2 A Deeply Serious Matter: Laughter in Medieval Ecclesiastical Discourse

“For Christians, laughing was a deeply serious matter.”

(Ingvild Sælid Gilhus)

“‘John Chrysostom said that Christ never laughed.’ —‘Nothing in his human nature forbade it,’ William remarked, ‘because laughter, as the theologians teach, is proper to man.’ —‘The son of man could laugh, but it is not written that he did so,’ Jorge said sharply, quoting Petrus Cantor.”

(Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*)

Medieval Theologies of Laughter

There can be no doubt as to the disputatious and heterogeneous nature of medieval culture, in which lay and clerical spheres, far from being separate, often created competing views of the body, sexuality, and femininity. It is precisely because vernacular courtly tradition did not exist in a vacuum, however, that one cannot fairly address the topic of laughter in the Middle Ages without first getting a sense of the prevailing clerical debates. The issues raised by ecclesiastical thinkers, the uncertainties and concerns they express regarding the place of laughter in the life of a virtuous Christian have an indisputable impact on the secular perception of this emotional gesture as well. Importantly, religious discourse on laughter itself was polyphonic and did not remain static; rather, it changed over time, reflecting and adapting to contemporaneous sensibilities.

Writers, especially academics, often beg indulgence from the reader when they venture outside their domains of competence. Let me make a gesture in this direction as well. I am a philologist and a literary critic by training, thus this chapter takes me beyond my areas of formal expertise. The following overview of religious discourse does not claim to be exhaustive; a great deal more has been written on laughter in the history of religion than I can address here, and much remains to be explored still. Yet even a brief survey of this literature better equips us to comprehend the scope of the bias against women’s laughter that I discuss.

2 “Es handelt sich […] nicht um eine Literatur, die in einem von der Kirche getrennten, höfischen Raum existiert hätte; viel mehr beteiligte sich die geistliche wie die weltliche Führungsschicht an der Diskussion.” Haug, *Die höfische Liebe*, 34.
more fully in the subsequent chapters. It allows us to situate the manifestations of this prejudice within a larger cultural discourse on the body, gender, sexuality, and emotions, and to detect in them a reflection of the overall ambivalence that marked medieval society’s relationship to joy and hilarity.

This uncertainty was partially inherited from a variety of pre-Christian traditions and then further complicated by Christianity’s own views on the body, virtue, and the afterlife. The study of religious thought has to be diachronic, since high- and late-medieval writings on laughter are heavily indebted to earlier debates and cannot be rightfully understood separately from them. Medieval thinkers struggled with the same questions that baffled their predecessors, such as the mechanisms and taxonomy of laughter, its eruptive nature, the difficulty of controlling it, and thus, ultimately, its connection to the body, fertility, and sexual activity. Needless to say, no consensus was reached on most of them during the period covered in this book.

The periodization suggested by the French historian Jacques Le Goff distinguishes three stages of the evolution of medieval laughter. The early Christian and early medieval times (particularly the fourth to ninth centuries C. E.) are dominated by what is frequently called a monastic model. During this time, the Christian Church did not yet know how to approach the phenomenon that it perceived to be dangerous; therefore, the predominant response to laughter was suppression.³ The High Middle Ages was a period marked by an extraordinary growth of lay culture and the blossoming of secular literatures and art. It had inherited an apprehension of laughter from the preceding epoch, yet continued to debate its value and nature. Instead of simply banishing both laughter and smiling, high-medieval thought sought to define them at the very time when they began appearing in much of religious art, particularly in sculpture, as a means of separating the sinful from the virtuous, an example of which I discuss in chapter 5. Le Goff calls this second stage the period of “liberation and control.”⁴ Lastly, the Late Middle Ages and early modernity are often characterized as the era of “unbridled laughter” due to its carnivalesque subversion and Lachkulturen, the study of which began with the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and remains popular until now.⁵

Despite this seemingly clear timeline, it is important to remember that the descriptions of these periods reflect only the dominant discourse, and that both

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⁴ Ibid.
⁵ In recent years a number of scholarly studies have explored Bakhtin’s theory of carnival, especially by Werner Röcke and his research group within the Sonderforschungsbereich “Kulturen des Performativen” at the Free University of Berlin, Germany. See Röcke and Neumann, Komische Gegewelten; Bachorski, “Performativität und Lachkultur,” 157–190; Röcke, “Ostergelächter,” 335–350.
pro- and anti-laughter positions are continuously present at any point during the medieval era. Gerhard Schmitz’s study of early monasticism, for example, powerfully complicates the view of the Early Middle Ages as a laughless time.\(^6\) The early tension that he uncovers between pro- and anti-laughter forces re-surfaces in high-medieval attempts to codify laughter, which are apparent in this era’s scholastic debates, in the proliferation of smiling in art and vernacular literatures, and in the solemn warnings against joy, excess, and entertainment. Finally, late-medieval carnival processions continuously fueled debates about their propriety, techniques, and purpose. This suggests that the anti-laughter discourse had not been forgotten, even at this time. Der Teichner’s late-fourteenth-century writings demonstrate that it was indeed so, for several of them familiarly treat laughter as a threat to individual salvation—the issue that was so prominent in early-medieval ecclesiastical discourse.\(^7\) In short, while Le Goff outlines general trends in the medieval way of thinking about laughter and joy, the true medieval attitude is best expressed by his own admission that there is no such thing as “the heresy of laughter.”\(^8\)

**Fighting the Body: Laughter in the Early Church and Early Medieval Monasticism**

In his essay on the role of gestures and ceremonial during the medieval period, Klaus Schreiner points out a dualism that is characteristic of medieval anthropology, i.e. the relationship between body and soul, between *actus animi* and *actus corporis*, between *homo interior* and *homo exterior*:

> The union of soul and body allows medieval theologians and writers to recognize in the movements of the body (*motus corporis*) the movements of the soul (*motus animae*), to turn the face (*facies*) into a reflection of the heart (*speculum corporis*), and to treat the posture of the body (*gestus corporis*) as an indicator of the state of mind (*signum mentis*).\(^9\)

As a bodily expression, as *actus corporis*, laughter is always interpreted in religious discourse as a manifestation of the person’s moral virtue or corruptibility. It becomes part of the debate on the corporal and the spiritual, and, consequently, sin and virtue as well as eternal damnation and salvation. The early

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\(^6\) Schmitz, “*quod rident homines*,” 3 – 15.

\(^7\) See e.g., #80 (“Von der werelt,” ‘Of the World’); #164 (“Von unrechten vraüden,” ‘Of Unjust Pleasures’); and Teichner, *Gedichte*, 91 – 92, 185 (respectively).


\(^9\) My translation. Schreiner, “‘Er küss mich,’” 89.
Church establishes these theoretical paradigms and sets the tone for later discussions about the place of laughter in the life of a Christian.

The early texts’ position on laughter is far from favorable. Both the Old and the New Testament provide arguments to convince believers that earthly joy is incompatible with the Christian ethos. Indeed, how could a sensitive and sensible person experience anything but awe and sadness when made aware of the magnitude of Christ’s sacrifice, the transience of human existence, and the impending Apocalypse? John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople (347 – 407 C.E.), presents laughter as callous when seen within the context of the tragedy of the Crucifixion: “Christ was crucified for your ills, and dost thou laugh? He was buffeted, and endured so great sufferings because of thy calamity, and the tempest that had overtaken thee; and dost thou play the reveler?”

In the early Christian worldview, rejoicing is shortsighted; the only true happiness is the one that will be available to the chosen in the afterlife, while the sinners should be constantly fearful of Judgment Day. Laughter thus becomes an important element of eschatology and apocalypticism. Its foolishness is condemned in four verses of Ecclesiastes (Eccl. 2:2, 3:4, 7:4, and 7:6) that serve as the foundation for what may well be considered the most important Christian statement on the subject—a passage from the Sermon of the Plain in the Gospel of Luke: “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. [...] Woe to you who are laughing, for you will mourn and weep” (Luke 6:21 and 6:25 respectively). Luke’s message is also restated at the end of the Epistle of James, who speaks of abandoning mirth as a sign of humility before God: “Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you” (James 4:9 – 10). For these reasons, the writings of Augustine, Jerome, Gregory the Great, and Isidor of Seville treat laughter as a spiritual matter. Gregory I (d. 604 C. E.) and Augustine agree that one could not rejoice with the World in this life and be at the Lord’s side in the afterlife, while the late-eighth-century theologian St. Benedict of Aniane (745/750 – 821 C. E.) excludes laughter in a much more radical manner from both this


11 “I said of laughter, ‘It is mad,’ and of pleasure, ‘What use is it?’” (Eccles. 2:2); “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: [...] a time to weep, and a time to laugh” (Eccles. 3:4); “The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth” (Eccles. 7:4); and “For like the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of fools; this also is vanity” (Eccles. 7:6).

world and the afterlife. In his *Interrogatio LIII* of the *Codex Regularum*, with the very telling title *Si ex toto ridere non licet?* (“If laughter is altogether permitted?”), Benedict observes, “Since the Lord condemns those who laugh now, it is clear that there is never a time for laughter for a faithful soul.”

While laughter is to be avoided, its antithesis, crying, is encouraged as a way of expressing repentance for one’s sins and grief for the sad affairs of the world. To quote Jerome, “As long as we are in the Valley of Tears, we must not laugh, but cry. On this account says the Lord: ‘Blessed be the weeping ones, for they shall laugh.’ We are in the Valley of Tears, and this world is of tears, not of joy.” A similar sentiment can be found in St. Augustine’s commentary on Psalm CXXVI: “Although we sow in tears, yet shall we reap in joy. For in that resurrection of the dead, each man shall receive his own sheaves, that is, the produce of his seed, the crown of joys and of delight. Then will there be a joyous triumph, when we shall laugh at death, wherein we groaned before.” Monastic discourse of late antiquity and the Early Middle Ages develops what has been called a “theology of tears” (*eine Theologie der Tränen*), in which crying and sorrow are highly valued and even treated as a duty for a monk or an ascetic. The superiority of grief over laughter is emphasized in *Apophthegmata patrum* (*Maxims of the Fathers*), a collection of sayings attributed to the Desert Fathers, i.e., the monks and hermits who dwelt in the Egyptian desert in the fourth century C. E. Originally written in Greek and translated into Latin in the sixth century, this collection remained well known and influential throughout the medieval period. One story praises the wisdom of a certain Father Arsenius, whose motto is said to have been *flere sempre debemus* (“We should keep crying”), while in another, Abba John (nicknamed Kolobus or “the Dwarf”) reproaches a brother for his unguarded behavior during a meal: “What kind of heart does he have,” he observes, “that he laughs when he should weep?”

Texts such as these form the foundation for the Christian anti-laughter discourse. They contrast short and long-term gains—fleeting pleasures of this world and spiritual salvation in the

15 Augustine, *Expositions*, in *NPNF* 1.8:605.
16 Schmitz, “*quod rident homines*,” 5. Similarly to Le Goff, Schmitz does not detect anything even close to a “theology of laughter” (*Theologie des Lachens*), which is indicative of the lack of agreement on the subject among medieval thinkers. One finds much on the value of tears in Chrysostom’s writings, especially in “Homily XII on Colossians.” *NPNF* 1.13:314 – 321.
17 As quoted in Schmitz, “*quod rident homines*,” 5.
18 Ibid.
next—and promise consolation in the eternal life as a reward for the willing acceptance of hardship and self-sacrifice.

In addition to eschatological concerns, the early Christian suspicion of laughter is shaped by the monastic view of the body: infinitely inferior to the soul, the body is perceived as transient, corrupt, potentially unchaste, and therefore in constant need of control. Ascetic rejection of laughter is first and foremost a rejection of physicality, an effort to conquer one’s humanity. One of the important debates lasting throughout the Middle Ages concerns Christ’s laughter, mentioned for the first time by Chrysostom. At the core of the dispute lie Aristotle’s maxim that laughter is proper to humans and the applicability of this statement to Jesus. Patristic discourse sees this idea of the inherent humanity of laughter as problematic. Even though Clement of Alexandria (d. 215 C. E.) seemingly agrees with Aristotle in Chapter V, Book II of his Paedagogus, he is cautious to point out the need to subdue the instinct:

Even laughter must be kept in check. [...] For man is not to laugh on all occasions because he is a laughing animal, any more than the horse neighs on all occasions because he is a neighing animal. But as rational beings, we are to regulate ourselves suitably, harmoniously relaxing the austerity and over-tension of our serious pursuits, not inharmoniously breaking them up altogether.

A similar attitude is found in the writings of St. Augustine (d. 430), who is also familiar with the Aristotelian view that laughter separates humans from animals, but considers this difference to be infimum (“the lowest, of the lowest kind”) and worldly joy (laetitia saeculi) nothing but a sign of vanity. As the Son of Man, Jesus was supposed to have been able to laugh—in accordance with the Philosopher’s thesis—yet, as Chrysostom points out, none of the Scriptures

19 “If thou also weep thus, thou art become a follower of thy Lord. Yea, for He also wept, both over Lazarus, and over the city; and touching Judas He was greatly troubled. And this indeed one may often see Him do, but nowhere laugh, nay, nor smile but a little; no one at least of the evangelists hath mentioned this. Therefore also with regard to Paul, that he wept, that he did so three years night and day, both he hath said of himself, and others say this of him: but that he laughed, neither hath he said himself anywhere, neither hath so much as one other of the saints, either concerning him, or any other like him; but this is said of Sarah only, when she is blamed, and of the son of Noe, when for a freeman he became a slave.” John Chrysostom, “Homily IV on St. Matthew,” NPNF 1.10:41.


21 Book 2, Chapter 5 in Clement of Alexandria, “Paedagogus,” ANF 2:250. Smiling must be regulated (“be made the subject of discipline”) as well, for “a clever man smiles almost imperceptibly” (Ibid.). Clement’s objection to laughter reveals that the strong influence of the Stoic philosophy is grounded in the potential of laughter to disrupt speech and violate reasonable discourse. Gilhus, Laughing Gods, 61 – 62.

22 Augustine, De libero arbitrio, I:8, 18, 63 as quoted in Schmitz, “quod rident homines,” 13.

record his doing so.\textsuperscript{24} Christ exemplifies a victory over his humanity; thus those who wish to emulate him must equally conquer their own human weaknesses, must gain control over their physical bodies.

It is thus not surprising that the repudiation of laughter would be reflected in many early-medieval monastic rules. Benedict of Aniane’s stern conclusion is taken very seriously by those who choose to dedicate their lives and bodies to God: ascetics, monks, and virgins. Ammonius, the disciple of St. Anthony, is said to have emphasized that monks should abstain from laughing lest it undermine the foundations of the ascetic life and its complete sexual renunciation.\textsuperscript{25} When not controlled, laughter was thought to function as a “crack through which earthly matters could touch the human soul,” leaving the body open to the world and sin.\textsuperscript{26} In order to prevent this, St. Bernard was known to chastise his flesh in an effort to avoid prohibited laughter, or as an English legend says:

\begin{quote}
He his herte neuer cast
inwardly to lauhwe so fast,
that he nas bisy hit to restreyne
with al his mihtes and to refrayne.\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}

The three demands—to emulate Christ, to gain control over one’s inherently corrupt (because sexual) body, and to be preoccupied with the salvation of one’s soul—provide the basis for the early-medieval monastic rules. The monk whose duty it is to be constantly aware of the danger of death can never freely surrender himself to cheer and merriment, for “he will enjoy laughter only in the future when he has finally escaped the snares of the devil and entered into the heavenly Jerusalem.”\textsuperscript{28}

Fear of the open body results in prohibition against most activities of the human mouth. The oldest monastic rule, that of Pachom of Egypt (ca. fourth century C. E.), explicitly forbids joking and laughter,\textsuperscript{29} while the seventh-century Irish \textit{Regula Coenobialis} emphasizes the need to conquer laughter in order to obtain complete control over the body.\textsuperscript{30} Particularly telling is the sixth-century Italian \textit{Rule of the Master (Regula magistri)}, known to have served as the basis for the famous Rule of St. Benedict. It does not simply mark laughter as a vice,\textsuperscript{31}

\begin{quote}
24 Gilhus points out that although Jesus’ laughter is never mentioned in the New Testament, it is sometimes found in apocryphal texts, such as the Gospel of Pseudo-Thomas, which mentions the laughter of Jesus as a child. Gilhus, \textit{Laughing Gods}, 145.
25 Ibid., 64.
26 Ibid., 67.
28 Resnick, “‘Risus monasticus,’” 99.
30 For a detailed discussion of different monastic rules see Schmitz, “\textit{quod rident homines},” 10 ff.
\end{quote}
but uses vivid body metaphors to depict it as a powerful force that is imperative—but difficult—to contain:

The *Rule of the Master* speaks of “the bolt of the mouth,” “the barrier of the teeth,” etc. When laughter is ready to burst forth, it should be absolutely prevented from getting out. One can see how of all internal forms of evil, laughter is the worst one: the worst stain [sin] of the mouth. 31

By the ninth century, the Rule of St. Benedict becomes the dominant and most influential monastic rule in the West, translated into numerous vernacular languages, including Old High German. It is particularly famous for its regulations of the mouth. Of the twelve degrees of humility a monastic must display according to Chapter 7, the ninth is achieved by respecting the importance of silence. A monk should restrain his tongue and keep silent, “not speaking until he is questioned. For the Scripture shows that ‘in much speaking there is no escape from sin’ and that ‘the talkative man is not stable on the earth.’”32 This idea is further developed in Chapter 42, which culminates in the most famous regulation, the notorious Rule of Silence: “Monks should be zealous for silence at all times, but especially during the hours of the night.”33 In addition to emphasizing humility, and similar to earlier monastic regulations, the Benedictine Rule admonishes its followers to maintain the integrity of their body by keeping their mouths closed most of the time.

The issue of laughter is explicitly addressed in the descriptions of the tenth and eleventh degrees of humility. The former is manifested through the reluctance to laugh because of the association of laughter with foolishness: “The tenth degree of humility is that he be not ready and quick to laugh, for it is written, ‘The fool lifts up his voice in laughter.’”34 The topos will continue to figure prominently, not only in religious literature but also in conduct texts and conduct texts and

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32 As translated in Geary, *Readings in Medieval History*, 176. For Latin and OHG see “Benediktinerregel,” 216. Lat. “Si linguam ad loquendum prohibeat | monachus! et taciturnitatem habens usque ad inerrogationem! non | loquatur; Dicente scriptura! quia | in multiloquio non effugitur peccatum! | Et quia uir linguosus non dirigetur super terram”; OHG: “ibu zungun ze sprehhanne piuuerie | … suuigali | habenti unzi zanfrahidu ni | sprehhe qhuedenteru kescritfi danta | in filusprahhi nist erflohan sunta | … danta comman zunkaler nist kerihit | uber erda.” The ellipses are reproduced according to the Old High German original.
courtly poetry of the high-medieval era. The latter reminds the monastic yet again that when he must speak, he should do so “gently and without laughter, humbly and seriously” (my emphasis). Both of these ordinances emphasize that control of one’s mouth (be it speech or laughter) is a crucial sign of humility and victory over one’s pride and physical body.

Rejecting Eroticism: Controlling Female Bodies

It is possible to see the early Christian rejection of laughter as an attempt to separate the newly emerging spirituality from earlier and contemporaneous pagan traditions, in which laughter was associated with the body, sexuality, eroticism, and fertility. It was viewed as a cosmic force and linked to eroticism in ancient Near Eastern and classical Greek cultures. Similarly, in ancient Egypt, ritual laughter is known to have symbolized opening up and rejuvenation of a divine body and functioned on the level of a sexual response during the ritual. As Ingvild Sælid Gilhus points out, certain traditions drew parallels between laughter and other “products” of the body such as birth, spitting, sneezing, or tears. In the Hellenistic cultures it was treated as a symbol of regeneration and renewal. In Greece, laughter (geloiion) is said to have functioned as a primary medium for religious expression and as a part of cultic life, and erotic laughter accompanied festivals dedicated to the goddesses Demeter and Aphrodite. Hilarity and laughter were firmly established as part of Aphrodite’s cult as the goddess of love and sexuality, and their link to sexuality was exploited even linguistically, in the play on words transforming one of her nicknames “genial” or “laughter-loving” (philommedes) into an adjective philomeides, meaning “genital-loving.”

In Demeter’s cult, laughter appears in the context of rejuvenation and rebirth, signaling a temporary end to her sorrow over Persephone’s kidnapping and the return of spring and summer to mortal earth. Provoked by antics of an Olympian servant-girl, Demeter’s laughter releases her generative powers as the goddess of motherhood, childbirth, and nature, opening her body up sexually and emotionally. The erotic face of laughter in this myth is further represented by the character who so successfully restores harmony to the world. In the Homeric

35 For a detailed discussion of this motif in the secular texts, see chapter 3.
36 Lat. “et sine risu humiliter; cum grauitate”; OHG: “ano hlhtaht theomuatliho mit fruati.”
38 Ibid., 19.
39 Ibid., 28.
40 Ibid., 28. Also see Brown, “Ares, Aphrodite,” 283 – 293.
Hymn to Demeter, the young goddess Iambe entertains the Olympians with her obscene jokes, while in other versions it is Baubo who makes the grieving goddess laugh by revealing her private parts in public. Both versions of the myth emphasize the analogy between the mouth and the female sexual organs, the two orifices that open up the female body. Baubo’s very name literally means “vagina,” and her statues are known to have had a face placed directly over her private parts and legs, a strong hint at the parallel between a laughing face and the female genitals. Even though Iambe does not expose herself, she is often addressed as athyroisin, or “doorless.” Her nickname has a dual meaning: it alludes to her function and ability to “open up that which is closed” (i.e., Demeter’s body) as well as to her own bodily openness, suggested by all the obscene jokes that stream from her mouth.

Such a connection to reproduction and eroticism was perceived as an abomination in the ancient Israelite religion. The Old Testament perspective is crucial to understanding medieval attitudes; by accepting the Hebrew Bible as one of its fundamental texts, Christianity inherits a long tradition, part of which is the rejection of laughter’s erotic side. Ancient Judaic theologians condemn the link between laughter and the sexual practices of the Canaanites, and thus banish fertility and erotic rituals together with female laughter, as they shut women out of the cult of Yahweh. Instead, they celebrate the divine derisive laughter of male power. The tension between the two becomes apparent in the story of Isaac’s birth (Gen. 18:11–15, 21:1–7). Ninety-year-old Sarah bursts into laughter upon hearing from Yahweh himself that she will soon conceive. Later, however, well aware of her misconduct, she denies ever having done so. Once the child is born, Sarah makes an enigmatic comment: “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me” (Gen. 21:7). She also gives the boy the name Isaac, which itself is conspicuously connected to the Hebrew word for “laughter.” While on the surface Sarah’s statement seems to give voice to the mother’s joy at Isaac’s extraordinary conception and birth, it also reveals the

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42 Ibid., Laughing Gods, 34.
43 Ibid., 35. For Baubo’s story also see Treusch-Dieter, “Das Gelächter der Frauen,” 115–143. For additional illustration of erotic laughter in Greek culture see Gilhus, Laughing Gods, 28–42, 46–48. Laughter thrived and had traditionally been a symbol of regeneration and renewal in the late Roman culture as well. According to Gilhus, the feast of Saturnalia and the Plautian comedies were contexts for erotic laughter. Gilhus, Laughing Gods, 46. For more on laughter and humor in antique cultures see Huizinga, Homo ludens.
44 Gilhus, Laughing Gods, 23. Also cf.: “Because of Yahweh’s prophets’ and theologians’ attempts to destroy the fertility cults, erotic laughter was overruled.” Gilhus, Laughing Gods, 26.
tension between three different kinds of laughter in this story—derisive (both human and divine), joyful, and erotic—and establishes the supremacy of divine power. It is Yahweh who has the proverbial last laugh. He punishes Sarah’s rebellious incredulity, her doubt and mockery, by making her conceive despite her advanced age. Sarah’s statement alludes not only to her happiness, but also to her humiliation. One may wonder if people who hear about Isaac’s birth will laugh with her or at her. As Gilhus points out, the tale is ultimately a veiled attack against the erotic, cultic laughter of other cultures:

The Old Testament God manipulated the power of reproduction when he caused a woman of 90 to become pregnant. In some passages the name Isaac is connected with a word for laughter [...] which sometimes has the meaning ‘have sexual fun’ (Genesis 21:9 – 10, 26:8). [...] With the birth of Isaac and the pun probably intended in the saying ‘God has made laughter for me’ (Genesis 21:7), it seems that Jahweh has made a sexual joke directed against the old fertility cults with their potent women and erotic laughter. In addition to Yahweh’s joke, the biblical text has clear gendered undertones and transmits a message of disapproval of women’s laughter. The qualitative difference between Abraham’s and Sarah’s transgressions (cf. Gen. 17:17: “Abraham fell upon his face and laughed”) continuously posed difficulties to medieval interpreters of this passage, who justified Sarah’s selective punishment by familiarly claiming her behavior to be less noble and spiritual in its motivation. With the Bible remaining “The Book” until the fourteenth century, and a starting point for “all theoretical reflection and practical rules,” the rejection of the erotic side of women’s laughter was firmly established as an important part of the Christian discourse.

If laughter could threaten the virtue of monks, it held even more peril for nuns since female nature was viewed as weaker and more susceptible to sin and excesses. These beliefs persisted into early-medieval times, finding further

46 Ibid., 25. For a feminist interpretation of Sarah’s story, see Ostriker, Feminist Revision and the Bible, 38 – 43.
47 Gilhus, Laughing Gods, 25. Gilhus’s idea of Yahweh’s laughter as a counter-measure against women’s laughter and power is also visible in the gendered way laughter is treated in this story. Abraham, who laughs as well (Gen. 17:17: “Abraham fell upon his face and laughed”), is not reprimanded. It is only Sarah’s laughter that is portrayed as transgressive. Later commentators attempt to explain this gendered approach by searching for differences between Abraham’s and Sarah’s motivation. Matthew Innes, for example, mentions how the medieval Church struggled with this qualitative difference between Sarah’s and Abraham’s laughter: “Abraham’s had reverently expressed his pious joy at God’s goodness, but Sarah’s had been fuelled by doubt at the possibility that God had granted her a son.” Innes, “He Never,” 142.
48 Innes, “He Never,” 142.
support in natural philosophy. As R. Howard Bloch points out, “In the misogynist thinking of the Middle Ages, there can, in fact, be no distinction between the theological and the gynaecological.”\textsuperscript{50} While Isidor of Seville (c. 570 – 636) proves woman’s inferiority through linguistic means, with the help of etymology,\textsuperscript{51} others, like Pseudo-Albertus Magnus in his \textit{De secretis mulierum} (\textit{On the Secrets of Women}), seek to provide an anatomical-physiological justification, incorporating the knowledge of their famous predecessors Aristotle (384 – 322 B. C. E.) and Galen (131 – 201 C. E.).\textsuperscript{52}

In a world that emphasizes sexual chastity as an “angelic” way of life,\textsuperscript{53} the exalted state of femininity has successfully conquered the temptations of the flesh and shut itself off from the world and men. The early-medieval theologians advocate virginity as the ideal for a Christian woman. Naturally, the Virgin Mary is the exemplar here, but her immaculate conception renders her unique. More attainable models of female behavior were provided by the so-called Iron Virgins, i. e. female martyrs such as St. Catherine of Alexandria who were seen as having transcended their sex, and the Demure Virgins “exemplifying the norms of womanhood.”\textsuperscript{54} The virgin body, imagined as a sealed vessel, a \textit{hortus seclusus}, was naturally seen as far superior to the regular, sexually active female body.\textsuperscript{55} Both Chrysostom and Ambrose present virginity as a state for the chosen, which “cannot be commanded, but must be wished for.”\textsuperscript{56} Neither of them actually condemns the institution of marriage as unequivocally sinful nor presents virginity as the sole, exclusive condition for women: “The one sins not if she marries, the other, if she marries not, it is for eternity. In the former is the remedy for weakness, in the latter the glory of chastity. The former is not reproved, the

\textsuperscript{50} As quoted in Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, \textit{Woman Defamed}, 3.
\textsuperscript{51} “(XI.i.i.17) Man [\textit{vir}] is so named, because there is greater force [\textit{vis}] in him than in women [\textit{feminas}];—he also the word ‘strength’ [\textit{virtus}]—or, he is so named because he controls woman [\textit{feminam}] forcefully [\textit{vi}]. (18) Woman [\textit{mulier}] gets her name from ‘softness’ [\textit{mollitie}], or as it were ‘softer’, \textit{mollier}, with a letter taken away or changed. (19) For the two sexes are differentiated in the strength [\textit{fortitudine}] and weakness [\textit{imbecillitate}] of their bodies. Thus there is the greatest strength [\textit{virtus}] in man [\textit{viri}], and less in woman [\textit{mulieris}] so that she might be forbearing to man; otherwise, if women were to repel them, sexual desire might compel men to desire something else or rush off to another sex.” As quoted in Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, \textit{Woman Defamed}, 43.
\textsuperscript{52} Lemay, \textit{Women’s Secrets}.
\textsuperscript{53} John Chrysostom, \textit{On Virginity}, xiv.
\textsuperscript{54} Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, \textit{Woman Defamed}, 13.
\textsuperscript{55} For example, Chrysostom insists that genuine Christian virgins must be completely unconcerned with the matters of the world (\textit{On Virginity}, LXXVII). Much later, in her \textit{Holistic Healing (Causae et curae)}, Hildegard of Bingen expresses the same view of a maiden’s body as “still closed up” and the importance of chastity as “the protection of her undamaged condition.” Hildegard of Bingen, \textit{Holistic Healing}, 91.
\textsuperscript{56} Chapter V.23 in Ambrose, \textit{Concerning Virgins}, in \textit{NPNF 2.10:367}. 
latter is praised.” Yet the difference between not reproving and extolling is too drastic not to be noticed:

Why speak of the troubles of nursing, training, and marrying? These are the miseries of those who are fortunate. A mother has heirs, but it increases her sorrows. For we must not speak of adversity, lest the minds of the holiest parents tremble. Consider, my sister, how hard it must be to bear what one must not speak of. And this is in this present age. But the days shall come when they shall say: “Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare [sic].” For the daughters of this age are conceived, and conceive; but the daughter of the kingdom refrains from wedded pleasure, and the pleasure of the flesh, that she may be holy in body and in spirit.

The blessed nature of the virginal state comes with higher demands for caution and chastity. Decorum, devotion, and perfect conduct are all essential; therefore, laughter comes to be associated with a lack of modesty. Chrysostom compares a virgin to a charioteer who keeps the “horses” of her senses and her body under control:

The virgin, applying the golden reins of good behavior to everything, keeps each of the horses in perfect rhythm. She forbids her tongue to utter anything discordant or unsuitable, her glance to stray impudently or suspiciously, her ears to hear any improper song. She cares too that her feet not walk in a provocative or pampered fashion. […] She cuts away the decoration from her clothes and continually exhorts her countenance not to dissolve into laughter, not to even smile quietly, but always to exhibit a serious and austere visage, one prepared always for tears, never for laughter.

Similarly, Ambrose’s Concerning Virgins focuses on the fragile nature of the virginal condition. Book III contains the strictest admonitions against laughter, with its Chapter III emphasizing the need to isolate virginal bodies from all possible contact with the secular world, by eluding human communication as well as by constraining the female body in terms of speech, gestures, and emotions. For example, visits are overall strongly discouraged with the exception of parental ones, since social interaction is seen as detrimental to the virgin’s virtue: “Modesty is worn away by intercourse, and boldness breaks forth, laughter creeps in, and bashfulness is lessened, whilst politeness is studied” (Ch. III.9). Laughter is seen as an integral part and an inevitable outcome of any communication (Ambrose’s “intercourse”), particularly between the sexes. It is tied to “politeness,” or secular etiquette, thus anticipating the high-medieval vernacular tradition in which laughter and smiles would play an important part

57 Chapter VI.24 in NPNF 2.10:367. Also see Chapters XVI and XVII in Chrysostom, On Virginity, 23 – 27.
58 Book I, Chapter VI.26 in NPNF 2.10:367.
59 See LXXX,2 in Chrysostom, On Virginity, 121 – 122.
60 LXIII,2 in Chrysostom, On Virginity, 100.
61 Ambrose, Concerning Virgins, in NPNF 2.10:381 – 385.
in courtly ritual and interaction between men and women. Since the virginal body is valued only as long as it preserves its metaphorical and physical intactness of a sealed vessel, it is constantly in danger of being opened through sexual intercourse as well as by the activities of the mouth. Even religious fervor has to be restrained in order for the body to be subdued. The female body has to disappear, rendering the virgin unnoticeable to the world:

And do you, holy virgin, abstain from groans, cries, coughing, and laughter at the Mystery. [...] Let virginity be first marked by the voice, let modesty close the mouth, let religion remove weakness, and habit instruct nature. [...] That virgin is not sufficiently worthy of approval who has to be enquired about when she is seen. (Ch. III.13).

Paradoxically, Ambrose’s repudiation of laughter reaffirms to some degree Aristotle’s maxim that it is inherently human. In the Christian theologian’s case, laughter is feared precisely because it is part of uncontrollable human—especially female—nature, which leads him to demand that virgins conquer this part of their humanity at all costs. Other Church Fathers share his prepossession. Clement of Alexandria points out that “to children and women especially laughter is the cause of slipping into scandal,” while Chrysostom and Jerome (in his Letters, 22 and 24,1) also see the laughter of virgins as a threat to modesty. In fact, Chrysostom is wary even of smiling.

Reflecting this spirit, Rudolf of Fulda, Carolingian monk writing in the early ninth century Vita Leobae (The Life of St. Leoba), praises Leoba’s self-control and emphasizes that despite her calm and cheerful demeanor, the Abbess of Bischofsheim never allowed herself to burst into laughter. Patristic theologians and their medieval successors see laughter as a symptom of immoderation, a sign of lax bodily control, and a threat to modesty that endangers the soul’s salvation. They thus establish a topos linking it to carnal desire and the consequent lack of chastity, the most treasured possession for a woman.

Tensions within the Early Christian View of Laughter

Although ecclesiastics like Isidor of Seville promote the ideal of humilitas mentis cum lacrymis (“humility of the mind with tears”), the early monastic treatment of laughter is actually riddled with tensions. The very same theologians who express strong views against laughter are well aware of the impossibility of eliminating it, even within monastic communities. It is more accurate to speak of its control rather than absolute rejection, even when the anti-laughter discourse

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63 Chrysostom, On Virginity, 100. Also see Gilhus, Laughing Gods, 6.
dominates. The very same St. Basil (d. 379 C. E.) who strictly admonishes against uncontrollable and excessive laughter leaves a place for a gentle sign of joy: “It is not totally inappropriate to express the joy of the soul in a soft cheerful smile. The Scripture speaks of that when it says: ‘A happy heart brightens up the face.’”

Like its predecessors and contemporaries, the commentary on St. Benedict’s Rule composed by Smaragdus, the abbot of Saint-Mihiel, shortly after the Aachen Council of 816–817 C. E. acknowledges crying to be much more appropriate for the monk than laughing and rejects loud and unrestrained displays of emotion as dangerous and foolish. At the same time, Smaragdus also recognizes that only seldom do even monks succeed in conquering their humanity. Therefore, he leaves a place for a restrained, careful, and “honorable” kind of laughter even in monastic culture, for “the man cannot leave behind to what he is compelled by nature.”

Another contentious topic within the monastic discourse during this time is the laughter of martyrdom. While derision is frequently interpreted as a sign of pride, Christian martyrs are said to have resorted to derisive laughter in order to defy their tormentors. On the one hand, mockery is admired for its spiritual character, stemming from its connection to the soul rather than the body: the martyr’s indifference to physical pain and suffering becomes a symbol of victory over carnality. On the other hand, as Catherine Conybeare demonstrates in the case of St. Lawrence, the laughter of martyrdom was not at all unproblematic. Various versions of this legend reveal that the saint’s behavior was perceived as unsettling even by the authors of his vita. During his painful and slow torture on the grill, St. Lawrence’s derisive laughter is unquestionably subversive; it challenges the authority represented by the Roman prefect. Yet Conybeare shows that the saint’s laughter also presents him in a dubious light, placing him in a position similar to the one women normally occupy, thus casting a shadow over the grandeur of his masculine heroism.

Early Christian thought bequeaths to posterity a rather complicated view of laughter. The strong anti-laughter perspective will continue to resonate in all


67 A similar emphasis on the spiritual nature of permissible laughter is present in Pope Gregory the Great’s Moralia in Job, in which he comments that the laughter of the elect in heaven will assume special status, radiating from the heart and not from the body. Sanders, Sudden Glory, 130.


69 Ibid., 190 – 191, 193 – 194. Conybeare also refers to Judith Butler’s observation that in the dominant masculine culture, the derisive, subversive type of laughter is far more typical of women.
spheres of life, not only in religious discourse, but also in folklore, didactic works, and even fictional secular texts. Yet parallel to it, other voices treat laughter as part of human nature and acknowledge the fact that, as such, it is difficult if not impossible to eliminate. In an effort to establish limits for hilarity and control it, early-medieval culture openly condemns laughter that erupts loudly and affects rational discourse and bodily composure.70 In addition, while the homo ridens is tolerated, the homo ludens (with his laugh of derision, the exact opposite of caritas) is denounced. As subsequent chapters will illustrate, the attempts to codify and control laughter reappear in high- and late-medieval discourses, and with them, the renewed interest in issues of chastity and virtue.71

Debate Continues: High-Medieval Theology of Laughter

The tensions already apparent in the early monastic view of laughter are only heightened during the High Middle Ages (11th–13th c.), a time of important cultural development both in the ecclesiastic and secular parts of society. The three issues that affect the treatment of laughter in this period are changes in the perception of the body, the unprecedented rise of vernacular lay cultures and literatures, and the return of the debate on chastity. The high-medieval era reveals an intense preoccupation with the physical body and its corruptibility and changeability, most apparent in the treatment of the Eucharist and the increasing interest in relics:

It [is] seen, for instance, in how the body of Christ was shown as bleeding and suffering and in the veneration of the fragments of the bodies of the saints, but also in the practice of judicial torture on living bodies and in how dead bodies were partitioned for religious and medical purposes. It is as if the corruptibility which is inherent in bodies was fully revealed; they were opened up…72

70 “Il riso accompagnato da sghignazzi e sussulti [subsannatio, risus cum cachinnis], il riso eccessivo, il riso intempestivo che rompe il silenzio, il riso grossolano” (“Laughter accompanied by mockery or shaking [subsannatio, risus cum cachinnis], excessive laughter, untimely laughter that disrupts silence, ungraceful laughter”). Le Goiff, “Il riso,” 172. Also see Innes, “He Never,” 143.
71 As Kathleen Coyne Kelly indicates in her study of medieval views on virginity, the discussion gets picked up in the central Middle Ages. From the twelfth century on, medieval society experienced a renascence of interest in the issues of virginity and chastity. Kelly supports her statement with numerous high- and late-medieval vernacular examples. See Kelly, Performing Virginity, 7. Another important and fascinating side of early-medieval laughter is the laughter of Gnostics, or to use Gilhus’ term, les enfants terribles of early Christianity. The constraints of this chapter do not allow a detailed analysis of this phenomenon, but a good overview can be found in Gilhus, Laughing Gods, 73 – 76. Also see Bröker, “Lachen als religiöses Motiv in gnostischen Texten,” 111 – 125.
72 Gilhus, Laughing Gods, 98.
Moreover, this era witnesses a renewal of the debates about chastity and virtue, owing to the Gregorian Reform. During the eleventh century, the Church attempted to set higher standards of moral behavior for priests, including the prohibition of marriage. Consequently, a new literature developed, criticizing marriage and emphasizing the importance of chastity. Although intended initially for priests, these developments had widespread repercussions for the laity as well, becoming a leading topic of debate in both ecclesiastical and secular discourses. Finally, the increased influence of courtly society that made joy and affability crucial parts of its ethos and etiquette naturally impacted the discussion about the value and place of laughter in a virtuous person’s life. It is one thing to demand obedience and sacrifice from those who have consciously chosen the life of austerity and self-renunciation, but how to control the emotional life of those who are not bound by such vows? These issues are reflected in the writings of high-medieval religious authors, demonstrating their keen awareness of the changing world around them.

At first glance, the high-medieval position on laughter appears to be more accepting than the views of the earlier epochs. Laughter and smiling are featured frequently in sculpture and art, joy is treated as a virtue and an indicator of harmony in aristocratic vernacular texts, and “laughter” becomes one of the most frequently used words in courtly literature. Yet a closer look at written and artistic sources of this time reveals that despite this seeming approval, all the manifestations of high-medieval laughter point toward the continuous codification of its practice, an effort to further determine who is allowed to laugh, when, and how. In this regard, the High Middle Ages inhabit the same tradition as the previous epochs, going back to the Early Church Fathers. The struggle is palpable in scholastic debates and responses to carnivalesque processions, in Berthold of Regensburg’s sermons, and in Hildegard of Bingen’s medical writings. It is also apparent in the contrast between the gaping mouths of gargoyles, sinners, and fools and the barely perceptible, Mona-Lisa-like smiles of the Amiens angels. The high-medieval approach is thus best described by Le Goff’s term “liberation and control of laughter,” which despite the seeming contradiction accurately represents the lack of consensus, the constant tension between

73 Karras, Sexuality, 43.
74 Ibid., 37. Aaron Gurevich also points out the ever-presence of religious doctrine in this historical period: “Everybody who lived in medieval Christian society belonged to different levels of culture. Everybody was Christian and therefore had something in common with the culture and religiosity of the learned people. Of course the monks, the Church prelates, the educated people and theologians had much more information and knowledge about the Christian truth than simple folk. […] But even the most uneducated people possessed some information concerning Christian ideas and Christian beliefs.” Gurevich, “Bakhtin and His Theory of Carnival,” 59.
two diametrically opposed positions: one that attempts to make a place for laughter and recognizes it as necessary or at least unavoidable, and one that is fixed on limiting it.

Works dealing with laughter in this period commonly follow three trajectories; they reiterate authoritative opinions, engage and debate with them, or subvert the established ideologies. Whichever approach an individual author chooses, it is still deeply rooted in tradition and the continuing influence of the past, “a repository of normative guidelines for Christian belief and action.”

Here the authority of the Church Fathers remains unquestionable, even when it is being debated against (Aquinas) or merely expanded on (Hildegard), the later thinkers are always careful to maintain, to use Clare Lees’ expression, an “impression of continuity” with their predecessors.

Patristic opinions retain their popularity during the High Middle Ages. Jerome, Ambrose, Tertullian, and Chrysostom are all cited repeatedly, giving the new generation of thinkers legitimacy and textual authority. Here one finds both apocalyptic motifs and the familiar argument about Christ’s humanity. For example, in the writings of Bernard de Clairvaux (1090 – 1153), laughter is said to constitute a crucial distinction between Christians and heathens because only the former are aware of why it should be avoided—an obvious allusion to the Last Judgment. The question of Christ’s laughter returns in the writings of John of Salisbury (ca. 1115 – 1180), who points out in his Polycraticus (1154) that “no man has seen him [Christ] laugh, but he has frequently wept in the presence of men.” This argument remains popular well into the fourteenth century, as evidenced, for example, by the poem Cursor mundi (The Runner of the World) (ca. 1300) and the writings of John Wycliff.

In the German-speaking lands, the anti-laughter discourse is as enduring as it is in the rest of Europe. The monastic rules, even those written in the vernacular, reflect the influence of the earlier models. Even though separated from St. Benedict’s Rule by three centuries, the twelfth-century fragment known as Die Nonnenregel (“The Rule for the Nuns”) advises its audience on the dangers of the mouth and tirelessly warns of the importance of silence and the discipline of

76 Lees, Tradition, 21.
77 Ibid., 28.
78 Moulinier, “Quand le malin,” 469.
79 Sanders, Sudden Glory, 136.
80 “Of Cristis laughing we reden never in Holy Writt, but of His myche penause, teris, and shedynge of blod”; “That thrice he wept we find i-nogh / Bot we find never quar he logh.” As quoted in Sanders, Sudden Glory, 136.
81 Ms. C 76/290 is said to come from the cloister Adelhausen in Breisgau and is now located in the Stadtbibliothek in Zurich, Switzerland. The name of the text is based on the inscription found on the first two blank pages: “diss büch Ist des Closters (ze) adelnhusen.” For an edition of the work, see “Nonnenregel,” 22 – 24.
speech: “von rede er [mund] gerne swigen sol”; “so soltu dich ze allir zit vor lütén worten huete dich. mit dunkeler stimme sprich” (“It [the mouth] should willingly abstain from speech”); “So should you guard yourself against loud words. Speak in a low voice,” *Die Nonnenregel*, vv. 15 – 16; 20 – 23). Just like the original Rule, it also contains explicit warnings about the dangers of the outside world and, unsurprisingly, of laughter: “dv welt ist das helle tor. div hoere von dem mvnde din. der sol vil wol bewart sin meistlich lachen han” (“The world is the gates of hell. Shut it in front of your mouth. It should be very well guarded against laughter,” *Die Nonnenregel*, vv. 10 – 13). Similarly, *Ecclesiastien homilae* by Hugh of Saint Victor (ca. 1096 – 1141), a Saxon canon regular, a mystic, and allegedly the first theologian to synthesize the dogmatic treasures of the patristic age and form them into a coherent and complete body of doctrine, reveals a strong hostility toward laughter, branding it as an outright evil: “To be noted [that] whereas joy is only proven to be wrong, laughter is indeed altogether disapproved of, because laughter is evil in every respect.”

The patristic views spread beyond the ecclesiastical community thanks to the efforts of religious clerics writing in the vernacular. They were transmitted to the laity in the form of homiletic literature, didactic and religious tales, exempla, and parables. In his poem *Von des todes gehugde (On the Remembrance of Death)* Heinrich von Melk (writing ca. 1160 – 1180) condemns those whose overly cheerful, insincere demeanor proves that they do not have a “true love in their hearts” (“di waren minne in dem hercen”): “They may well know how to ridicule and grin” (“wol chvnnen si spotent vnt greinen,” *Von des todes gehugde*, vv. 201 – 202). He also reiterates the view that true joy can be found only in Paradise:

Da ist elliv chlage fremde  
vnnder dem himelischem sende,  
da sint die gedanch alle vrei;  
dane waeiz niemen, waz angest sei;  
mer vrewden mvgen si da lehen,  
denn iemen habe gehoert oder gesehen  
oder iemen gedenchchen chvnne  
ir vrewde ist immer ane cil. (*Von des todes gehugde*, vv. 985 – 997)

82 “Notandum quod gaudium tantum argentur, risus vero omnino reporbatur, quia risus omnino modo malus est; gaudium non semper malum est, nisi quando de malo est.” As quoted in Sanders, *Sudden Glory*, 128 f. Translation mine. Sanders’ own translation appears to be only fragmentary, “Joy may be good or evil, depending on its source, but laughter is in every respect evil”.

83 See for example Anton Schönbach’s three-volume collection of German sermons of the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries. Schönbach, *Alteutsche Predigten*. In volume 1 there are several familiar motifs such as Jesus’s laughter (Sermon 1; 8,11), as well as allusions to Luke 6:21 – 25 (Sermon 6; 39,5) and Ecclesiastes 7:5 (Sermon 191; 299,29).

84 Cited according to Heinrich von Melk, *Von des todes gehugde*. 
No lament will be known to the righteous ones in heaven. There all thoughts will be free, for nobody shall know what fear is. More joys will be given them there than one has ever seen, heard or thought of. Their joy will last forever without end.

Heinrich’s message is echoed by a thirteenth-century German sermon that brings together various themes, including the question of Christ’s laughter and the apocalyptic promise of terrible punishment after death for idle laughter in this life found in Luke 6:25:

\[
\text{du ensolt uoch nicht itelichen lachen, uffe daz die nicht gesche als den von den got spricht in dem ewangelio: ve vobis qui nunc ridetis etc. we iuch die ir nu lachen, wanne ir wert her nach weinent vuorege trehen. unser herre Jesus Christ der weinnete ober Lazzarum und Jerusalem die stat, von sinen lachen les wir niht. dar umme so si wir in der jamercheit und sulen billicher weinnen danne lachen. (Sermon 1; 8,11 – 19)}
\]

You should not laugh vainly, so that you would not fare as those of whom God speaks in His Gospel: \textit{ve vobis qui nunc ridetis}, etc. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall afterwards weep fiery tears. Our Lord Jesus Christ wept over Lazarus and the city of Jerusalem; yet of his laughter we read nothing. Therefore, let us remain in sorrow; weeping befits us better than laughter.

All these themes are brought together in a parable by the thirteenth-century author Der Stricker, which remained extremely popular all over Europe well into the fifteenth century. The short didactic poem, “The Earnest King” (Germ.: “Der ernsthafte König”; MHG: “Ditz ist von einem kunege der wolde nie niht ge-lachen”),\textsuperscript{86} tells about a virtuous king questioned by his brother about the cause of his perpetually serious demeanor. In response, the ruler summons an assembly, orders his brother to undress, and surrounds him with four spears pointing directly at his bare flesh. Having noticed that the naked man’s careless manner has quickly given way to great anxiety, the king inquires why he no longer feels like laughing, to which the brother replies that if he were to do so, all the four spears would immediately pierce his body. The king then explains to all present that what they have witnessed is an allegorical representation of what he endures daily: “Four spears aim at my heart” (“Vier sper sten an dem herzen min,” \textit{EK}, v. 105). The message of the story is familiar and typically patristic: no good Christian should be capable of laughter as long as he is aware of Christ’s suffering on the cross, of his own mortality, and of the uncertainty he will face even after his death: “Ein sper daz vaste dar in get: daz ist die marter die Krist leit” (“One spear that pierces [my heart] is the torture that Christ suffered,” \textit{EK}, vv. 116 – 117); “daz wendet mich des lachen wol / daz ich die zit niht wizzen sol / wen mich der tot ersliche / und mich scheide von minem riche” (“It truly turns

\textsuperscript{85} Schönbach, \textit{Alteutsche Predigten} 1:8.
\textsuperscript{86} Cited according to the following edition: “Der ernsthafte König,” 63 – 68.
away my laughter that I cannot know when death will slay me and thus part me from my kingdom and wealth,” EK, vv. 143 – 146); “daz ist die engestliche not / welich vart mir schaffe min tot” (“My great anxiety is [that I do not know] with what kind of way my death will provide me,” EK, vv. 157 – 158). The popularity of the story across time and the fact that it was incorporated into numerous collections prove that the enduring apprehension of laughter and its potential threat to individual salvation continued to preoccupy not only the medieval ecclesiastical elite but secular society as well.

During the High Middle Ages patristic views on laughter also provide material for further inquiry and even for intellectual debate about their accuracy. One finds this approach in the works of two prominent figures of the period, Hildegard of Bingen (1098 – 1179) and Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274). While in her liturgical drama Ordo virtutum, Hildegard continues the early-medieval paradigm of denouncing laughter as proper to the devil, she offers quite a different perspective in her contribution to medieval health science, Causae et curae, completed between 1151 and 1158. Belonging to both monastic and popular medicinal traditions, Causae et curae is a handbook of advice in matters of sickness and health, which despite its singular scientific approach remains deeply rooted in the canonical Christian texts. The intertwining of natural philosophy and theology characterizes Hildegard’s treatment of laughter as well; the two approaches serve to reinforce one another. For example, in the chapter “Adam’s Knowledge,” the visionary accounts for the sinfulness of laughter with the help of its physiology, which she considers to be a direct result of the Fall:

Adam’s Knowledge. Before his fall, Adam knew the angels’ song and every form of music and had a voice like the peal of the bell. However, as a result of his fall, through envy, the serpent infested his marrow and his abdomen with a kind of wind, and it is
still present in every man. Through this wind a person’s spleen becomes fat, and thereby inappropriate intemperance, hilarity, and echoing laughter are set loose.\(^{92}\)

Hildegard does not address the social and individual psychological aspects of laughter that make it so disturbing to Christian thinkers. She attributes its origins to an external corruptive force—the devil—thus revealing her familiarity with the topos of diabolical laughter. Yet she treats its causes not as merely “spiritual” (envy and desire for superiority), but also as physiological: the Evil one literally interferes with the functioning of Adam’s (human) body. Laughter is therefore similar to (and is a product of) a disease. It is linked to moral qualities such as immoderation and impropriety (“immoderate intemperance”), but is also set loose by the evil wind festering in the fatty human spleen. Its origin is thus wholly corporeal, making it inherently impure. Before the Fall, there was no need for laughter, since there were no corrupt bodies. This idea gets further developed in the next passage called “Echoing Laughter and Hilarity”:

*Echoing Laughter and Hilarity.* Just as at Adam’s fall the pure, holy form of begetting offspring was transformed into carnal desire, so also the voice full of heavenly joy that Adam possessed changed into the opposite sound of hilarity and resounding laughter. Inappropriate rowdiness and laughter have a certain commonality with carnal desire, and the same wind that sets loose laughter, emerges from a person’s marrow and disturbs his abdomen and his bowels. Once in a while as a result of excessive disturbance, laughter drives as much tear water out of the eyes from the blood in the vessels as foam of the man’s seed is driven out from the blood in the vessels by the heat of his passionate desire.\(^{93}\)

Here again, one notices Hildegard’s attempt to juggle her own innovative natural-philosophical perspective with the traditional moral or social view of laughter prevalent in the ecclesiastical tradition. The passage acknowledges the disturbing, inappropriate, aesthetic side of the emotional gesture and its metaphorical association with carnality. Yet it also establishes physiological affinity between laughter and human sexuality. Sexual activity is the post-Fall transformation of what was originally intended to be pure and sinless procreation.\(^{94}\) For this reason, earthly laughter is a sullied form of what could have been eternal unpolluted heavenly joy. Its “commonality with carnal desire” is explained with the help of the theory of winds and humors, widespread at Hildegard’s time; she claims it to be released by “the same wind” that disturbs the person’s abdomen and bowels and sets in motion the procreation process, i.e. ejaculation. Since laughter is seen as a physiological process, as a bodily disturbance akin to a

\(^{92}\) Ibid., 132. Italics as used in the text.

\(^{93}\) Ibid.

\(^{94}\) Cf. Chrysostom’s position on sexuality as the result of the Fall in On Virginity, XIV.5 – 6 and XV.2. See John Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, 21 – 23.
disease, it can and should be treated. In the chapter “For Immoderate Laughing,” Hildegard offers some creative recipes on how to manage laughing fits and explains their damaging effects on the body and the curative magic of her medicine. However unusual it may look, her approach to the emotion as a treatable physical malady has a very familiar outcome. It effectively reinforces the well-established view of it as utterly corporeal in nature. The “empirical” methods thus strengthen the existing theological opinions of laughter as bodily, sinful, and thus in need of constant control.

That said, Hildegard’s writings on laughter are by no means consistent; just like the larger medieval discourse, her pioneering text contains tensions and contradictions. The view of laughter’s diabolical and sinful origins coexists with more hopeful and positive opinions, such as the ones found in the chapter “Joy and Laughter.” Both the former and the latter can be positive as long as they occur when a person “is not aware of anything sad, unpleasant, or bad in himself.” Remarkably, contrary to the widespread admonitions based on Luke 6:21–25, Hildegard seems to prefer joy to sadness. She compares the heart of a joyous person to a blossoming flower: “When a person’s consciousness is not aware of anything sad, unpleasant, or bad in himself, this person’s heart also opens itself to joy, just as blossoms open themselves to the sun’s warmth.” Joy thus offers a positive alternative for laughter’s origins. And yet even in this very chapter, the vocabulary used to refer to laughter in general is frequently derogatory, emphasizing its inferior nature. Its sound is likened to the “sound of an animal” and to a horse’s neighing. These animalistic comparisons go against Aristotle’s thesis about laughter as inherently human, subordinate it to intelligible speech, and brand it as aesthetically unpleasant. Even in this seemingly positive chapter, the prejudice against laughter is far too strong, as revealed in repeated warnings about excess and its danger to human health. Immoderate hilarity is ranked together with such negative emotions as sadness and anger that “make a person thin and weak,” they “weaken the stomach and cause the humors to circulate incorrectly.”

A discussion of high-medieval religious writings would be incomplete

95 “For Immoderate Laughing. A person who is seized and shaken by excessive laughter should grind up some muscat nut, add half as much sugar, shake this in some heated wine, and drink it both on an empty stomach and after having eaten something. For immoderate laughter dries out the lungs and shakes up the liver, and the heat of the sugar that has become liquid restores the lungs. If these two agents are regulated with the heightened heat of the wine and then consumed, they restore the good humors to their proper order which, through immoderate laughing, have become unbalanced.” Hildegard of Bingen, Holistic Healing, 176.
96 Ibid., 132.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
without mentioning Scholasticism, given that, as John W. Baldwin points out, scholastics had an expressed interest in mastering authoritative texts while debating “thorny questions and smoothing out conflicts.”

They develop what Le Goff calls a “casuistry of laughter” (*une casuistique du rire*), in an effort to define who is authorized to laugh and when it is legitimate to do so. Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica* provides the most prominent example of this approach. In four articles of Question 168, “Of Modesty as Consisting in the Outward Movements of the Body,” Aquinas explores the alleged sinfulness of laughter by engaging with the almost proverbial patristic opinions, with the help of formal thesis-antithesis postulates: “(1) Whether there can be virtue and vice in the outward movements of the body that are done seriously? (2) Whether there can be a virtue about playful actions? (3) Of the sin consisting in excess of play; (4) Of the sin consisting in lack of play.”

The way in which the questions are formulated suggests that this theologian’s approach to mirth, laughter, and the body might be less restrictive than that of his predecessors. And indeed, his response to Ambrose’s interpretation of Luke 6:21 (“Woe to you who laugh, for you shall weep”) disagrees with the Church Father’s conclusion that “all, and not only excessive games should be avoided” and that “therefore there cannot be a virtue about games.” Aquinas defends joy, pleasure, and laughter because of their therapeutic effect on the human soul.

However, as in Hildegard’s case, Aquinas’s less rigid views regarding joy and laughter should not be taken as an unconditional acceptance of them. To use C. S. Lewis’s description of Aquinas’s rhetorical strategy, “He seems always to take away with one hand what he holds out to us with the other.” *Summa* reveals a delicate balance between the inherited tradition of Christian theology and his own views on the matter, inspired by the Aristotelian philosophy and other works of classical antiquity, to which he continuously refers. While proclaiming mirth and joy beneficial for one’s health (Article 2) and for greater social harmony (Article 4), Aquinas is also careful to agree with some of his austere

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100 Baldwin, *The Scholastic Culture of the Middle Ages*, 85.
101 Quoted according to Aquinas, *Summa*, 1870.
102 “Just as man needs bodily rest for the body’s refreshment, because he cannot always be at work, since his power is finite and equal to a certain fixed amount of labor, so too is it with his soul whose power is also finite and equal to a fixed amount of work. […] Now just as weariness of the body is dispelled by resting the body, so weariness of the soul must needs [sic] be remedied by resting the soul: and the soul’s rest is pleasure…” Question 168, Article 2 in Aquinas, *Summa*, 1872.
103 Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, 16. Aquinas utilizes the method commonly used in medieval disputation and presents two sides of the argument side by side; however, more than Aquinas’s method, Lewis addresses his ambiguous philosophical position.
predecessors that “excessive play pertains to senseless mirth, called by Gregory (Moral. xxi, 17) a daughter of gluttony”\footnote{104}: 

\begin{quote}
I answer that, In human affairs whatever is against reason is a sin. Now it is against reason for a man to be burdensome to others, by offering no pleasure to others, and by hindering their enjoyment. Wherefore Seneca […] says (De Quat. Virt., cap. De Continentia): “Let your conduct be guided by wisdom so that no one will think you rude, or despise you as a cad.” 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.”
\end{quote}

\textit{Reply to Objection 1:} Mirth is forbidden the penitent because he is called upon to mourn for his sins. Nor does this imply a vice in default, because this very diminishment of mirth in them is in accordance with reason.

\textit{Reply to Objection 2:} Jeremias speaks there in accordance with the times, the state of which required that man should mourn; wherefore he adds: “I sat alone, because Thou hast filled me with threats.” The words of Tobias 3 refer to excessive mirth; and this is evident from his adding: “Neither have I made myself partaker with them that walk in lightness.”

\textit{Reply to Objection 3:} Austerity, as a virtue, does not exclude all pleasures, but only such as are excessive and inordinate; wherefore it would seem to pertain to affability, which the Philosopher (Ethic. iv, 6) calls “friendliness,” or, otherwise wittiness. Nevertheless he names and defines it thus in respect of its agreement with temperance, to which it belongs to restrain pleasure.\footnote{105}

Aquinas places a particular emphasis on affability, the quality of being pleasant to others, a motif prominent in the contemporary vernacular literature and conduct texts. Unlike Ambrose’s treatise on virginity, in which social intercourse is presented as a dangerous aspect of the secular world that threatens virtuous ascetic bodies, Thomas treats it as an important component of human life. Laughter is disapproved of not because it stems from affability, but because if it is excessive, it can disrupt social relations. In this respect, the High Middle Ages exhibit a preoccupation not only with the salvation of the human soul, but also with much more immediate concerns, such as social interaction and acceptance, for which the body is recognized as an important means of communication. Aquinas objects to the position of the Apostle Andronicus who “counts austerity to be one of the virtues” and “describes it as a habit whereby a man neither gives

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item Question 168, Article 3, Reply to Objection 2 in Aquinas, \textit{Summa}, 1874.
\item Question 168, Article 4 in Aquinas, \textit{Summa}, 1874 – 1875.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
nor receives the pleasures of conversation.”

By responding that even austerity itself “does not exclude all pleasures, but only such as are excessive and inordinate,” he reveals his understanding of mankind’s social nature, and that it is impossible to abolish mirth and laughter just as it would be impossible to eliminate all social interaction. Aquinas offers a middle ground and emphasizes the importance of self-restraint and bodily control, the ideal of *moderatio* in all things as one of the most important characteristics of a “good man” (*vir bonus*). Thus he reconciles the two positions and illustrates the Legoffian *contrôle de rire* at work.

All the aspects of high-medieval laughter are represented in the German sermons of the Franciscan friar Berthold of Regensburg (1210 – 1272). A charismatic preacher and a prolific writer, Berthold left numerous Latin sermons transmitted in more than 300 manuscripts and 211 sermons written in the vernacular. Whether the so-called “German sermons” were truly his or only attributed to him, it is obvious that in either case his name provided the weight of legitimacy and authority. Unlike those of Hildegard and Aquinas, Berthold’s view of laughter is uniformly derogatory. His writings demonstrate an awareness of both the canonical works and contemporary debates and reveal a preoccupation with the state of morality among the laity. Like his early monastic predecessors, Berthold interprets laughter in eschatological terms: as a symptom of shortsightedness and insufficient concern with eternal salvation. In the sermon with the telling title “Von fünf schadelichen sünden” (“Of Five Harmful Sins”), the preacher admonishes:

> Fliheet die sünde diu dā heizet unkiusche. Wellet ir des niht tuon, vil wunderlichen balde von der gesunheit des libes unde von lancelebenne iuwers libes unde von der gnåde gotes in den lön måch den sünden zuo dem ēwigen tōde, nū des ertsen an der sēle und an dem jungsten tage an libe und an sēle! Jā ist ez iu niht wan ein gespōte und ein gelachter. Jā kumpt noch der tac, daz der schimpf gar ze einem ernste wirt, des niemer mēr zerrinnet. (XXVII, 10 – 17)

Flee the sin called unchastity. If you do not wish to do so, then you shall marvel at [what will happen to] the health and longevity of your body and to God’s mercy. As a reward for your sins [you shall be condemned] to eternal death, first in soul, and on the Judgment Day in body and soul! Truly, to you it is all nothing but a joke and a laugh. Verily, the day shall come when your jesting turns into gravity to which there shall be no end.

107 *VL* 1:819. The question of authenticity in the case of Berthold’s “German sermons” continues to be debated. Frank Banta argues that the German sermons are not authentic and have only been transmitted under Berthold’s name, while Joachim Bumke asserts with certainty that there is no reason to question their authenticity. Cf. *VL* 1:819; Bumke, *Geschichte*, 425.
108 *VA* 1:435.
In contrast to Aquinas, who treats laughter as a universal human ability, for Berthold it is a particular secular, or courtly, vice that deserves condemnation as an idle pastime together with other forms of amusement, such as jesting, dancing, or playing games:

Der sechst sunde stam is vrazhait, des est sint è zeit ezzen, edeleu ezzen, chostleicheu ezzen machen, ze vil ezzen, […] und gelustleicheu löterrede und loterfur nach wirtscheften, ungefuogeu gemeleich oder schimpf, unmäzzich gelechter, vergezzerung gotes und des todes, spil mitwürfel, pretspil, schachzagel und sölheu spil… 109 (Appendix A, vv. 30ff)

The origin of the sixth sin is gluttony. To that belong eating all the time, fine eating, preparing expensive meals, eating too much, […] joyful but useless speech and good-for-nothing lifestyle, impolite jollity or joking, immoderate laughter, forgetting God and death, playing games, board games, chess, and other such pastimes…

Women are particularly singled out and advised against all immoderation in enjoying life, which includes dancing and joking: “ir frouwen, schönet och iuwer selbe gar flizliche vor springen unde vor schimpfe unde vor tanzen” (“You women, protect yourself diligently from jumping, jesting, and dancing,” XLII, 6–7). 110 Berthold explicitly ties laughter to the lack of chastity (unkiusche), for which humanity was punished with the biblical Flood, and condemns it in all possible forms, including ridicule (smehen, gespoett, and gespoettlachen) and loud, bodily, immoderate outbursts (chahitzen). 111 Laughter is also conspicuously included in the long list of the sins of the mouth, such as gluttony (“unmäze des mundes an ezzen und trinken”), excessive talkativeness, vicious speech, and slander. While warnings against these transgressions are present in most of Berthold’s speeches, Sermon I of Appendix A substantially expands this catalogue to more than fourteen lines of text, adding several categories that clearly aim their criticism at the secular ideal of courtly love service and the literature that perpetuated it: “weib erwerben” (“wooing women”), “singen wertleicheu lieder” (“singing of secular songs”), “lesen tauetsche puech die valsch sint und unnütz” (“reading of books in the vernacular, i. e. German, which are false and useless”), “die stimm trilberen, so man singen sol gotes lob” (“trilling one’s voice the way one should sing God’s praises”). 112 For Berthold,

110 VA 1:57.
111 For references to the Flood, see sermon “Von ruofenden sünden” (“Of Calling Sins,” VI), VA 1:81–83. Also see vv. 25ff in VA 1:87. For ridicule see Sermons I, VII, and XXVII. For chahitzen, cf. v. 23 in VA 2:672. Chahitzen is a rare Germanized version of the Latin onomatopoeic cachinnus, referring to loud or violent laughter (etymologically related to the actual sounds of laughter *ha ha*). Kremer, “Das Lachen,” 43.
112 Vv. 15–25 in VA 2:672.
courtly ideology is firmly connected to shortsightedness, the want of morality, and laughter.

It is hard to do justice to the complexity of medieval theological discourse on laughter in just one chapter. Much more can be said about the forms of religious expression that do not suppress but rather utilize and favor human laughter, particularly in the later Middle Ages. However, since most of the literary texts analyzed in this study belong to the high-medieval period, such manifestations of laughter as the Passion plays (Corpus Christi) and the risus paschalis have to be excluded from the present discussion.113

A brief word needs to be said about the phenomenon of carnival, this ultimate form of subversive laughter, which exploits its connection to human sexuality. Much has been written on the carnival tradition thanks to the discussion initiated by the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin in his seminal study Rabelais and His World. Bakhtin famously presented the late-medieval carnival as an alternative to the hegemonic power of the Church, as a cathartic, salvific expression of popular rebellion against the restrictive and oppressive religious ideology.114 Even though commonly thought to be a late-medieval phenomenon, the carnival tradition began much earlier. The oldest mention of the Feast of Fools (festum stultorum) comes from the end of the eleventh century and is attributed to the Rector of Theology in Paris, Joannes Belethus. It is also known that in 1199 the Bishop of Paris, Eudes de Sylla, wrote a decree against this feast in Notre Dame.115 The tradition of carnival processions must have been established firmly enough by the end of the twelfth century for it to disturb the ecclesiastical authorities and to warrant condemnation. The Feasts of Fools (festum fatuorum, festum follorum, or festum stultorum), the Feasts of the

113 Their meaning and effect continue to be debated. Particularly popular in England during the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, the Passion plays were originally a byproduct of the medieval feast Corpus Christi, “the feast in which the symbolic Eucharistic world of the Medieval period culminated.” Gilhus, Laughing Gods, 88. As far as the risus paschalis is concerned, Werner Röcke’s recent study illustrates that there are still many misconceptions to be resolved, including the very definition of this phenomenon (preachers driving their parishioners into fits of laughter during the Easter service). See Bachorski et al., “Performativität,” 335 – 336. On Passion plays and Corpus Christi see Choi, “Corpus Christi Cycle,” 131 – 151; Fichte, “Die Darstellung”; Bergmann, Studien zu Entstehung; Bumke, Geschichte, 404 – 407.

114 Some aspects of Bakhtin’s argument, such as a rather black-and-white contrast between the “laugh-less” Middle Ages and the unbridled and free laughter of the Renaissance, are no longer accepted as unquestionable. See, for example, Le Goff, “Le rire au Moyen Âge,” 13; Gilhus, Laughing Gods, 103 – 107. In fact, Gilhus describes the time following the Renaissance and Reformation as no less hostile towards laughter than the medieval period. Gilhus, Laughing Gods, 100.

115 Gilhus, Laughing Gods, 147. Gurevich, however, disagrees and cautions that the carnival proper is a late-medieval and Renaissance phenomenon. Gurevich, “Bakhtin,” 56.
Subdeacons (*festum subdiaconorum*), the Feast of the Ass (*festum asini*), and the Feast of the Rod (*festum baculi*) appropriate and subvert the religious ritual while representing and celebrating the opening up of the body to the sensory world, the age-old connection between laughter and sexuality. The participating priests are said to have dressed up in female garments, clothes with clear sexual connotations, for the female gender represented disorder and corporeality. One of the important characteristics of the carnival is its interest in the material, unruly body and its functions, including sexuality; Bakhtin refers to this aspect as *snizhenie*, a Russian term commonly rendered into English as “pointing downward”: from high to low, from spirit to body, from head and face to buttocks and genitals. Carnival participants thus exploited the very aspect that the doctrinal tradition before them had attempted to subdue. The subversive nature of the carnival and the negative responses to it, however, illustrate that the ambivalence toward laughter that plagued earlier epochs was very much present in the High Middle Ages.

This uncertainty is manifested in continuous attempts to create a taxonomy of laughter and to define its permissible and unacceptable forms. The attempts at codification illustrate the medieval awareness that Aristotle’s view of laughter as inherently human was ultimately true. At the same time, its numerous aspects are perceived as disturbing. They correspond to, as Gilhus points out, two phenomenological fields of laughter in religion: the connection between the physical body, creation and birth, sexuality and eroticism, food and intoxicating drinks, feasts and comedies, madness and wisdom, and the destructive and antisocial powers, seen in destruction and death, derision and shame, ridicule and blasphemy, and ultimately tragedy. As the new Christian religion tries to differentiate itself from the surrounding and former religious pagan practices, laughter inevitably becomes involved in the debate on the body, propriety, salvation, and virtue. As the issues of corporeality, chastity, and virtue are particularly important in monastic communities, laughter is frequently interpreted as a sign of immoderation, foolishness, and, in women’s case, as signaling a possible lack of sexual virtue, while its rejection demonstrates one’s internal goodness. In order to obtain salvation after death, an early-medieval Christian had to perform virtue at all times, whether in front of a human or divine audience. As Althoff points out, performance was practiced not only in secular interactions, but also in communicating with God and the saints. The truth of this observation is illustrated by the thirteenth-century cleric Thomasin von Zerclaere, who warns that those who laugh in church act unwisely because the

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saints can witness their transgression. Early Christianity and medieval monasticism bequeath to posterity what in German is called *der Unwert des Lachens* (the depreciation of laughter).

By the High Middle Ages, patristic texts are seen as authoritative opinions, which—even when questioned—continue to influence ecclesiastical and secular discourses. “I thought of laughter as folly,” proclaims the Vulgate Bible. Even as the high-medieval society develops a seemingly more accepting view of joy—curiously coinciding with the rise of courtly culture, the increased importance of laity, and the development of vernacular literatures—the interest in controlling it indicates the persistence of the same concerns that plagued their predecessors and endured well into the future. In the fourteenth century, the female mystic Margaret Ebner interprets her own laughter as a sign of suffering to come, and the fourteenth-century author Der Teichner continues to transmit the belief to his audience that hilarity is incompatible with virtue, and particularly with holiness. The following chapters will show that the secular treatment of laughter in many ways reflects the uncertainty we find in the religious discourse, but that medieval aristocratic culture also played an important role in “domesticating” laughter. Some of its forms become an integral part of courtly protocol. Yet even within courtly culture, the question of laughter’s propriety continues to be debated, especially for women who are expected to perform virtue at any cost.

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119 “Swer da ist mit ubermuot / und chlaffet unde lachet / wizzet, daz der selbe mahet / die heiligen ze geziuge siner missetat” (*WG*, vv. 10878 – 10881). For further discussion of medieval clerical works, see chapter 3.
120 “Dem Mönche, und man kann ruhig hinzufügen, auch dem Menschen, ziemt das Lachen nicht.” Schmitz, “*quod rident homines*,” 11.
121 “Risum reputavi errorem” (*Vulg. Eccl.* 2,2).
123 Ebner, *Major Works*, 120.
124 “Daz tunt uns dw puech nicht schein / daz chain heylig yndert sey / der mit lachen sorgen frey / chomen sey ans himel schar” (“The books do not let us know of any saints who would have ever joined heaven carefree and laughing.” *Von unrechten vraüden* [#164], vv. 22 – 27).