

The Laughter of Courtly Women: Complexities and Concerns

Let’s imagine a situation: a beautiful young woman and her husband are travelling alone, far from their court, when she unwillingly attracts the attention of a boisterous and vain nobleman and is about to be snatched away from her husband by brutal force. Despite her pleas and appeals to the villain’s reason, the situation is becoming desperate: unless she yields and agrees to become his mistress, her husband will be killed and she herself will face rape and abuse. Luckily, the woman reveals a remarkable presence of mind and turns the situation to her advantage by distracting the attacker and giving her companion time to save both of them. The evil is defeated, and the couple is free to continue their travels and face new adventures.

A student of medieval literature will easily recognize in this description an important episode from the famous tale of the love and trials of a married couple—the Arthurian knight Erec and his ever-patient wife Enite. In both

1 “And what is the inclination of clerics? They teach good manners, art, wisdom, all kinds of virtue, peace, modesty and, in addition, awe.”

2 “How should I, a chaste woman, behave nowadays towards people so that I might silence their slander since, according to them, minds and bodies do not desire the same thing? If only four of them were of one mind about it! Nobody sees things the same way...”
versions of the story—Chrétien de Troyes’ Old French romance and its German counterpart by Hartmann von Aue—Enide averts danger from herself and her husband by choosing to deceive the treacherous count whom the couple meets in their wanderings. However, the two works differ significantly in the means that the clever heroine deploys to achieve her goal. Having initially rejected the count’s advances, Chrétien’s Enide suddenly changes her attitude. In order to persuade the count to spare Erec’s life, she summons all her sophistry and rhetorical skills. She resorts to an endless monologue, intersperses it with complicated arguments, and manipulates social conventions to her advantage—further and further convincing the traitor of her willingness to become his lover:

“Sir, there is a preferable alternative to what you’re saying,” said Enide: “it would be an act of gross disloyalty and treachery if you killed him [Erec] right here. But, good sir, calm yourself, for I shall do as you desire. […] I should not at any price wish you to commit such an act of treason. My lord is not on his guard: if you killed him in such a way you would be committing too great an offence, and I would in turn be blamed for it. Throughout the land everyone would say that it had been done on my advice. Hold back until morning, when my lord will wish to rise; then you will be better able to harm him without incurring blame or reproach.” But the thoughts of her heart are not the words on her lips. […] The count replied: “Splendid, my lady! Surely you were born under a lucky star; you will be kept with great honour.”

“My lord,” said she, “I do believe it, but I wish to have your pledge that you will dearly cherish me; I shall not believe you otherwise.”

The rapturously happy count replied: “Here: I pledge you my faith, my lady, loyally as a count, that I will do all you wish….” Then she accepted his pledge, but it was of negligible worth to her and she scarcely valued it except as a means of saving her lord. She knew well how to intoxicate a rogue with words when she put her mind to it; it was far better that she lie to him than for her lord to be cut to pieces.3

In Hartmann’s story the same scene is depicted differently. Gone are the verbal nets of complicated reasoning woven by the Old French Enide for her potential rapist. The Middle High German heroine’s first strategic success is achieved not through her words, but through her body language:

als si sinen ernest sach
und daz erz von herzen sprach,
vil güetlichen sach si in an,
den vil ungetriuwen man,
und lachete durch schönen list.
si sprach: “ich wæne iu ernest ist.
[...] só bin ich iuwer bete bereit.” (Erec, vv. 3838 – 3843; 3895)4


4 Hartmann von Aue, Erec.
As she saw that he [the Count] was serious and meant it, she looked at the false man in a friendly way and smiled cleverly. She said, “I see that you are in earnest. […] So I am ready to do your bidding.”

What Chrétien’s character achieves with persuasion, Hartmann’s Enite accomplishes with a smile. No doubt, this smile has the same degree of premeditation and deceit as her Old French counterpart’s words, a fact made clear by the author’s reference to *list*, meaning “cleverness,” “wit,” or “cunning.” However, while the non-verbal aspects of this scene are left to the discretion of the individual performer of Chrétien’s text, the German work is very precise in its description of the heroine’s actions. And although the message that Enite’s body language sends is then reinforced by a tall tale about her alleged misery with Erec, it is clear that her smile plays the crucial role in turning this dire situation to her advantage. The count, who a moment ago was ready to lose control over his passion and ravish the poor woman, stops and listens. He is persuaded by her sudden change of mood and takes it at face value. Enite thus appears to use some well-established convention in regard to women’s smiling, which her wooer recognizes. It is the count’s uncritical acceptance of this convention that ultimately leads him to his perdition.

Smiling is by no means an unusual gesture in medieval courtly literature. As Kathryn Starkey observes,

> “In most courtly epics the joy of the court is expressed visually in the smiling countenances of young men and ladies, particularly at ceremonial events such as arrivals and feasts. At these public events smiling is not just an affective response to a joyous event but […] is part of a conventional visual display of courtly *freude* [joy].”

Few would believe that Enite’s facial expression has anything to do with an affective response to a happy event. Although it resembles the restoration of peace and a reaffirmation of the power of the lord of the house, it is hard to find courtly *joy* in this situation of threat, danger, and rape. The heroine’s smile is thus nothing but a performance. In the fictional world of Hartmann’s romance, Enite’s smile produces an *impression* of restoring *freude*, with its important component of harmonious interaction between the sexes. It reinstates traditional gender roles by presenting the woman as attractive and sexually inviting, as an object of desire, rather than as a rebellious and inaccessible *übelez wip* (“evil woman”).

The connection between women’s laughter and sexual availability, discussed in previous chapters, serves Hartmann well; yet it also causes the German poet to

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5 Starkey, “Bruhnhild’s Smile,” 164.
6 On the definition of performance and performatives see Starkey, “Bruhnhild’s Smile,” 163 – 164.
view Enite’s smile as problematic. He reveals his uneasiness by adding a clarifying description, *durch schœnen list*, purposely translated earlier simply as “cleverly.” Of course Enite laughs *cleverly* in the given situation (MHG *durch list*!) But the question that arises is why this *list* should be described as *schaen*; or, even better, why couldn’t Hartmann simply omit the reference to *list* and describe the scene as, “she looked at the false man in a friendly way and smiled” or “smiled sweetly” (“und *lachete*” or “…*lachete schœne*”)? Could it be more than a flowery idiom or a mnemonic aid for the performer of the story? 7 Can Hartmann’s careful word choice add to the modern understanding of how his contemporaries might have perceived the laughter of courtly women and uncover this perception’s complexities and contradictions?

First of all, let us examine what would happen if the word *schaene* were taken out of the phrase. Even though Hartmann is much less direct than Chrétien, never stating that his Enite is openly lying, the phrase *durch list* would alert the listening audience to the fact that the heroine’s behavior was a charade and that this smile must be followed by a lie. The Middle High German word *list* is used much more often to refer to cunning than to wisdom, and the expressions *äne list, mit listen, arger list, boeser* or *übeler list* all refer to treacherous, dishonest, or deceitful behavior. 8 Surely, the audience is likely to be on the woman’s side as she tries to free herself from this precarious situation, but such a strategic use of smiling in order to deceive and mislead can nevertheless be seen as transgressive. The image of Enite in this case—so cold-blooded in her smiling and plotting—would be at odds with the way she is depicted throughout the rest of the work—as warm, womanly, and honest. By adding *schaene* to his description, Hartmann takes away the negative connotation of *list* and softens the effect of the heroine’s treacherous smile and her subsequent lie.

Had the author described Enite as simply smiling or smiling decorously (*schaene*), her behavior would have looked very strange indeed. Now *schaene* would come to describe not her cunning, but her smile. With no other explanation provided for Enite’s sudden change of mood, the audience could come to question her character, since her body language—the stereotypical *vil güet-

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7 For a brilliant discussion of the formulaic constitution of thought in oral noetic (i.e., relying on memory) cultures to which the Middle Ages belong, see Chapters 2 and 3 in Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 16 – 76.

8 Lexer’s definitions of *list* include “weisheit” (wisdom) but also “klugheit, schlauheit” (cleverness, slyness); but the negative connotation seems to predominate, e.g. *mit listen* means “auf schlaue weise” (slyly, cunningly); *äne list* means “aufrichtig, wahrhaftig” (honest, true; literally: “without cunning”); and *argerlist* means “arglist, unaufrichtigkeit” (dishonesty, conceit). Lexer, *HW* 1:1936. This use of *list* is characteristic of Stricker’s Arthurian romance *Daniel von dem blühenden Tal* (*Daniel of the Blossoming Valley*). Scholars speculate that the protagonist’s use of *list* rather than knightly prowess may have contributed to the negative reception of Stricker’s epic. Cf. Gibbs and Johnson, *Medieval German Literature*, 363.
lichen ansehen and (schöne) lachen—would have indicated she welcomed the man’s sexual advances. Without the reference to list, German Enite’s smile would thus take on the meaning of the unkiusche (the notorious lack of chastity), which Hartmann needs to avoid in order for Enite to maintain the image of a virtuous victim. In fact, this is precisely what Chrétien fears too. His version supplies triple justification for Enide’s lying, and all three times he is emphatic that Enite’s dubious words are not indicative of her conjugal infidelity: “The thoughts of her heart are not the words on her lips”; “then she accepted his pledge, but it was of negligible worth to her and she scarcely valued it except as a means of saving her lord”; “it was far better to lie […] than for her lord to be cut to pieces” (my emphasis). The last quote unhesitatingly presents lying and giving the impression of consenting to adultery as correct ethical choices.

Despite the fact that Enite’s chastity and her loyalty to Erec are unquestioned, Hartmann’s innovation—the heroine’s smile—is both brilliant and problematic. Poetically, Hartmann dramatizes the episode and achieves through the description of a single gesture what Chrétien tries to do in several paragraphs and three clarifications. On the level of symbolism, however, the MHG writer has difficulty reconciling Enite’s virtue and her treacherous seductiveness, inherent in her smile and necessary for the plot. His addition durch schönen list clearly illustrates the need to emphasize the woman’s goodness and to justify her smiling lest it be perceived as transgressive.

A clue to understanding Hartmann’s concern that Enite’s behavior might be misconstrued can be discovered in a completely different kind of text, known as conduct literature, written to educate young aristocrats about proper behavior in this world and attaining salvation after death. Intended for a lay audience but written mostly by clerics, these works are conspicuously situated between the two worlds—the religious and the secular. The nature of their authors’ education presupposes knowledge of the Church’s teachings; and it is thus not surprising to discover that these texts often echo and promote contemporary religious concerns about laughter and virtue.

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9 My interpretation is further supported by Joachim Bumke, who points out that medieval rules for women frequently emphasize that in order to reject a man a woman must do so with entire seriousness and without laughing. Bumke, Courtly Culture, 343.
10 In MHG schoen can also mean “careful, complete, impressive.” In this case, schoen can be seen as a compliment to Enite’s presence of mind. Yet, it still performs the same function—it neutralizes the treachery of Enite’s smile and of her consequent lie.
11 Of course, conduct literature is by no means the only way that religious views of laughter reached the secular public. Sermons by mendicant preachers like Berthold of Regensburg are just one example. Another venue for the interaction between the ecclesiastical and secular spheres may be found in the didactic tradition of the Middle Ages, such as Maeren. For example, see Sieglinde Hartmann’s study on the way laughter is represented in Der Stricker’s
that appreciate laughter (including that of women), define its acceptable forms, and fix its place within the secular courtly ideal of humanity. At the same time, medieval conduct texts do more than simply mirror the debate between anti- and pro-laughter discourses. The two kinds of conduct works demonstrate that medieval lay society lived with two diametrically opposed views of laughing femininity, both relying on the topos “laughing woman = sexually available woman,” but utilizing this equation in its own way. While one position presents laughter as a threat to female virtue, the other exploits its erotic potential. Conduct discourse reveals the degree to which these two seemingly incompatible views are in fact intertwined in the medieval courtly imagination, pointing to the ultimate reason behind this symbiotic existence: control of laughter in the case of women represents male control over female sexuality. It exposes an inherent contradiction within medieval courtly society that imposes on women the unsatisfiable requirement to be virtuous and desirable at the same time.

Before moving on to a textual analysis of conduct literature, I must clarify some terminology. The texts I will discuss belong to the genre known as conduct or courtesy literature. Although the terms are often used interchangeably, the distinction between “conduct” and “courtesy” is important. The latter refers to the texts dealing specifically with court etiquette, while the former is used as a broader and more inclusive term. A further distinction can be made within the concept of “courtesy,” between “courtesy books proper” that deal with moral qualities and “etiquette manuals” that focus on behavior. However, too strict an emphasis on the moral versus behavioral, internal versus external is neither helpful nor necessary in the study of medieval conduct, where external qualities, such as behavior or beauty, commonly reflect internal qualities (i.e., virtue or its lack). As Dronzek observes:

People would no doubt consider a person’s behavior toward others as an indicator of that person’s morality or goodness, thus erasing the modern distinction between courtesy and etiquette. Therefore, although a number of these texts do label themselves “courtesy books,” the term conduct literature is more encompassing and neutral.

In this study, the terms “conduct” and “courtesy” are used interchangeably to refer to instructional treatises like Thomasin of Zerclaere’s Der Welsche Gast or works. Hartmann makes a strong argument for the influence of medieval theology, particularly of the Early Church Fathers. Hartmann, “Empirischer Beitrag,” 107 – 129.

12 Dronzek, “Gendered Theories,” 137.
13 Ibid., 137. For a detailed discussion of the term “courtesy” with a survey of medieval texts see Nicholls, The Matter of Courtesy. Recent research on pan-European conduct literature is wonderfully represented in the essay collection Ashley and Clark, Medieval Conduct. A comprehensive overview of medieval and early modern German conduct texts for women is provided by Susanne Barth in Barth, Jungfrauenzucht, 75 – 83. On women in specific MHG texts see the bibliography, particularly the studies by Bennewitz, Ehlert, Rasmussen, and Dallapiazza.
Hugo of Trimberg’s Renner. However, I also apply the term “conduct literature” to a broader spectrum of texts that includes Sprüche, or short didactic poems by secular authors, as well as proverbial wisdom from collections such as Freidank’s Bescheidenheit. Although these works formally belong to the genre of didactic literature (Lehrdichtung) rather than to educational literature (Erziehungs-literatur) proper, their relevance to the present discussion is obvious in their frequent engagement with the issue of laughter and their broader interest in the subject of proper conduct, represented by the iconic question, Wie man zер werlте solte leben? (“How one should live in this world?”).

Belonging to Two Worlds: Meet the Courtly Cleric

Until the rise of courtly culture in the twelfth century, all literary activity was concentrated in the hands of clerics and intended, for the most part, for religious instruction, whether in Latin or in the vernacular (what Bumke calls “practical religious literature”). However, the work of scholars such as Jaeger, Colish, and Schulman has shown that true interaction between the secular and ecclesiastical worlds extended beyond patronage and religious instruction. Even such striking developments in secular society as the unprecedented growth of vernacular literatures and the spread of the chivalric code of manners during the High Middle Ages are now themselves seen as products of clerical activity.

Although the term “cleric,” from the Latin clericus, includes all clergy living outside monastic life—such as students, teachers, bishops, archbishops, and clergy of parish and cathedral churches—it also applies to court clerics, that is, the educated members of aristocratic courts who performed a number of important duties as advisors, tutors, diplomats, architects, and chaplains. As the best-educated members of the court, privileged to have access to their secular lords, courtly clerics played an important role in shaping the affairs of medieval aristocracy, which becomes clear thanks to the numerous works they wrote with the purpose of improving and guiding the noble laity.

14 Bumke, Courtly Culture, 425.
15 Jaeger’s seminal work, The Origins of Courtliness—Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals—939–1210, reveals the scope of clerical influence in formulating and promoting the ideal of courtliness that found its expression in medieval lyric, narrative, and numerous writings of didactic nature. Also see Colish, Medieval Foundations, 175–183; Oostrom, Court and Culture; Schulman, Where Troubadours Were Bishops.
16 Jaeger, Courtliness, 15.
17 Cf. “As tutors at court the clerics unquestionably exerted a significant influence on the social ideas of the secular nobility.” Bumke, Courtly Culture, 324. Both Jaeger and Bumke concur that instruction of laity in courtesy lay by and large in the province of clerics, especially in Germany, where the level of literacy among the aristocracy was substantially lower compared
The functions of the court chaplain often included those of a priest, thus providing an opportunity to transmit ecclesiastical ideals to the laity. Because of the discrepancy between courtly ideals and reality, it is not surprising that the secular way of life is continuously scrutinized in the clerical writings of the time, which reveal that worldly clerics were strongly aware of the scope and limits of their influence. For example, the fourteenth-century Dutch cleric Dirk of Delft advises against attacking laymen’s vices and suggests more diplomatic strategies that his colleagues might use in order to fulfill their duty of *correctio* (correction): “Let them approach their masters and convey to them the error of their ways by parables, with gentle speech rather than harsh words, for these will not be heard and so they do more harm than good.”

The works of many high- and late-medieval clerics anticipate Dirk’s insight, correcting the deficiencies of the laity not through direct condemnation, but rather with the help of persuasion, *exempla*, and appeals to their patron’s secular values, such as honor, prestige, well-being, and prosperity. Clerical writings, particularly conduct texts, point to their authors’ position at the nexus of the two worlds and their understanding of the lay society within which they moved—its mechanisms, intricacies, necessities, and sensibilities.

It would be inaccurate to imagine all clerics as highly pious churchmen pursuing the goal of promoting the Christian doctrine at court. However, their proximity to and integration into courtly society cannot obscure the fact that they received an ecclesiastical education, by means of which they were initiated into the pan-European culture with long-rooted traditions and patriarchal ideology. Besides ideals of courtly humanism, this learned culture promoted misogynist discourse inherited from classical and early ecclesiastical texts. Andreas Capellanus’s *De Amore*, particularly its notorious and rampant misandry Book III, demonstrates how the patristic, no less than the classical, tradition could be harnessed for the agenda of high-medieval authors; while Alcuin Blamires’ anthology *Woman Defamed* and *Woman Defended* provides another stark illustration of the negative pre-modern discussion on femininity and sexuality.

18 Oostrom, *Court and Culture*, 185.
20 “The worldly clergy formed a class whose values were not limited by national boundaries.” Jaeger, *Courtliness*, 27 – 28. Jaeger also provocatively asks, “Where should they have gotten an education if not in the church as clerics?” Ibid., 15.
21 Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*. Also see Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed*. Van Oostrom’s and Karras’s studies show how all clerical learning inevitably led to
be closely associated with a university education, forming the core of clerical masculine identity, different from that of secular knighthood.\textsuperscript{22} Misogyny was thus transmitted to the laity, even by liberal worldly clerics, and provided a rationale for gendered education.\textsuperscript{23} The medieval theological and natural-philosophical belief that woman is more carnal than man is the key reason for this gendered approach. Even though both men and women are held to the standards of moderation (\textit{m	extsuperscript{oyze}) and advised against improper behavior, awareness of the body and the ways to control it are emphasized to a greater extent in the texts intended for the female audience. While the list of a man’s virtues and responsibilities encompasses a broad scope of activities, the most important and defining values for a woman are thought to be her physical beauty and attractiveness, thus anchoring her in her corporeality. Gendered education results in a gendered approach to laughter. Similar to the contemporaneous religious discourse, conduct literature recognizes the connection between laughter and affability (or social intercourse), so prominent in the writings of Ambrose and Aquinas. The authors of conduct treatises are conscious of the fact that affability is more than just an indicator of a person’s refinement as a courtier; it also plays a crucial role in facilitating the interaction between the sexes. While some authors may be more explicit than others in their apprehension of the erotic side of laughter, the majority express reservations regarding women’s laughter, reaffirming Ambrose’s view that “when laughter creeps in, […] bashfulness is lessened and modesty is worn away.”

Despite the parallels between conduct literature’s negative perception of laughter and that of the contemporaneous religious discourse, conduct manuals
clarify why Le Goff calls the medieval court the place where “domestication” of laughter must have occurred. The authors of courtesy books try to accommodate, even “tame,” laughter by defining its forms and the specific spheres where it might be permissible. It continues to be viewed with suspicion, but the task of medieval courtly didacts is to control rather than utterly eliminate it.

Non-Gendered Laughter in Conduct Texts: Saving Souls and Reputations

In their overall treatment of laughter, conduct texts reflect the contemporary preoccupation with the impending death and looming Apocalypse, as expressed in Luke 6:21 – 25, James 4:9 – 10, and Ecclesiastes 7:4. The writings of clerical authors Thomasin of Zerclaere and Hugo of Trimberg, for example, contain such familiar motifs as the performance of virtue, the diabolical nature of laughter, and the foolish shortsightedness of those who indulge in it. According to Hugo of Trimberg, the devil is said to drag his victims to hell laughing; and Thomasin calls those who make others laugh the “devil’s illusionists.” The need to appear virtuous and ever mindful of God and His saints causes Zerclaere to warn his audience against laughing in church, since it indicates one’s lack of repentance and points to the deadly sin of arrogance: “Be it known to you the saints witness misdeeds of those who chatter and laugh in arrogance [in church]” (“swer da ist mit ubermuot / und chlaffet unde lachet / wizzet, daz der selbe mahet / die heiligen ze geziuge siner missetat” (WG, vv.10878 – 10881).

At the same time, the writers of conduct manuals are keenly interested in the here and now, in the social perception of laughter. The preoccupation with societal approval is apparent in Facetus Deutsch, a German translation of the famous twelfth-century Latin collection of aphorisms, proverbial expressions, and maxims: “Du salt nicht lachen zcuvil, Und das selbige sal gescheen senfftiglich; Wen wer stetis lachen wil, Den saltu han vor eyenen narren gewiß” (“You should not laugh too much, and if you do laugh, you should do so quietly,

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26 “Swenne der tiufel, / din geselle, / mit dir vert lachende in der helle …” (“When your friend, the devil, laughingly rides with you in hell…”; Renner, vv. 6395 – 6387). All citations come from Hugo von Trimberg, Der Renner. Also Zerclaere: “er ist des tivels goukelere / wan er machet mit sinem mere, / daz ein tore den vient uber siht, / wan er ist sin gevær niht” (WG, vv. 11067 – 11070). Also see WG, vv. 1149 – 1163 condemning the shortsightedness of those who choose worldly laughter. The laughing devil is a common image in the fourteenth-century poems by Der Teichner, as well as, for example, in #34 “Von der chonschaft,” v. 23. In Heinrich der Teichner, Gedichte, 40 – 41.
because he who always wants to laugh, should be truly considered a fool”).27 This sober admonition seemingly echoes the proclamation in Ecclesiastes 7:4 that “the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth”; yet it is no longer just the response of the heavenly audience that preoccupies the author, but rather that of his peers, their sensibilities and acceptance. Aristotelian physiognomy, popular in the Middle Ages, included treating facial expressions and bodily gestures as a reflection of one’s character and morality. Therefore, as Verberckmoes points out, “from someone’s laughter could be deduced what kind of individual he was.”28 Depictions of laughing fools abound in medieval art. The fool’s open mouth draws attention to itself and disturbs the viewer. The grotesqueness of laughter combined with its eruptive nature are incompatible with the ideals of moderation and refinement cultivated in courtly fiction and advocated in contemporaneous courtesy manuals. This leads medieval didacts to demand that the education of aristocratic children of both genders include instruction on how to control their natural, potentially excessive jollity:

Ein ander lêre suln diu kint
behalten, die dâ edel sint:
si suln lachen niht ze vil,
wan lachen ist der tôren spil.
bi ir rede ist niht grôzer sin,
swâ zwêne lachent under in.
dâ von mac ein ieglich man,
der sich wol verstên kan,
lâzen ân nit, hœrt er niht,
des ein man lachende giht. (WG, vv. 527 – 536)

Noble children should follow yet another rule: they should not laugh too much, because laughter is a fool’s business. Whenever two people laugh, there is not much sense in their speech. That is why a wise person must not get angry if he does not hear what somebody says while laughing.

A keen awareness of the performative aspects of laughter and of the difference between affect and gesture, especially in a society where high-mindedness and joy (freude) are standards, is another recurrent theme in medieval didactic

27 SI, VII, 249, Lachen 121. This advice appears also in medieval proverbial lore, for example, in Freidank’s Bescheidenheit: “und lachent si nôch tôren site” (“and they laugh as is common with fools,” v. 86,4), Dietrich Engelhus’s Laienregel, Der Teichner’s poetry (#391, vv. 1 – 5), and much later, even in Sebastian Brandt’s Narrenschiff (v. 54,26). For more examples, see the rubric “Lachen” in TPMA 7: 240 – 253, esp. SI, VII, 249 – 250, Lachen 119 – 137. All quotes from come from Freidank, Bescheidenheit.
28 Verberckmoes, Laughter, 41.
literature. Medieval authors express concern with the manipulative use of laughter and smiling, with false friendliness intended to deceive and mislead:

Vil maniger mich an lachet,
ichn weiz, ob er mich meine
mit triuwen als ich in.
Sin triuwe diu wirt geswachet,
sin muot der ist niht reine,
ob er treit valschen sin.
[…]
Sō phī dir, valschez lachen,
swem du wonst in den ougen;
vil manigen häst [du] verwunt.
Du kanst wol sünde machen… (“Aber driu,” vv. 1 – 6, 10 – 13). 29

Many a man smiles at me, but I do not know whether his intentions toward me are as honest as mine toward him. If he is false, he is not trustworthy and his mind cannot be pure. […] So fie, you false laughter, in whosever eyes you live; [you] have hurt very many. You can truly cause sin.

What has worked so well for Hartmann’s Enite clearly has its downside. It is crucial for young courtiers to be able to discern the true motivation behind the external affability: “Dishonesty is visible in him who grins in laughter,” states Freidank 30; “I have to be wary of those who smile at me sweetly,” observes Der Teichner 31; hypocrites’ “cloudless laughter/smile” brings along “sharp hail” and their sweet tongues are just a distraction from their hearts of gall in Walther von der Vogelweide’s opinion. 32 For this reason, the Latin Facetus warns that laughter must be used very sparingly; and if it is used, it should be honest and kind. 33

While differing in their perception about the potential of laughter, all conduct texts share the same premise, i.e. that it must be approached with caution.

29 De Boor, *Die deutsche Literatur* 1.1: 870.
32 “[ir] wolkenl(o’[w])sez lachen bringet scharpfen hagel” (L 29,4; Schweikle 12,10); “Mir griulet s(o’[w]) mich lachent an die lechelere, den diu zunge honeget und daz herze gallen håt” (L 30,9; Schweikle 13,8). Walther von der Vogelweide’s verses are quoted according the standard practice of following Karl Lachmann’s classification (marked as L). For the sake of convenience, I also quote the page numbers from the most recent standard edition of Walther’s poetry by Günther Schweikle. See Walther von der Vogelweide, *Werke*.
33 “Risus in ore tuo pius et rarus videatur; per crebros risus levitas in corde notatur” (“Laughter on your face should be honest and kind and must appear rarely, for frequent laughter indicates inconstancy of heart,” SI, VII, 248, Lachen, 110).
Whether their authors talk about an immoderate eruption that turns the person into a shortsighted fool in the eyes of his or her peers and the all-knowing heavenly judges, or a gentle, disarming, and welcoming smile that conceals one’s evil intentions, the primary reason for their concerns is its relation to virtue. Laughter, especially when it is excessive, is seen as a statement about one’s character. At the same time, when used wisely, laughter can function as a social lubricant. The authors of conduct books are keenly aware of the fact that in their society no words or actions can or should be understood literally. Thus the frequent laughter of the so-called lechelære may be a successful tool of their intrigues, but it also signals and proves their treachery.

**Bodily Virtue or Social Prestige: Gendered Education and Laughter**

This treatment of laughter in conduct texts acquires additional complexity when examined within the context of the gendered nature of medieval education. A comparison between conduct manuals that address men exclusively and those written just for women uncovers an unequal treatment of laughter. This results from distinct social expectations and relies on a different understanding of male and female honor in courtly society. The texts written for a male audience, such as *Winsbecke, Der Jünglinc, Magezoge*, or relevant passages in *Der Welsche Gast* and *Der Renner*, discuss the practical deeds and actions that reflect a dominant masculine role. At the same time, works intended for a female audience explore a much narrower sphere of activities centered around love and marriage. The two thirteenth-century poems *Winsbecke* and *Winsbeckin* lend themselves particularly well to comparison. The male-voiced text (*Winsbecke*) and its female-voiced counterpart (*Winsbeckin*) are complementary in a number of ways, so much so that it is believed that the former could have served as a model for the latter in both form and content. The similarities between the two texts are indeed striking, particularly in their language, metaphors, and overall didactic tone; yet the differences are no less surprising. While the young aristocrat in *Winsbecke* is instructed in various subjects, such as knighthood (*Ritterlehre*), weaponry (*Waffenlehre*), courtly behavior (*Hoflehre*), household management (*husère*), and, very briefly and only to general principles, love (*Minnelehre*), the education of the young woman in *Winsbeckin* chiefly explores an inner, emotional world—the prerogative of women—and is reduced exclusively to *Min-

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Texts like *Winsbecke* prepare young men for their role as rulers, warriors, courtiers, Christians, and even household managers; they focus on various aspects of the feudal life and represent diverse civic, masculine roles. In contrast, the conduct books intended for girls limit women’s field of activity to love and marriage and emphasize that a woman need only be “courteous and decent” (*hüfisch und gevuoic*).36

Such a disparity in social expectations is grounded in a gendered understanding of honor. Conduct manuals are deeply influenced by the view that female sexuality requires stronger control than its male counterpart. Therefore, they emphasize the physical component of women’s ère and examine any female behavior through the prism of sexual modesty. A woman’s reputation is treated as a consequence of her bodily virtue, and even when a particular transgression is nonsexual (such as excessive chattiness, for example), “damage takes place only through the catalyst of inappropriate sexual behavior,” thus resulting, to use Anna Dronzek’s term, in the “physicalization of women’s honor.”37

In order to restrain their inherent sexuality, women’s bodies are subjected to numerous restrictions. Ingrid Bennewitz has pointed out three primary ways, in which courtly manuals successfully obliterate the female body in order to make it less visible and therefore less disturbing: through concealing it with clothes38;

35 As Trude Ehlert observes, only nine stanzas in *Winsbecke* deal with *minne* (love), comprising merely 16 percent of the poem, while in *Winsbeckin* thirty-three out of a total of forty-five stanzas (ca. 73 percent of the total text) are dedicated to love. Ehlert, “Die Frau als Arznei,” 55.

36 Bumke, *Courtly Culture*, 345. This aspect of conduct literature for women did not go unnoticed by older scholarship and can be blamed for the long-term lack of interest in these works among scholars. For example, while Helmut De Boor praises *Winsbecke* for addressing such profound issues as the problems of its time and the conflict between the world and God (“[die] Problematik der Zeit, [der] Zwiespalt von Welt und Gott”), *Winsbeckin* is described as “more superficial and flat, and focused more on formal education than character building” (“äußerlicher, flacher, mehr auf formale Erziehung als auf Charakterbildung gerichtet”). De Boor and Newald, *Geschichte*, 409.

37 Dronzek, “Gendered Theories,” 149.

38 Although written with a different goal in mind, James A. Schultz’s essay about the relationship between clothes and gender in Gottfried’s *Tristan* offers some additional insights into the relationship between the body and clothing. Schultz, “Bodies,” 91 – 110. Schultz claims that clothes often function to reveal the gender of the person wearing them, since Gottfried’s bodies are not sexed (due to their lack of “the most obvious anatomical signs of sex difference,” which reflects more general trends of medieval construction of the body). “While the sex of the desirable body is not culturally visible, the gender of the desirable body is,” says Schultz. “When clothing signifies gender it does something that bodies cannot do, since Gottfried’s desirable bodies do not distinguish themselves morphologically as men or women. Clothing, which relates differently to men’s and to women’s bodies, thereby establishes a difference between men and women. […] It creates the gendered body” Ibid., 97. On the other hand, Schultz’s essay offers a different perspective on how clothes can *call attention* to the body instead of *masking* it: clothes and the body work together. Contrary to Ben-
limiting it spatially (including prohibitions against touching, running, and sudden movements); and by restricting its senses (including rules controlling speaking, gazing, etc.).\textsuperscript{39} The most memorable illustration of this literal and metaphorical concealment is found in Thomasin von Zerclaere’s \textit{Der Welsche Gast}, with its meticulous lists of activities deemed inappropriate for a courtly lady. The degree of self-control expected of a virtuous woman may shock the modern reader. She is not allowed any swift or sudden movements, including walking fast or even looking up; she may not gaze around or behind herself, talk loudly, or speak if she is not addressed directly. When riding a horse, she must hold her head completely stiff and keep her hands and her body hidden under her cloak.\textsuperscript{40}

In contrast, the importance of the body in texts for men is far less prominent. Young noblemen are not simply permitted, but rather encouraged to look directly at both men and women: “A noble youth should \textit{gladly} observe both knights and ladies in a polite manner” (“ein edel juncherre sol / bède riter unde vrouw / gezogenliche gerne schouwen,” \textit{WG}, vv. 416 – 418) (my emphasis). Even when such “bodily” issues as table manners or personal care are discussed, the texts never reduce male aristocrats to their bodies. Depending on the intended audience’s gender, the very word \textit{zuht} (“breeding, upbringing, education, good manners”) comes to signify different concepts. Whereas in the case of women, it represents “sexual modesty,” the same word in reference to men acquires the meaning of “self-control.” In contrast to female honor “located in the physical arena,” its male counterpart is linked to social prestige.\textsuperscript{41} Undoubtedly, both men and women will damage their honor or reputation if they neglect their manners, but for a man such damage would mean a drop in his social standing, a loss of respect in the eyes of his male superiors.\textsuperscript{42} In order to

\textsuperscript{39} Also see Bennewitz and Weichselbaumer, “Erziehung,” 48.
\textsuperscript{40} \textit{WG}, vv. 405 ff.
\textsuperscript{41} In her study of the fifteenth-century English conduct books, Anna Dronzek has shown the extent to which the instructions for boys and girls differ in their pedagogical methods and strategies thanks to the belief in men’s greater intellectual capacities, thus reflecting the dichotomy “reason versus body.” While not all of Dronzek’s conclusions apply with equal ease to medieval German texts, some of them nevertheless prove useful for studying conduct literature in general. For the gendered use of metaphors and imagery in Middle High German conduct texts, see Trokhimenko, “\textit{Gedanken sint vrtl},” 327 – 350.
alert boys to this potential consequence, conduct literature encourages them to strive to match “the worthy men” in excellence. The father in Winsbecke constantly reminds his son of die werden, “Self-control and virtue will make you worthy of the worthiest company” (“[zuht und tugent] machent dich den werden wert,” WE, v. 6), while his equivalent in Der Magezoge speaks of the elders (die alten) and advises his son to be “brave and noble, so that people would speak of this” (“wis biderbe, daz man sin jehe,” Magezoge, v. 94). In Thomasin’s Der Welsche Gast, young men are told to imagine being observed at all times by an older “virtuous man” (frum man):

In sinem mut man still sol
ain frum man erweln wol,
und sol sich rihten gar nach im,
daz ist tugent, und sin.
er sol di naht und den tach
an in gendenchen ob er mach.
[…]
da volge mit dem biderm manne.
im mach niht misslingen danne. (WG, vv. 627 – 632, 635 – 636)

Secretly in one’s mind, [a youth] should choose a noble and virtuous man and be completely guided by him. This is virtuous and reasonable. He should think of [the chosen man] day and night, if he can. […] Let him follow the exemplary man: then he shall not fail.

All of these principles apply to both joking and laughter as an emotional gesture. As sinful behavior and a symptom of hubris, ridicule would, understandably, be inappropriate for any well-mannered courtier. However, as far as jesting is concerned, the prohibitions are clearly gendered. Men are advised against ridicule and excessive jesting, but women are told to forgo jesting completely. “A lady should not jest insolently,” points out Thomasin of Zerclaere, and explains, “Such is the womanly way” (“ein vrouwe sol niht vrevel(o[‘wch schimpfen, daz st(o[‘wch vr""o""uwel(o[‘wch” WG, vv. 411 – 412), especially since joking is connected to garrulousness (itself strictly disapproved of) and eventually to the topos of the “open woman.” Jesting is also discouraged for its subversive potential; neither wit

43 Der Magezoge is quoted according to the “Der Tugendspiegel oder der Meizoge.”
44 Also see Starkey, “Thomasins Spiegelphase,” 230 – 248, esp. 232; and Starkey, A Courtier’s Mirror.
45 Cf. WG, vv. 831 – 836, 1271ff; on mean-spirited joking see WG, vv. 1270 – 1282. Also Magezoge, v. 297; WE, vv. 27,1 – 10.
46 On women’s jesting in medieval literature see Perfetti, Women and Laughter.
47 The subversive potential of laughter and humor has been widely discussed in scholarship. See Bergson, “Laughter,” 161 – 192; Morreall, Taking Laughter, 2 – 3; Holland, Laughing, 101 ff.
nor authority are deemed to be desirable qualities for a courtly lady, as the following passage from Thomasin’s treatise illustrates:

ob si dan hât sinnes mere,
sô hab die zuht und die lêre,
erzeig niht waz si sinnes hât:
man engert ir niht ze potestât. (WG, vv. 837 – 840)

If she has some common sense, then let her show good upbringing and wisdom and not display how much intelligence she has, for she is not wanted as an authority figure.

As a physical response, men’s laughter is mentioned seldom; and when it is addressed, the male audience is usually advised to follow the idea of mâze (moderation) in this, as in everything else: “One should be moderate in speech and in laughter, in sleeping and in waking” (“man an rede, an lachen, an slaffen und an wachen sol haben mazze,” WG, v. 484). A man should avoid laughter entirely in the presence of his superiors:

er kenne die zuht ze behalten,wiz ernsthaft mit den alten,
mit den chinden so lache,
gezogen zu wirtschaft und vro in ungemache (Magezoge, vv. 377 – 380)

Know how to behave gracefully, laugh with children, be serious in the presence of the elders, polite to the host, and joyful in sorrow.

Good manners and self-control (zuht) prove a courtier’s nobility, understood as both his internal virtue and his social status. “Do not laugh loudly and calm down your anger,” admonishes Der Magezoge, “this is how your noble virtue is revealed” (“niht lûte soltû lachen / dinen zorn sanfte machen: / da erkennen man edele tugent an,” vv. 107 – 109). As Konrad of Haslau, the author of the late-thirteenth-century treatise Der Jüngling, points out, a young aristocrat should be particularly cautious in the presence of his lord (Jüngling v. 135), for “a noble man has always been recognized by his good-breeding” (“bi zuht die edeln man ie kande,” Jüngling, v. 5). Otherwise, his manners would place him on the same level with peasants, buffoons, and animals:

ein villan, der der nikht erten gert,
der ste und kere sich war er welle
zu dem selben toren ich geselle
affen, narren und einen bock. […]
manger von dem tisch stat,
der anders nicht ze schaffen hat
denn stozen, dringen, spotten, lachen.
daz solten gumpelleute machen. (Jüngling, vv. 116 – 119, 139 – 142)

48 Cited according to Konrad von Haslau, Der Jüngling.
An uncourtly creature who does not strive for honor and good reputation, who stands or goes as he pleases—I would rank such a fool together with a monkey, a halfwit, and a billy goat. […] Many a man now stands in front of the table who can do nothing else but push and shove, mock and laugh. Only clowns should behave this way.

When addressing the appropriateness of male laughter, conduct texts place great emphasis on the young man’s ability to discern; they appeal to his reason, his piety as a Christian, his feelings of inner virtue and worth, and they present the undesirable behavior as a sign of feeble-mindedness. They are not at all interested in his sexual modesty or physical beauty, both of which are extremely prominent in the works intended for a female audience, be they disparaging or accepting in their treatment of laughter. The very existence of the two positions in the women’s case, but not in men’s, is in itself telling. It is more than a mere reflection of discursive heterogeneity in the Middle Ages; rather, it implies that the validity of women’s laughter must have been harder to determine. 49 Ironically, despite their seemingly different perspectives and approaches, the two positions are grounded in very similar principles. Both anti- and pro-laughter works treat a woman’s role as ornamental and her beauty and virtue not as values in themselves, but only as a means to please and encourage men. 50 While the former texts condemn or punish laughing women, the latter present them as perfect sexual objects whose education should emphasize the importance of their physical attractiveness. Furthermore, conduct texts in both groups are keenly aware of the effect women’s behavior has on men. Female members of the courtly society are expected to bear responsibility not only for their own emotions and actions, but also for those of their male counterparts; they must exist not for their own sake but as a mirror to reflect men’s aspirations and desires and to contribute to men’s self-improvement. Marquard vom Stein’s and Ulrich von Liechtenstein’s works illustrate how women’s unrestrained emotions can endanger the delicate social order. Finally, both conservative and more liberal conduct texts reinforce traditional gender roles and prepare young women for their instrumental function vis-à-vis men. Through controlling or manipulating laughter, these male-authored works control and manipulate female sexuality. Whether laughter is strongly admonished, or whether ladies are encouraged to smile gently and seductively, both types of texts imply that men desire only virtuous women and that a woman’s ultimate purpose is to be de-

49 It is important to remember that these manuals were written for aristocratic women only, for as far as the peasants are concerned, as Alice A. Hentsch pointed out, they are allowed almost anything: “Elles peuvent rire, chanter, pleurer et jouer librement” (‘They are free to laugh, sing, cry and play.”) See Hentsch, De la littérature didactique, 107.
50 Bumke, Courtly Culture, 337.
sirable. They thus reinforce the view that “the fundamental purpose of female virtue is to make women sexually available to men.”  

Restraining Bodies: Voices against Women’s Laughter

Unsurprisingly, the connection between women’s laughter and the lack of virtue is strongly emphasized in the works inspired by ecclesiastical, particularly patristic, writings. By quoting the Church Fathers, medieval authors align themselves with a preexisting and well-known tradition, while also actively reshaping it. To borrow Clare Lees’ expression, they “selectively reproduce the past.” With their help, patristic thought remains relevant and influential. The early texts provide the later writers with legitimacy and authority, yet they themselves are adapted to reflect new needs and bolster new ideas. Originally intended for a very specific social group of female monastics and religious virgins, their arguments are taken beyond the ecclesiastical sphere and applied to a broader audience, such as the medieval laity.

One such work is Vincent de Beauvais’s thirteenth-century Latin treatise *De eruditione filiorum nobilium* (On Education of Noble Children). Its last ten chapters, dedicated to the education of girls, reveal the influences of St. Jerome’s and Augustine’s writings on virginity. Quoting Augustine, Vincent advocates for the strongest bodily restraint possible, warning against a willful demeanor, roaming eyes, unbridled tongues, wanton laughter, jeering or buffoon-like jesting, and an indecent disposition. The passage culminates in Ambrose’s famous verdict that when one strives for politeness (i.e., social interaction), laughter creeps in and modesty is lessened. Such references to the patristic authors are found in the familiar context of gendered social expectations. Men’s brains should be trained for their various careers in the future, while women are depicted as creatures of flesh rather than reason, whose primary social value is

51 Rasmussen, “If Men Desire You,” 150.
53 Lees’ observation about the time gap between her tenth- and eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon homilies and their sources is true for other texts as well: “These texts,” she says, “are not simply the reworking of the Latin Church Fathers, even when (or perhaps especially when) their content appears to point in this direction, for the simple reason that the historical and cultural conditions of the Benedictine reform are not synonymous with those of the earlier Carolingian reforms.” Lees, *Tradition*, 27.
54 “Non sit […] uobis improbus uultus, non oculi uagi, non infrenis lingua, non petulans risus, non scurrilis iocus, non indecens habitus…” Chapter XLVI in Vincent of Beauvais, *De eruditione*, 192.
their marriageability and whose unruly bodies must be kept in check: “If sons are given to you, educate them. […] If daughters are given to you, guard their body and do not reveal your joyous face to them. Guard their bodies in the age of maidenhood, which is prone to licentiousness.”

Vincent’s preoccupation with laughter as a symptom of unchastity is echoed by later works as well. Conduct authors agree that the biggest threat laughter poses to women lies in its potential to reveal their immoderate, sexual bodies, thus threatening their reputations. In the *Quarta Distinctio* of his *Der Renner*, conspicuously entitled “Von der unkiusche” (“About the Lack of Chastity”), Hugo von Trimberg names laughter together with dancing, jumping, joking, singing, embracing, and kissing as regrettable but, unfortunately, all too common indicators of declining morality among his contemporaries. Almost two centuries after Vincent penned his guide, Marquard vom Stein’s translation of the French didactic treatise for girls *Le livre du chevalier de La Tour Landry pour l’enseignement de ses filles*, familiarly reinforces the stereotype of a laughing woman as a fallen woman. The purpose of *Der Ritter vom Turn*, as this collection is known in German, is to teach the narrator’s young daughters good manners and to keep them “in constant good practice and proper behavior” (“in steter guoter übung vnd zymlichen wesen hyeltenn”). Although Marquard vom Stein does not explicitly address the issue of laughter, his mistrust of it is palpable. When this bodily expression is mentioned in the case of women, it is combined with other familiar transgressions, such as talkativeness, gluttony, or immodesty. Several *exempla* depict laughing female protagonists as immoral and unruly. Among them is a story about a willful, deceitful, gluttonous, and unchaste young woman who is given in marriage to a respectable and pious knight. One night her husband catches her “sitting with two male servants, eating, and laughing” (“by zweyen knechten sitzen essen und gelechter triben”). The young wife’s frivolous laughter, whether light-minded or playfully seductive, her male company, and the time she chose for stealing away from her husband’s side clearly bespeak her lack of modesty. The place of laughter according to the *quinque lineae amoris* and the reference to eating as an allusion to indulgences of

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56 “Filij tibi sunt, erudi illos. […] Filie tibi sunt, serua corpus illarum et non ostendas hilarem faciem tuam ad illas. Serua […] corpus illarum in etate puellari que prona est lasciuie.” Vincent of Beauvais, *De eruditione*, 172.

57 *Renner*, vv. 11729 – 11738. Quoted according to Hugo von Trimberg, *Der Renner*.

58 “My greatest desire,” says Marquard, “is that […] they would be taught to be courtly and seemly through good exempla” (“Da aber min groeste begerung / […] ouch das sy wol hofflichen / vnnd zymlichen mit guoten byspeln vnnd exemplen / dar zuo zuo wysen vnnd vnnderrichten weren”). Marquard vom Stein, *Ritter vom Turn*, 87 – 88.

59 Ibid., 94. It is unclear which transgression is emphasized more here: a transgression of class or of sexual immodesty. *Knecht* can mean both “a young man” and “a male servant.”
the flesh, including gluttony (yet another transgression of the mouth), leave no doubt as to what would have happened if the husband had come in later. The situation is strongly reminiscent of German Mären and Schwänke, late-medieval stories of hard-to-control and often overtly sexualized women defying their husbands’ authority. The challenge to the man’s dominance in this tale comes from the wife’s unrestrained conduct, represented by her inappropriate laughter and complete disregard for her responsibilities as a virtuous and chaste married noblewoman.

The punishment for such misbehavior is almost providential and emphasizes its sexual nature; it effectively guarantees that the woman will never be perceived as sexually attractive again. Conspicuously, it affects her most precious possession and the body part that participated in her misdeed: her face and, consequently, her beauty. As the husband strikes one of his wife’s admirers with a club, it splits from the powerful blow, sending one of its splinters directly into the woman’s eye and permanently disfiguring her face: “And her face became so disfigured because of it that the knight began to hate her and turned his heart toward a new love” (“vnd ir das antlit dar von so gar vngestalt ward / das sy der ritter zuo hassen begunde vnd syn [her husband’s] hertz vff andre liebe thet keren”). The wicked wife loses her principal value as an ornament and an object of desire both for her husband and for anybody else, and with it, her whole livelihood: “And because of it, her whole being, her house, and her honor were destroyed and came to an end” (“Dar durch jr wesen / huß / vnd ere / vernichtet / vnd zuo abgang kam”).

The need to control women’s bodies and laughter in public in order to protect their reputations is advocated even by more liberal courtly clerics, such as the anonymous writer of Winsbeckin (early-thirteenth century). Similar to other conduct works, Winsbeckin cautions against laughter in public, but quite unexpectedly, the warning does not come from a figure of authority, such as the

60 Both Freidank and Thomasin connect various mouth transgressions (gluttony, drunkenness, ridicule, and lying) with sexuality and lust. Freidank speaks of trunkenheit (drunkenness), vráz (gluttony), and huor (lechery), which correspond to Latin ebrietas, gula, and luxuria. See Freidank’s Bescheidenheit, v. 94,7ff; Eifler, Ethische Anschauungen, 316 – 340. Also see Zerclaere: “Swer dem geluoste volgen wil, / der hat vrowen harte vil. / Tracheit unde Lekkerheit, / Huorgelust unde Truonchenheit, / die habent ueber in gewalt” (“Whoever desires to follow his lust, he will have lots of women. Laziness and Lewdness, Lechery and Drunkenness. They will all have power over him,” WG, vv. 4919 – 4923).
61 On the issue of authority and violence in MHG short comic tales, see Altpeter-Jones, “Inscribing Gender” and Altpeter-Jones, “Adam Schubart’s Early Modern Tyrant.” On laughter in MHG comic tales, see Coxon, Laughter and Narrative.
62 Marquard vom Stein, Ritter vom Turn, 94.
63 Ibid.
64 Cited according to Winsbeckin, 46 – 66.
poet himself or an older person in the text. Rather, it is an inexperienced young woman who voices the traditional view.

The poem itself is an exchange between a mother and a daughter, in which the older woman tries to teach the younger one about sexuality, love, and honor. Although occasional disagreements do arise, the daughter accepts her mother’s advice, for the most part respectfully and compliantly. She is taught the familiar rules for remaining modest and guarding her virtue by controlling her body. In stanza 7, for example, the mother warns her against the danger and impropriety of immoderate staring (*wilde blicke*, lit. “wild glances”). The daughter agrees with this advice and expresses a strong apprehension of women who cannot control their roaming eyes:

\[\begin{align*}
Vür wär dir, muoter, si gesaget, 
swie kleine ich habe der järe zal, 
daz mir diu vuore niht behaget, 
swelch wip diu ougen úf, ze tal, 
und über treit als einen bal… (WI, vv. 8,1 – 5)
\end{align*}\]

Truly, mother, let it be said to you, that while I may be young in years, such behaviour does not please me when a woman moves her eyes up and down, and rolls them around like a ball...\(^{65}\)

As the stanza continues, frivolous looking turns out not to be the only thing that the daughter considers to be inappropriate for a decent young woman:

\[\begin{align*}
&\text{…dar under ouch gelachet vil:} 
&\text{diu priset niht der zühte ir sal.} 
&\text{ich wæne ouch, daz juncvrouwen muot,} 
&\text{diu âne vorhte wirt erzogen,} 
&\text{näch ir gebærden dicke tuot. (WI, vv. 8,6 – 10)}
\end{align*}\]

[Such behaviour does not please me when a woman moves her eyes up and down, and rolls them around like a ball] and laughs a lot while doing it. Modesty does not grace her chamber.\(^{66}\) It seems to me that the spirit of a maiden who has been raised without fear is apparent in her behaviour.\(^{67}\)

The daughter familiarly places laughter into the same context of sexuality, immodesty, and unrestrained female body as the notorious *wilde blicke*. The fact that the author of *Winsbeckin* delivers this condemnation through the younger woman’s statement is ingenious; it allows him to reaffirm the norm twice, first

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\(^{66}\) The idiom means, “She is no ideal of modesty.” See note 2 in Rasmussen and Trokhimenko, “The *Winsbecke* Father-Son and Mother-Daughter Poems,” 121.  
\(^{67}\) As translated in Rasmussen and Trokhimenko, “The *Winsbecke* Father-Son and Mother-Daughter Poems,” 109.
by the daughter and then by the mother. The daughter is consistently portrayed throughout the work as too inexperienced and, for that reason, uncritically relying on the learned wisdom of others rather than on her own personal knowledge. Her categorical and instant rejection does not simply reveal her naïve rigidity, but rather points to the prevalent general prejudice against women’s laughter. In her turn, the mother chooses to reply to the girl’s “bookish” knowledge not with praise for a lesson well learned, but with a warning not to be rash, delivered in the form of an allegorical comparison to a bird that is too wise before its time:

Sint wiwi wort den werken bi,
sō ensint die sinne niht betrogen:
sint aber si guoter werke vri,
sō sint diu wiwen wort gelogen.
von neste ein vogel ze vrui gevlogen
der wirt den kinden lihte ein spil:
die vedern werdent im enzogen.
daz mac dir, liebez kint, geschehen,
hāştū in jugent gar wiwi wort
und låst dich tump an werken sehen. (WI, vv. 9,5 – 7)

When wise deeds accompany one’s words, then one’s wisdom is not a pretence. But if what you say lacks good sense, then the wise deeds are a lie. A bird that has flown from the nest too early easily becomes the plaything of children, who pluck its feathers. That is what can happen to you, dear child, if in your youth you are very clever with words but show yourself to be unwise by your actions.

The mother clearly cannot deny that the daughter’s words are true in theory, but she has life experience telling her that it is much harder to control one’s behavior in practice. By challenging the young woman’s naïve “wisdom” and her zealous righteousness, and by asking her to prove with her deeds what she asserts with her words, the mother effectively reinforces the lesson about proper courtly behavior and the need to control the female body.

68 And indeed, the roughly contemporary text Quatre tens d’aage d’ome by Philippe de Novaire contains a similar warning against excessive gaiety for young women. Cf. Hentsch’s summary: “Il faut défendre aux jeunes filles de se montrer trop gaies, causantes ou gourmandes lorsque’elles vont à des fêtes, etc.” Hentsch, De la littérature didactique, 84.

Complicating Matters: Attractive Laughter

In her study with the telling title of “If Men Desire You, Then You Are Worthy’: The Didactive Mother-Daughter Poem Die Winsbeckin,” Ann Marie Rasmussen points out a paradox plaguing the courtly view of femininity in the fictional world of the Winsbeckin poem. It appears that despite the heavy emphasis on restraint and woman’s virtue in courtly discourse, the primary duty of an aristocratic woman is to be desirable. “To be lusted after does increase a woman’s honor,” says Rasmussen, or to quote Winsbeckin:

If you can rise in virtue, then many a worthy man will lie with you in his dreams. […] If someone thinks of you often and desires you, then you are valuable.

Rasmussen’s findings apply to the greater conduct discourse as well. Women are taught to know “how to make others desire [them],” for those who fail will pay by being forgotten:

A lady should let herself be looked upon, if a noble man approaches her. She who would not let herself be seen, will remain unknown outside of her bower. May this be her punishment, may she remain unknown!

It is not surprising then that in this worldview laughter would also be harnessed to enhance a woman’s value as an attractive love object. Indeed, the demands to avoid laughter coexist with the attempts to define acceptable forms of it that would satisfy society’s need for eroticism and seductiveness, as well as guarantee smooth interactions between the sexes. The Old French translation of Ovid’s Ars Amandi, known as La clef d’amors (ca. 1280), does not reject laughter at all, but

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70 Rasmussen, “If Men Desire You,” 143.
71 As translated in Rasmussen and Trokhimenko, “The Winsbecke Father-Son and Mother-Daughter Poems,” 111, 112, respectively. A more poignant, because more gendered, translation is found in Rasmussen, “If Men Desire You,” 142: “If men often think of you and desire you, then you are worthy.”
72 “Une femme doit savoir se faire désirer.” Hentsch, De la littérature didactique, 47.
rather attempts to define an “ideal laughter” (“le rire idéal”): “A little laugh, sweet and brief, with the mouth semi-open between two little charming dimples” (“un petit rire doux et court, à bouche entr’ouverte avec deux jolies petites fossettes”). While the texts like *La clef* or Robert de Blois’s *Chastoiement des Dames* discourage excessive or loud laughter, they appear to be less interested in the question of its propriety and more in its aesthetic value. A woman is advised to avoid laughter only if it sounds unpleasant:

> Et devant totes genz de pris  
> se vos avez maul plaisant ris,  
> sans blasme vostre main poez  
> metre devant quant vos riez. (*Chastoiement*, vv.369 – 372)

And if you have an unpleasant laugh, you may do well by covering your mouth with your hand when you laugh in front of people. It is telling that Robert does not say that a woman with a less-than-attractive laugh should not laugh at all. Rather, he simply suggests that she should cover her mouth with her hand in order to reduce the unpleasant impression. Apparently, the mere act of laughing does not always automatically imply a lack of *courtoisie*; one must be cautious about *when* and particularly *how* one laughs.

A more accepting approach to laughter is detectable in a number of medieval texts, spread over a substantial period of time. It is shared by Garin lo Brun’s twelfth-century Occitan work *Ensenhamen* (ca. 1175) and is later reiterated by Francesco da Barberino (1264 – 1348) in his *Del reggimento e costumi di donna* and in the fifteenth-century Middle English poem, “How the good wiif taughte hir doughtir.” However, this group’s texts still share with their more conservative counterparts the ideology of courtly love as a man’s game of domination and subordination. Be it restrained and modest or pleasantly joyful and enticing, female behavior is acceptable as long as it arouses men’s desire and does not endanger the harmony at court. Smiling or gentle laughter can be encouraged in women as a part of their ornamental function, as long as they do not interfere with their most treasured possession—beauty (viewed as a sign of both her virtue and attractiveness)—or disrupt the interaction between the sexes.

The contradictory demands of virtue and beauty—the traditional prohibitions of, yet need for, female laughter and sexuality—do not go unnoticed by medieval writers. Robert de Blois empathizes with the women of his time, say-

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73 Hentsch, *De la littérature didactique*, 89.
74 “Ne pas rire haut et longuement.” Hentsch, *De la littérature didactique*, 89.
75 Cf. “Si on a un vilain rire s’efforcer de ne pas rire.” Hentsch, *De la littérature didactique*, 89.
76 Hentsch, *De la littérature didactique*, 104ff, esp. 105 f and 139. For a substantial analysis of Barberino’s didactic work, see Burghartz, “Ehebruch,” 123 – 140.
ing, “because of that [mixed message] a woman does not know what to do” (“por ce ne set dame que faire,” Chastoiement, v. 27). He is echoed by the female speaker in a poem by Burkhart von Hohenvels, quoted in the epigraph to this chapter:

Wie sol ich sælig wip
den liuten nū gebâren,
daz ich müg ir nāchrede wol gestillen,
sit daz in sin noch lip
niht kan geliche varen?
daz ir doch viere hæten einen willen!
iemen siht geliches iht… (KLD XIII.1,1 – 7)

How should I, a chaste woman, behave nowadays toward people so that I might silence their slander since, according to them, minds and bodies do not desire the same thing?
If only four of them were of one mind about it! Nobody sees things the same way …

The issue of contradictory expectations is addressed particularly clearly in Ulrich von Liechtenstein’s Das Frauenbuch. Thanks to his layman insights, Ulrich is able to show the clash between the clerical and courtly views of femininity, using the laughter of women as one device that reveals the degree to which these two, seemingly incompatible, positions are in fact intertwined in the medieval courtly imagination.

“How Nobody Sees Things the Same Way”: Femininity and Laughter in Das Frauenbuch

Composed in the mid-thirteenth century (ca. 1257), Ulrich von Liechtenstein’s Das Frauenbuch is a curious text representative of two popular genres. Its formal poetic characteristics place it firmly within the tradition of Minnereden, or allegories of love—texts that theorize and didacticize the debate on the qualities of femininity. Thanks to his layman insights, Ulrich von Liechtenstein, using the laughter of women as one device that reveals the degree to which these two, seemingly incompatible, positions are in fact intertwined in the medieval courtly imagination.

77 Cf. the editor’s summary of vv. 27 – 66 of Fox’s introduction to de Blois’ works: “Difficulté qu’éprouve la dame à régler sa conduite dans la société, car si elle se montre courtoise, les homme disent que c’est par amour et n’hésitent pas à en abuser. D’autre part, si elle manque à la courtoisie en refusant d’accueillir les gens, on l’accuse d’orgueil.” Fox, Robert de Blois, 24.
78 A version of this section has appeared as a self-standing and expanded essay. Trokhimenko, “Women’s Laughter,” 243 – 264.
79 Cited from Ulrich von Liechtenstein, Frauenbuch. Christopher Young’s more recent edition of the text includes several valuable resources, such as a modern German translation, a commentary, and literary-historical information on the work, its genre, and its period. See Ulrich von Liechtenstein, Das Frauenbuch. Das Frauenbuch has been transmitted in a single extant manuscript, the famous Ambraser Heldenbuch, Codex Ser. nova 2664 (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek zu Wien). Ulrich von Liechtenstein, Das Frauenbuch, 37.
and value of courtly love. Like many works of this kind, Das Frauenbuch is structured in the form of a dispute overheard and resolved by the all-knowing male narrator (self-identified as Ulrich). It presents a discussion between a lady and a knight about the decline of courtesy in their world. Opening with a negative Minnelehre that reveals a complete failure of the fictional society to live up to the standards of courtliness, the poem concludes with Ulrich’s effort to restore courtly love to its proper place and to convince the audience within and beyond the world of his text of the importance of such values as moderation, decorum, high-mindedness, joy, respect, and love service to help their society function smoothly.

At the same time, it is easy to notice, however, that the discussion of love in Das Frauenbuch has heavy didactic overtones. The speeches delivered by the two male characters in particular (the knight and the narrator) place the work within the genre of prescriptive conduct discourse. The didactic nature of Ulrich’s text is immediately apparent in its title. Das Frauenbuch is both “a book about ladies” and “a book for ladies,” written at the request of the author’s supposed patroness or beloved (FB, vv. 5 – 16, 2053 – 2060), not so much to praise or entertain as to instruct courtly women on the subject of proper behavior. It is telling that while Ulrich the narrator formally takes the female protagonist’s side in the dispute, his criticism at the end of the work is directed at both of the men, who have failed to live up to the standards of courtliness, and the women, whom he reminds of their duty to be obedient to their male partners. Though written by an aristocratic layman rather than a religiously educated cleric, Das Frauenbuch combines the rhetorical elevation of women (Frauenehre) that is characteristic of lofty love song, with the simultaneous subordination of them that usually marks moral-didactic literature. Ulrich’s text thus can be seen as a junction of both secular and clerical debates on conduct, virtue, and gender, particularly in regard to the place of laughter within the ideal of virtuous womanhood.

Women’s laughter proves to be the truly central issue in Das Frauenbuch. Structurally, it bookends the work; the subject of joy and of its visual manifestation introduces and concludes the discussion of harmonious courtly existence. Conceptually, it is portrayed as both the principal cause of the moral decay in the fictional world of the text (the male perspective) and its symptom (the female position). The knight’s accusations against the courtly women and the lady’s defense of their behavior reveal contradictory models of femininity coexisting side by side and reflect two opposing medieval views of female

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81 See Glier, Artes, 41.
laughter: one that encourages, or at least permits it, and one that condemns it. Ulrich’s work demonstrates that what ultimately underlies both anti- and pro-
laughter discourses is the patriarchal control of female sexuality. Even though one side uses it to present laughter as a threat to female virtue and the other exploits its erotic potential, both equate the gesture with sexual availability.

The ideal to which the court in Das Frauenbuch strives is no different in other medieval works; its positive state is supposed to be expressed visually in the smiling countenances of its knights and ladies. What the reader finds here, however, are men’s cheerless faces and dejected mood—all clear signals that the fictional courtly world of the poem has lost its harmony. As the work unfolds, it becomes apparent that the ideal of joy (freude) is not only reflected in, but also maintained by outward expressions of happiness. This is precisely why the knight places responsibility for the decline of courtliness on the lady’s shoulders. Women, he asserts, no longer fulfill their duty to maintain freude because they refuse to welcome men with laughter:

die wile ir gen uns in hazze lebt
und uns antwurt ouch nicht gebt,
noch grüzet wol, noch lachet an,
von wiu solten wir dann freude han? (FB, vv. 145 – 148)

Since you live feuding with us and do not respond to us, nor greet us, nor smile to us, in what should we find joy?

Markedly, women in Das Frauenbuch bear responsibility not only for their own emotions but also for those of men. In order for society to function smoothly, the man says, “a maiden should be glad, maintain an elated state of mind, and do it cheerfully at all times” (“ein maget diu sol wesen fro / und ir gemüete tragen ho/
und zuo alle ziten wol gemuot,” FB, vv. 995 – 997, my italics). The discussion between the lady and the knight makes it clear that the affective side of freude is not the only necessary component of courtly harmony, but that internal joy has to be revealed externally in the courtiers’ smiling countenances. Women’s refusal to display contentment, whether sincerely felt or merely performed, proves to be destructive; it is interpreted as a sign of animosity, discontent, and social discord, impacting the men’s own state of high-mindedness and sending the world into a downward spiral. While this passage appears to refer to both affective and performative sides of freude, the true relevance of affect in this case is called into question by the emphasis on its continuous display: “zuo alle

82 For a detailed philological analysis of the medieval concept of joy, see Christoph, “The Language and Culture of Joy,” 319 – 333.
83 Gabriele Müller-Oberhäuser makes a similar point in her recent study of Middle English courtesy books. See Müller-Oberhäuser, “Gender,” 27, 47.
84 This is how the lady senses the man’s discontent as well. See FB, vv. 54 – 55.
ziten” (“at all times,” FB, v. 997). As the reader finds out later, no matter what problems a woman faces—a drunk or absent husband, loneliness, or vicious gossip—she still has to smile, i.e., to perform courtly joy:

\[
\text{doch sol si darumb verzagen nicht.}
\]
\[
\text{ [...]}
\]
\[
\text{si sol mit andern sachen}
\]
\[
\text{ir herze froelich machen,}
\]
\[
\text{ir freude nicht verliesen. (FB, vv. 957, 959 – 961)}
\]

She must not despair because of that. [...] She must make her heart glad with other things, she must not lose courtly joy.

In difficult life situations, women are encouraged to seek consolation elsewhere lest they sink into low spirits. And yet it is ultimately the appearance of elatedness and contentment that proves to be crucial for their male partners’ mood. The demands of etiquette in Das Frauenbuch can be satisfied with performance alone; as long as ladies fulfill their ornamental function at court, they ensure its smooth functioning.

The text makes clear why women’s smiling and joyful faces are so important. In this respect, Das Frauenbuch is no different from other conduct and literary texts of this period. Gentle laughter makes a woman attractive and appealing in men’s eyes. In a world that favors and is based on procreation and sexuality, female smiles and physical beauty facilitate heterosocial ties. Clearly, a joyous, good-looking, and well-dressed woman is much more likely to attract male attention: “die wile ein wip wil haben man, / so sol si iren lip schone han” (“As long as a woman wants to find a man, she should remain beautiful,” FB, vv. 369 – 370). This is precisely where Ulrich’s courtly ladies are said to have failed. They purportedly cause their society to crumble because men no longer perceive them as alluring. E. Jane Burns’ conclusion that in medieval French literature “a female identity [...] exists as corporeality alone”[^85] is equally true for Das Frauenbuch, for it is always the female body that the male speaker is dissatisfied with in one way or another. He complains about the women’s physical appearance, body language, and even clothes, all of which no longer invite the men’s eyes to linger on their charms, thus stimulating male desire: “Ir lat an iuch nicht anders sehen / mit willen wann der ougen prehen…” (“You do not let [us] see anything else of you other than the gleam of your eyes,” FB, vv. 237 – 238). The knight criticizes women for refusing to laugh, for controlling their movements and emotions, and for concealing their bodies with modest clothing and their faces with veils—i.e., for what Ingrid Bennewitz sees as too closely conforming to the precepts for

[^85]: Burns, *Bodytalk*, 3.
modest behavior advocated in contemporaneous clerical writings.\textsuperscript{86} What this reading does not take into account, however, is the tension between the two views of femininity that the text presents, which becomes obvious only when one looks at it through the prism of laughter.

Aristocratic women in Das Frauenbuch are confronted by a dilemma. Despite the expressed need for joy and smiles, they have to be wary of the effect their laughter has on men. As Bennewitz rightly observes, and as the female protagonist herself points out, the courtly world in Ulrich’s work is not governed by secular ideals alone. The very behavior being urged upon women is at the same time to be avoided, for the courtly men have also internalized the contemporary\textit{clerical} views of laughter, femininity, and virtue.\textsuperscript{87} The lady in Das Frauenbuch is very much aware of the clerical equation that laughing woman equals sexually open woman, and she shows that men in her society are familiar with it as well. She complains about constantly running the risk that her every look and gesture might be misconstrued as a sign of sexual interest or conjugal infidelity:

\begin{quote}
welh frawe iuch nu güetlich an sicht,
ir jehet, si hab ez durch daz getan,
si welle iuch minnen für iren man.
davon si wir in huote
mit lib und ouch mit muote
gen iuch als uns des twinget not
wir wären anders an eren tot. (FB, vv. 310 – 316)
\end{quote}

Now, if a lady looks at you kindly, you say that she has done so because she wishes to love you instead of her husband. For that reason we are on our guard against you, guarding both our bodies and our minds, as we are forced to do. Otherwise, our honor would be dead.

Similarly, a woman’s well-intentioned laughter can also be used to reduce her to her rampant libido. The lady warns, “Welchez wip gern ere welle han, / diu sol

\begin{quote}

87 The restrictions placed on female bodies are at their most extreme in the case of the aristocracy, for the behavior of women of lower birth is not as strictly regulated. Francesco Barberino, for example, points out consistently that noble women are held to a higher standard than other social groups. See Krueger, “Introduction,” xviii. Also Hentsch, \textit{De la littérature}, 107. Medieval conduct texts thus support and anticipate the anthropologist Mahadev Apte’s conclusion about the correlation between corporeal and emotional control and socio-economic status: “Where ideal sex-role models for women emphasize modesty, passivity, and politeness, it is considered unbecoming for women to laugh in an unrestrained manner.” Apte, \textit{Humor}, 259.
\end{quote}
iuch nicht lachen an” (“The woman who would wish to keep her honor, should not laugh/smile at you,” FB, vv. 205–206), and explains why:

ob iuch ein frawe gruozte,
der gruoz mit lachen suozte,
ir daecht also: ‘si ist mit holt, […]
si mag wol sin ein gaehez wip. […]
Si hat gegen mir licht minne gir.’ (FB, vv. 185–187, 191, 194)

[…]

ist aber daz ein schoeniu maget,
der lip von rechte wol behaget,
tanzet unde lachet
und sich icht schoene an machet,
so gicht man des, si si ze palt,
si werde in eren nimmer alt. (FB, vv. 821–826)

Should a woman greet you and sweeten her greeting with laughter, you would think: “She is well-disposed toward me. […] She may well be a hasty woman. […] She must desire my love. […] When it so happens that a beautiful maiden, whose body is truly pleasing, dances and laughs/smiles, and adorns herself a little bit, it is said at once that she is too daring and that her honor will not grow old.

The last quote is just one of many examples of how Ulrich’s Das Frauenbuch anticipates the twentieth-century feminist position that women’s bodies are commonly perceived as “speaking” a language of provocation: “When female bodies do not efface their femaleness, they may be seen as inviting, ‘flaunting.’”

For a woman, failing to use utmost caution in her interaction with the other gender and to control her body results in immediate sexualization, in a projection onto her of the male onlookers’ own urges and fantasies. To make matters worse, nobody is safe from gossip in this society, regardless of age or status; married or single, maidens, wives, or widows, all are vulnerable:

dise not nu lident alliu wip.
wie solte ein wip da bi iren lip
behüeten vor dem spot also,
daz si dannoch da bi waer fro? (FB, vv. 845–848)

This is the trouble that all women suffer. How should a woman protect herself from ridicule and still remain joyful at the same time?

Women in Das Frauenbuch are clearly placed in an impossible situation. When in their attempt to earn respect and appreciation they choose to follow clerical advice and perform virtue by forfeiting laughter, they are accused of destroying the harmony of the secular world. However, when they try to maintain this world

88 Bordo, Unbearable Weight, 6.
with their friendly courtliness, the misogynist clerical rhetoric marks them as unchaste.

Unsurprisingly, men represented by the knight deny the contradiction between the clerical and courtly views of women’s laughter and sexuality. The lady’s opponent does not see it as inherent to his society, but rather attributes all the injustices to several bad apples. At the end of the book, however, his own words betray that he himself is not immune to clerical influence. When the narrator reminds the knight of his duty as a courtier to obey and respect ladies, the latter accuses the mediator of bias in women’s favor and resorts to the old misogynist cliché that women are fickle and must be kept under control:

Da sprach der ritter al zehant:
‘herr, mir waz daz e bekant,
daz ir den frawen zuo gestat.
ja waz ez ie iuwer rat,
daz den frawen alle man
mit dienste waeren undertan
und tuon recht waz si wolten.
ob wir man alle soltten
tuon daz frawen diuchte guot,
so gewunnen si grozen übermuot.
des mugen wir iuch gevolgen nicht.’ (FB, vv. 1949 – 1959)

Then the knight spoke at once: “My lord, it has been known to me for a long time that you stand by women. It has always been your advice that all men should be subject to ladies in service and do whatever they wish. If all of us men were to do whatever seems good to women, they would become too arrogant. For that reason, we must not follow your [Ulrich’s] advice.”

He is not willing to recognize men’s share of responsibility for the decline of chivalry. It is his female opponent who has to his call attention to the discrepancy between reality and the standards of courtliness. From the modern point of view, her mode of analysis is much more sophisticated and more abstract; while the knight personalizes the problem, the lady sees it as a structural issue. She objects to the demand to perform joy at all costs and points out that men are far from fulfilling their side of the bargain. Since laughter makes women more beautiful, approachable, and desirable, then in an ideal society, it must function as a reward, as an expression of welcome and appreciation of men’s sacrifices. Through the use of the common trope laudatio temporis acti (praise of olden times), the lady shows how men have ignored crucial aspects of the courtly ideology, such as service (Frauendienst) and respect (Frauenehre):

warumbe sol
ein frawe, die man nu grüezzen, wol
mit spilnden ougen lachen an?
mit welhen dingen (dienent) man,
daz si die frawen grüezen,
den gruoz mit lachen stüezen?
mir ist gesaget, daz e die man
die frawen güetlichen lachten an,
daz si wurden als hochgemuot,
daz si den lip und ouch daz guot
zerzen durch uns williklich
und von uns wurden muotes rich
und waren der tat unverzaget... (FB, vv. 151 – 163)

Why should a woman, greeted by a man, smile at him with frolicking eyes? How exactly
do men serve that ladies should greet them and sweeten their greeting with laughter/smile? I was told that in the past, men, at whom the ladies smiled kindly, used to become
so high-minded that they would willingly risk their lives and their possessions because
of us, and were ennobled by us, and did not fear deeds... 89

In the idealized past, when all components of the courtly way of life were in place, women are said to have been able to smile out of joy or gratitude, for men knew
that they had earned this smile as a reward and as a promise of an even better
recompense later. In a perfect world, the woman suggests, in which there is trust
and good-will on both sides, clerical rhetoric about female fallibility would have
no place, for there would be no need to spy on women and misinterpret their
signs of affection.

Although Das Frauenbuch so powerfully highlights the tension between the
clerical and courtly views of women’s laughter and sexuality, it resolves this
contradiction in a rather conservative way. 90 In order to steer the characters
within the fictional universe of his text, and his contemporaries outside it, back
toward the ideals of love service (Minnedienst), the narrator takes the lady’s side,
bestows lavish praise on all women, and reaffirms their inherent goodness; and
yet the only true solution that his work is able to offer is to establish that women
must adhere to their traditional gender roles. Ulrich’s explicit verdict proclaims
that in order for society to function harmoniously, women must live up to men’s
expectations and recognize their authority:

Ich sprach: ‘fraw, ich muoz des jehen,
was ich ie frawen han gesehen,
dar zuo aller hande wip,

89 Ulrich is definitely not the only author addressing the subject of love service versus its
rewards, and of appearance versus virtue. A very poignant critique is found in the manu-
script version J of Winsbeckin (mgf 474; ca. 1300). See Trokhimenko, “On the Dignity of
Women,” 490 – 505.
90 Albeit without explanation or textual evidence, Ulrich Müller and Franz Viktor Spechtler
express a similar opinion in Müller and Spechtler, “Ulrich von Liechtenstein,” 239.
I said, “My lady, I have to tell you this: whatever I have seen of ladies and of all kinds of women, their possessions, their livelihood, and also their bodies must be subject to men. For this reason I must entreat you: women must do and allow everything that we, men, desire and that seems good to us. The woman who would not do so willingly, has to do so nevertheless. That is how things are.

The poet conveys a similar message rhetorically, through his carefully and strategically constructed argument. Having initially impressed the audience with her power and readiness to voice her concerns, the lady slowly transforms herself into the man’s pupil, asking him to teach her how to discern good men from evil ones and how to lead a virtuous life. In addition, the man’s yielding in their dispute represents, as Helen Solterer has pointed out, the Ovidian model of symbolic domination and is a common, pan-European device to achieve a true victory. The man’s seeming submission, ironically, symbolizes the woman’s defeat: “The man’s obeisance correlates with the ultimate aim of the woman yielding. Representing the man as temporarily submissive is meant to signify his ultimate dominance. The master-narrator’s contention is this: to defer from a position of power can offer, paradoxically, a means of exerting it.”

Both the knight and Ulrich the narrator achieve this symbolic dominance through acknowledging the authority of women. The man does so by agreeing to respect ladies while receiving in return a promise of their obedience. Ulrich presents himself as a humble servitor, a vassal to his lady love to whom he has always been ze dienst vil berait (“ever ready to serve,” FB, v. 13); and yet his humility does not prevent him from composing a püechelin (both “a little book” and a didactic work written in a form of a debate or disputation), aptly named Der frawen puech and intended not so much to entertain as to educate the female audience about the correct way to interact with men. While Ulrich’s support for women

91 Solterer, Master and Minerva, 38.
92 Also “ich bin ir staete dienestman / mit triuwen als ich beste kan” (“I am her loyal vassal / as loyal as I can [be],” FB, vv. 15 – 16).
can be seen as an acknowledgement of their predicament, the ultimate purpose of his text is to teach women “how to inhabit the socio-sexual function that is expected of them, [...] a notion of female identity that depends on the female’s becoming an attractive and compliant object of male desire.” Thus the female audiences in Ulrich von Liechtenstein’s text and beyond are left to be ever mindful that their laughter and sexual virtue are closely connected and that societal harmony heavily depends on the perfect and willing control of female bodies.

Social Constructs of Femininity: Some Conclusions

“Wer lacht, bekommt ein grosses Maul” (“He who laughs ends up with a huge mouth”) warns the folk wisdom. The secondary, metaphoric meaning of this saying, which has survived to this day, is understandable only when one is aware of the perpetual concern with the aesthetic side of laughter, perceived as disturbing in both modern and medieval polite circles. Conduct books show medieval society as plagued by uncertainty in regards to laughter, recognizing the futility of any attempts to eliminate it, and, therefore, desperately trying to solve the questions of its legitimacy, role, and acceptable forms. In these texts, laughter must be restrained and controlled, but only by means that are understandable and acceptable to the secular nobility whom these clerical authors serve. Thus the composers of conduct manuals do not only appeal to their audience’s fear of the Last Judgment; they also address their readers’ more immediate, courtly sensibilities such as virtue and reputation, and even their concern with outward appearances, especially women’s. Courtly clerical instruction about laughter, however, takes a clearly gendered approach. For men it emphasizes a multitude of roles, the importance of social standing, and the esteem of superiors, while for women it focuses on their decorative role, presenting laughter as dangerous to their reputations and always interpreted in terms of sexual modesty.

It is in their view of femininity that the authors’ clerical education manifests itself. Presenting each gender not only with its own image, but also with what is expected of the opposite side, conduct books send the message that aristocratic women’s role vis-à-vis men is ornamental and instrumental, that their fields of activity include only love and marriage, and that femininity is inseparable from

94 Rasmussen, “If Men Desire You,” 158.
95 WA, II, 1746, Lachen 87.
sexuality, thus warranting more stringent bodily control. The treatment that laughter receives in conduct texts for women is part of this ideological work. The female readers are reminded again and again to mind their public persona, to carry themselves with dignity, and yet not to forget that, to use a modern expression, their strength lies in their weakness. In other words, they are wanted not in a position of authority, but rather as desirable and virtuous objects who adhere to a courtly ideology defined from a male perspective.

In her introduction to a recent collection on medieval and early-modern didactic literature, Juanita Feros Ruys raises the issue of the correlation between textual advice and actual behavior, between the standard these works advocated and the reality they strove to influence. Her concern is echoed by Roberta Krueger, who warns against reading conduct texts “as snapshots of medieval life.” Indeed, it would be naïve to argue that the behavior conduct literature prescribed was diligently followed; that the power structures these texts advocated were unquestioningly embraced and implemented; and that there was no resistance or objection to the misogyny, inconsistencies, and contradictions that mark much of this discourse. It would be equally unreasonable to deny the existence of strong female personages, both historical and fictional, whose behavior, intelligence, or authority did not exactly match the image of the perfect but passive and submissive femininity often inscribed in prescriptive manuals. It may be more productive then, as Krueger suggests, to approach conduct liter-

97 The clerical view of female nature as something to be restrained can be detected even in the most worldly literary works, such as Arthurian romances. This is not at all surprising, considering the fact that the court’s administrative center (the office of the chancellor), equipped with lettered clerks, allowed for the production not only of functional but also literary texts, and that most authors of secular epics were educated as clerics. Also see Oostrom, who notes, “This fact explains why medieval court literature so often emerged in the shadow of a chancellor.” Oostrom, Court and Culture, 9. Bumke points out that “contrary to the widespread notion that with the beginning of courtly literature clerics were replaced as authors by writers from the laity, we must emphasize that the epic poets usually had the kind of learned education that could only be acquired at the ecclesiastical schools. The discussion of this issue has often overlooked the fact that the Latin word clericus at this time did not describe primarily an ordained priest or the holder of an ecclesiastical office, but a man with a clerical education.” Bumke, Courtly Culture, 492. In addition, scholars believe that even the German Minnesingers also included members of the clergy, although a thorough examination of this question still remains to be done. Bumke, Courtly Culture, 499. See also Schulman for discussion of the connection between the clergy and Occitan troubadours in Schulman, Where Troubadours, 38 ff. Stripping away the sophisticated disguise of the Frauenlehre in literary works often reveals the limits—physical, spatial, and emotional—imposed on female bodies; and women’s emotions, including laughter, often only make these limits more evident.

98 Ruys, What Nature Does Not Teach, 18.
100 See, for example, Kathleen Ashley and Robert L. Clark’s introduction to Ashley and Clark, Medieval Conduct, esp. x, xii–xvii.
nature as a reflection of an ideal, an example of what its authors “wished the life to be like.”\textsuperscript{101} And yet, the treatment of laughter in Ulrich’s \textit{Das Frauenbuch} and in the greater didactic discourse reveals that even this ideal was far from uncomplicated, since it arose out of a disputatious and complex medieval culture in which lay and clerical discourses were far from separate, but rather debated and shaped each other; in which the necessity for laughter, eroticism, and procreation clashed with the suspicious view of women and the veneration of restraint and chastity; and in which competing norms and notions of femininity and masculinity coexisted and changed over time.

Written by a nobleman and a famous courtly poet rather than by a church-educated cleric, \textit{Das Frauenbuch}, on the one hand, offers a defense of women and provides a powerful model for female behavior. It features a strong and vocal protagonist who is not afraid to express her opinions and is capable of reasoning logically for and mounting a strong defense of what she considers just and right. Yet, on the other hand, it is precisely the guise of the courtly exaltation of women that allows Ulrich von Liechtenstein to gradually and skillfully take control of this vociferous female dissident; revert to the model of femininity as silenced, accepting, and compliant; and thus send a starkly familiar message.\textsuperscript{102} His text is wonderfully duplicitous. It is a work that seems to chastise men, while actually educating women; a work in which women are given the voice, will, and courage to object to men, while ultimately being silenced by the reinstated gender order; a work that with the help of its rhetoric seems to elevate women and yet in the end locks them up within the confines of the traditional patriarchal system.\textsuperscript{103} Although unique in its encapsulation of both sides of the debate on laughter and femininity, \textit{Das Frauenbuch} shares with other conduct and didactic texts the ideal according to which women are respected, as long as they themselves are respectfully silent, and obeyed, as long as they themselves are obedient.

\textsuperscript{101} Krueger, “Introduction,” xxviii.
\textsuperscript{102} The view of courtly love and the praise-of-women topos as forms of misogyny is not new, of course. As Blamires points out, “many of the defense arguments could be interpreted as misogyny in disguise” and “honouring ladies’ came to be a proverbial definition of male honor.” Blamires, \textit{Case}, 237 and 10, respectively.
\textsuperscript{103} “Even in the most nearly feminist medieval writings, those most affirmative of female autonomy, there will lurk a shadow of patriarchy.” Blamires, \textit{Case}, 5.