

Witches and «bitches»: genderised laughter in medieval comic tales

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Witches and witchcraft were very real phenomena to the fifteenth-century writers. Their writings tell us much about their humorous misconceptions, built on established accounts of folk beliefs about witches, and conveyed as academic, fact-based theories. In addition to the official documents¹, some authors, mostly anonymous, undertook the task of recording the many oral appearances of popular literature. Among these, I chose to analyse two medieval comic tales: an English tale entitled *Dame Sirith*² and, a Latin one, entitled *The Old Women who made a Pact with the Devil*³. In doing so, first I intend to briefly describe the medieval cultural setting that supported and promoted popular and learned witch beliefs; and secondly, to illustrate these, by analysing the witchlike protagonists - their conduct, dealings and sufferers - portrayed in the tales of this study. Moreover, bearing in mind that the majority of medieval comic works were framed in antifeminist traditions, I shall illustrate that the female characters in these two tales - the old women or the witch and the unfaithful wife - were, in fact, targets of genderised laughter for male authors, that is, they were laughable medieval female icons.

¹ Among many other influential witchcraft treatises, the most acclaimed at this time was the *Malleus Malleficarum* (1486) authored by the Dominican inquisitors Heinrich Krämer (1430-1505) and Jacob Spenger (ca. 1436-1495). Familiarly called the «Hammer of Witches», it was a compilation of witch beliefs that had been extracted under torture. Its ideas were so widespread that many of the details appeared in later confessions and learned treatises in England. It is important to point out that underlying the entire structure of this work are three beliefs: witchcraft is real and it is heresy to maintain the opposite; evil spirits interfere in human affairs; and both witchcraft and demonic activity are permitted by God.

² Derek Brewer (ed.), *Medieval Comic Tales*, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2nd ed., 1996, p. 47-51.

'Dame Sirith' is preserved in a single text of 450 lines in Bodleian MS Digby 86 of the late thirteenth century, containing a miscellaneous selection of poems. It is written in a mixture of tail-rhyme and roughly octosyllabic couplets and tells the story, widely known in Europe, called 'the Weeping Bitch' (Folktale Type 1515). It was told as late in English as William Baldwin's *A marvellous history intituled beware the cat*, 1570, 1584, though the bitch is changed to a cat. In the analysed translation, marks are put into verse, where the author parodies the clichés of contemporary love poetry (as Chaucer does in 'The Miller's Tale').

³ *Ibid.*, p. 172-174. This text, as a Medieval Latin anecdote, is to be found in T. Wright, *A Selection of Latin Stories*, no. C, p. 85-9 [MS BL Harley 2851 (not foliated)] Percy Society Publications 9 (1842).

Between 1100 and 1300, the features that were later to build the witch stereotype emerged in the European thought. But there were no witch trials as such during this period. From 1300 onwards, explicit accusations of witchcraft began to appear. For the following two centuries the image of the witch grew in complexity and in fearful immediacy. By 1500, most features of the established witchcraft theory provided the foundation for the massive craze of the period from about 1560 to 1680.⁴ During this period, it is possible to differentiate two kinds of witches, in the geographical context of England and Continental Europe: the English popular archetypal witch; and the Continental demonic witch.⁵

In what refers to the popular English witch, on the turn from the fourteenth century to the fifteenth century, a series of beliefs and practices of ritual and popular magic became common, these being vestiges of the Pagan heritage.⁶ It was believed that some people, mostly women, could manipulate the natural and supernatural worlds by means of good and harmful magic deeds. A female witch or cunning woman was believed to have the power to heal sick and injured people, and animals, to bring about love, to exercise divination, to find buried treasures, and to invoke the spirits, by means of incantations or potions. This power⁷ could even be used to kill, by the simple use of the evil-eyed curse.⁸ The frequent practice of midwifery and the knowledge of ancient herbal medicine were other features that characterised the witch or cunning woman. In other words, since ancient times spells, charms and imitative or deceptive magic were used to overcome the mystifying adversities of life. These features are closely related to the so-called English witch or archetypal popular witch, peculiar to the English folk narratives. Moreover, these witches are habitually portrayed as being old, lonely, spiteful, cursing, poor village

⁴ Joseph Klaits, *Servants of Satan –The Age of the Witch Hunts*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1985, ch. 2.

⁵ This terminology is coined by Owen Davies in his work *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture 1736-1951*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1999.

⁶ Anne Llewellyn Barstow, *Witchcraze: a New History of the European Witch Hunts*, San Francisco, CA, Pandora, 1994, ch. One; and P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, *Witchcraft in Europe and the New World, 1400-1800*, New York, Palgrave, 2001, chs. 1 and 2.

⁷ «*maleficium*», «is the simplest and most basic form of witchcraft. It can include [...] physical manipulation of objects and/or incantation of words and [...] harming through the release of power activated by hatred». (Christina Lerner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief*, New York, Blackwell, 1984, ch. 5)

⁸ It was widely believed, among the learned and the people, that the influence and the use of the evil eye (*fascinatio*) was so physically powerful that anyone possessed of such a characteristic had only to look at someone or something to effect a transfer of malevolence or envy which would usually manifest itself in the form of disease or loss of power. Cursing was also not an uncommon practice. Early Catholic priests cursed, from the pulpit, the enemies of God, while villagers, especially women, reacted by cursing any neighbour that was unwilling, in any way, to render the assistance they pleaded for. P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, *Witchcraft in Europe and the New World, 1400-1800*, New York, Palgrave, 2001, p.7.

women, with some creepy abnormal physical trait. They were both feared and needed.

As for the demonic witch, as Joseph Klaits⁹ notes, the culture of the Middle Ages was constructed on deep religious foundations that not only explained the individual's destiny, but also guided the individual from cradle to grave. Those were times when religious authority underlaid all social and political structures, and the hierarchical order in the family, state and cosmos. Unsurprisingly, religious dissidence implied political and social subversion. Hence, heretics were seen as traitors to God, and associates of the Lord's major enemy: Satan.¹⁰ This biblical entity and his demons were progressively empowered and began to be believed as perilous tempters and destroyers of body and soul. In clerical accounts, the Devil murdered the innocent, lured people into renouncing their allegiance to God, caused destruction, induced possession and copulated with humans. Moreover, Satan had metamorphic power, being able of taking the shape of an animal or other shape. At an earlier stage, it took the form of a Moor or of a black; and later that of handsome young men or beautiful women. These were also attributes initially ascribed to heretic sects. However, and to a great extent, at a later stage they became characteristic of the demonic Continental witch. Therefore, as Anne Barstow¹¹ similarly maintains, one can see official notions of witchcraft, slithering towards being identified as heresy, or more precisely heretical witchcraft, by the Church authorities. As a consequence, this relatively novel typecast of witch emerged as being a heretic who had entered into a formal pact with the Devil,¹² practised murder, infanticide, cannibalism, sodomy and bestiality, during the course of Satanic meetings and orgies, known as Sabbaths, and who deliberately surrendered to the demands of apostasy. The demonic witch is more closely related to the demonological preconceptions of scholarly Continental writers, being in fact a theme of minor importance in the English popular discourse on witchcraft. Thus, one may argue that the learned European minority only fashioned the stereotype of the demonic witch, when harmful magic was closely related with religious dissent or heresy.

⁹ Joseph Klaits, *Op. cit.*, p.2.

¹⁰ «The word *devil* enters the picture in the third century with the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament into Greek [...] The Greek word *diabolos* – *accuser* – was at that time chosen as a fitting translation for the Hebrew *Satan*. [...] Jerome restored the word *Satan* to the vulgate, except for psalm 109. [...] in the New [Testament] *Satan* had become a different sort of figure, an opponent of God rather than God-appointed opponent of man.» (Charles Hoyt, *Witchcraft*, 2nd ed., Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press, 1989, ch. 2)

¹¹ Anne Barstow, *Op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹² More clearly, «Compact witchcraft» as suggested by Christina Lerner, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

In the *Dame Sirith* tale, one may find one of the earliest definitions of the popular English witch. Written in a mixture of tale-rhyme, it tells the story of Willikin, the rich aristocratic clerk who falls in love with Margery, the merchant's wife. For a long time, the clerk has unsuccessfully tried to seduce Margery. Following a friend's advice, one day, when he found out that her husband was absent, he asked Dame Sirith to help him seduce her. The witch made her dog weep, by giving it hot spices and took it to Margery. The merchant's wife is persuaded that the weeping dog is Dame Sirith's daughter magically transformed by a grieving clerk, whose love she once refused. To prevent the same fate to befall upon her, Dame Sirith convinced Margery that she had to yield to the clerk's sexual advances, while her husband was away.

Though Dame Sirith is never explicitly termed a witch, in many aspects this character fits the profile of an English witch or cunning woman. First, Willikin finds out about the «gracious Dame Sirith» through a friend, fact that suggests that she is known in her community for her magical dealings. After having asked what he wished her to do, the clerk said: «A cure dear old lady [...] through your trickery and devices» (p. 48-9), an answer which clearly indicates traits characteristic of a witch, namely her ability to produce a cure by means of deceptive magic and her old age. Moreover, to be sure of his intentions, Dame Sirith begins by dismissing her skills as mere lies: «I'm old and ill and crippled [...] I'm a holy woman; I know nothing about witchcraft. [...] And may I be avenged on him who spoke this shame about me.» (p. 49) Yet, for the attentive reader, her words are unconvincing. By emphasising her old age and physical distress, by asserting her godliness and denying any knowledge of witchcraft, and by cursing, the rather opposite effect is achieved, i. e., the awareness that Dame Sirith is a witch. In addition, from the fact that her sole companion is a pet dog, to which she talks to, leads us to infer that this is her imp or familiar, as dogs were believed to be at the time. In fact, as Owen Davies¹³ has noted, these were times when dogs were seen as manifestations of evil spirits. As the plot unravels, Dame Sirith sets her mind into helping the young man, for the right price, as any cunning woman would, as she puts it, «if there's anyone who is foolish and can't get his sweetheart for any price, I'll make him succeed - if he will pay me - for I know very well how!» (p. 51) Curiously, Dame Sirith makes no use of witchcraft, but only of her wit to achieve her aims. As a way of gaining Margery's trust, she shows up at her doorstep as an old common poor village beggar, so as not to have her real intentions unveiled. While thanking

¹³ Owen Davies, *Op. cit.*, p. 2.

Margery for her kindness, Dame Sirith curses her: «God curse her life» (p. 50), a curse intended to bring harm to Margery, in the sense of her becoming an unfaithful wife. And so, step by step the witch in the story is fleshed out.

In the other tale of this study, *The Old Women who made a Pact with the Devil*, and as the title itself suggests some of the traits of the Continental demonic witch surface. Here the reader is introduced to a new character, the Devil, the «enemy of mankind» (p. 172) and «the crafty Serpent» (p. 172). The Devil, not succeeding in breaking up a married couple blessed by God's grace, takes the form of a young man and establishes contact with «a certain hag» (p. 172). She binds herself to the commitment of carrying out his request of showing «hatred between them and separate their unanimity a little» (p. 172). By lying to both husband and wife about their alleged unfaithfulness and treachery, she manages to lead the enraged husband to murder his innocent wife, and to dissolve a once godly and happy marriage. Here, we have once again an old witty village woman. Yet, differently from Dame Sirith, she is not portrayed as a cunning woman, but as a demonic witch, for she engages in compact witchcraft, i. e., she agrees on a pact with the Devil. Nevertheless, it is not clear in the story that the woman is aware of such pact. As far as she is concerned, her services were required by the young man, «her employer» (p. 174), for an arranged price, «this miserable and unhappy woman [being] paid to the tune of five pieces of silver.» (173)

One must highlight the fact that, this particular medieval comic tale falls under the category of an anecdote. In the twelfth and following centuries a number of compilations of stories appeared, of which some were intended to be amusing, aiming at supplying sermon-writers with illustrative anecdotes. Many medieval authors, including priests, drew on the ancient strategy of using humour to instruct. Thus to enliven their sermons, priests added little stories - anecdotes - called *exempla*.¹⁴

The comic tales discussed above are good examples of how folk narratives dealt with illicit love, broad humour and directness. Both of them are set on local surroundings, and almost inevitably they involve trickery, and are designed to gain favours from a desired married woman.¹⁵

As Derek Brewer¹⁶ puts it, much of the comic imagery found in European medieval comic tales rests and gives an insight into human conditions and circumstances.

¹⁴ Derek Brewer (ed.), *Medieval Comic Tales*, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2nd ed., 1996, 'Introduction'.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

They have a pleasing mixture of fantasy and realism, and are based on the individual's self-contradictions of ordinary life, of his/her needs of food, drink, defecation, love, sex, money, as well as on the potentially comic horror of death. Physical disaster is also sometimes the subject of humour as well as an instrument whereby humour is created. Stupid husbands, the physically deformed and the misbehaviour of parish priests, the elderly, the silly, and the weak, as well as the pompous are also object of mock. Supernatural elements, as the ones here highlighted, are either fantastic or feigned in order to mock the credulous.

Due to its ambivalent nature, humour in medieval comedy also leads us to infer some of the misogynist prejudices of the time, as for instance, the derisive attacks to certain minority demotic groups that traditionally attracted mockery, namely women as witches or cunning women, old hags, shrewish, young and naïve or unfaithful wives.

Detracting women was however, an already long established tradition before medieval times. Misogynist definitions of women date back to Antique Classical Times. Women were believed to be more liable to do evil. This was a view held by Classical authors and the Church Fathers. They regarded them as having lesser rational faculties, and condemned them for their weakness of faith and malevolence. Vestiges of such misogynist images can be identified in the female characters of the tales object of our study, namely the deprecatory attributive descriptions. Dame Sirith is, for instance, said to have gone off «like a miserable wretch» (p. 50), and the Old woman is said to be «a certain hag» (172), «the miserable and unhappy woman» (p. 173), a «crafty old woman» (p. 173), «that mother of error» (p. 173). It is also important to highlight two other similarly deprecatory images. First, it is ironical that the young wife - Margery - confronted with the hypothesis of becoming a «bitch», very easily accepts to be Willikin's mistress, thus becoming object of social contempt for being unfaithful to her husband, which in social slang also means being a bitch or hoer. The second detracting image is that found in the Old Woman character. Gullibly deceived by «the demon her master» (174), she is more successful in alluring people into sinning than Satan himself. In fact, emphasising the old woman's newly acquired power, Satan «added that, not even if he had ten years and a legion of accomplices could he have accomplished what she had brought to completion in the space of only one night.» (p. 174)

One may thus infer the applicability of the humour theory of superiority,¹⁷ whereby the pleasure we take in laughing at the misfortunes of others both derives from and reflects our own sense of superiority over those we laugh at. The laugher thus always looks down on whatever or whoever is laughed at. And so did medieval male authors, male readers, as well as disempowered female readers.

In his work *Laughter as Subversive History*, Barry Sanders¹⁸ concludes that in Western cultures women have been socialised into a quieter, more retiring role than men, in what telling jokes or tall stories are concerned. Daily life found expression in the vernacular Romance languages in which tales were told. For this same reason women's proper place was out of the Schools, where Latin was taught. While only a few cloistered women were fluent in this language, the language of the learned, the overwhelming bulk of women lived surrounded by the clutter of their own distinct vernacular. For most medieval women, life was marked by the spontaneity of oral discourse, in sentences less affected by the Schools, but enriched with ancient popular beliefs like magic and witchcraft. Moreover, as Mahadev Apte puts it,

Women's humour reflects the existing inequality between the sexes not so much in its substance as in the constraints imposed [...] These constraints generally, but not universally, stem from the prevalent cultural values that emphasize male superiority and dominance together with female passivity and create role models for women in keeping with such values and attitudes.¹⁹

In other words, cultural prejudices were bred against any display of female wittiness or, whenever displayed, it was perceived as laughable. For example, Dame Sirith and the Old woman are presented as derisive comic characters, due to their use of wit and of seemingly non-threatening witchcraft. Hence, and according to the humour theory of incongruity,²⁰ we laugh at something that defies our expectations. Yet, it is not only that unexpected connections are made between apparently dissimilar effects. Our notions of propriety are also involved. In any community certain behaviours are seen as appropriate to some but not to others. It is from this that stereotypes are built, the unconventional being highlighted namely through humour. And, at the expense of the woman who is unable to live up to the social conventions, humour emerges, as seen through our female protagonists.

¹⁷ See D. H. Monro., «Theories of Humour», *Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum*, 3rd ed., ed. by Laurence Behrens and Leonard J. Rosen, Glenview, Scott, Foresman and Company, 1988, p. 349-55.

¹⁸ Barry Sanders, *Laughter as Subversive History*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1995, 'Introduction'.

¹⁹ Mahadev Apte, *Humour and Laughter: an Anthropological Approach*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, p. 69.

²⁰ D. H. Monro, *Op. cit.*, p. 6.

Sanders further notes²¹, that being barred from acquiring formal rhetorical skills, from access to writing, and prevented from occupying positions of social, commercial or religious power, women found their voices in their intimate female conversations. On the whole, there was the rhetorical, intellectual world (male, upper-class, mostly literate) and the narrative, laughing world (female, peasant, oral). However, the nature of humour in a medieval comic tale seems not to have been intended to be socially rebellious, or moralistic, genderised, satirical, or particularly derisive. Yet one is confronted with the ambivalent nature of medieval humour. On the one hand, medieval comic stories violate the social norms of decency, and evidence a subversive sub-culture, and on the other hand, they express a deep conservatism in terms of racism and sexism. This is inferred from the stereotyped characters, namely witches, traditional attitudes and expected patterns of narrative. Amazingly enough, medieval comic tales preserve even when they violate traditional norms.

Thus, medieval disparaging humour, in the form of genderised laughter, as seen in the comic tales here discussed, has regrettably played a significant part, in ascertaining a derisive identity for women, and in diffusing the, ultimately fatal, misconceptions of Devil worshipping witchcraft and its demonic witches.

Resumo

²¹ Barry Sanders, *Op. cit.*, p. 7, ch. 5.