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Jody Enders, ed., *The Farce of the Fart and Other Ribaldries: Twelve Medieval French Plays in Modern English*. The Middle Ages Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011. xv + 477 pp. Introduction, translations, commentary, notes, bibliography. \$49.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 978-0-8122-4323-9.

Review by Carol Symes, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

What reviewer, however well-disposed toward this book, could better the endorsement of Monty Python's Terry Jones? What scholar dedicated to revising the prevailing perception of medieval entertainment could ask for a better ally? His glowing assessment (on the book's back cover) is right: Jody Enders is "a great champion of comedy at its most vulgar and hilarious," but she is also "thoroughly grounded in her academic approach to the subject" and uniquely qualified to show how these farces "confront the real controversies of their day." In fact, this is probably the most accessible introduction to medieval theatre in existence, and also the most deeply informed. Enders has been the smartest and most prolific exponent in this field for three decades, ranging with apparent ease from the rhetorical conventions of antiquity to the splendor of late-medieval civic display and the troubling spectacle of judicial ordeal, with constant and perceptive attention to the contemporary counterparts of these phenomena on TV and Internet.[1] Her work encompasses the frivolous and the fraught, and her style has always been distinctive for its unsettling mixture of breezy erudition, pop-culture gossip, and theoretical flair.

This is Enders' first foray into translation, but it seems a natural extension of her mission and talents. In all of her books, she has honed in on the essential humanity of the people who produced the dramatic artifacts we now study, paying careful attention to the very specific conditions in which they lived and acted. She loves an apt analogy, but she never loses sight of a play's original context (insofar as this can be determined) or its potential consequences. By embracing the translator's job, she is therefore well equipped to "carry over" not only the words but the flavor of a joke and the politics of its reception, by transposing it thoughtfully into a twenty-first-century key.

Her stated goal is deceptively simple: "user-friendliness" (p. ix). This is not as easily achieved as she makes it sound. There are hundreds of Middle French farces (the estimate is conservative), most still in scattered manuscripts, and all alienated from the vernacular milieu (linguistic, social, theatrical) that made them edgy and popular. Capturing this for today's students and actors and conveying it to today's audiences should be dauntingly difficult. But here is where Enders' unusual combination of skills comes into play. Not only does she know a lot about the world in which these sketches were conceived, the world of late medieval France, she is a perceptive observer of our world, too. In mediating between them, she shows how distinctive and yet similar they are. "Without performance," as she says, "medieval culture makes no sense" (p. xiii); the same could be said of ours. Everything back then, especially those desiccated remnants of lively interactions that we call *texts*, was intended for (or generated by) some type of performance. Nearly everything now, one could argue, has no currency unless it is performed: what is Twitter if not a performance of textuality? And this is to say nothing of the natural affinities between the genre of farce and that of sketch comedy, or between those geeks who sketched the farces of the past and those who make You-Tube videos today: procrastinating students, cheeky clerks, the products of prolonged adolescence. If the makers of *South Park* or *The Hangover* were transported to Paris and forced to work in the law courts, they too would be doing farces on the Marble Table of the Basoche or in the interstices of the city's solemn *mystères*.

As Enders tells us, the first of these farces—her favorite, the eponymous *Farce of the Fart*—came about as part of a teaching exercise, and this book is very much geared toward use in the classroom. Comedy isn't funny until it is put on its feet, and Enders wants to provoke us all to get our students out from behind their desks. Even if you have never read a farce before, or—having read it, didn't get it—this book will empower you to give it a try. It gives you all the tools, too: a comprehensive introduction to the genre and its textual history, a frank explanation of Enders' own methods of selection and translation (amounting to a Middle French primer for English-speakers), brief plot summaries of each play, copious notes and stage directions, and practical suggestions for performance. The translations themselves make no attempt to replicate the verse-forms and rhyme-schemes of the originals; this is not, Enders admits, her *forte*. But rendering the plays in fast-paced, lively prose mimics their momentum while enabling her to substitute puns, allusions, and locutions that parallel those modish in the fifteenth century. She even finds an apt way to incorporate the farces' frequent use of popular song, sometimes in snatches, sometimes (she surmises) in the form of show-stopping musical numbers. The index of copyrighted materials shows classical melodies juxtaposed with Motown, Gilbert & Sullivan operas, and "Happy Birthday to You."

What's not to like? I have only two quibbles; and since all comedians know that "k" is a funny consonant, I feel it's OK to voice them here. I am personally a big fan of rhyming couplets and would like to see someone, inspired by Enders' example, do for these (and other) farces what a few clever translators have done for Molière's later comedies, or what John DuVal did so brilliantly for some of the earlier Old French fabliaux.^[2] I am also (in my roles as scholar, teacher, and theatre practitioner) someone who prefers more flexibility when working with a pre-modern script. These were extremely skeletal and open-ended, for a variety of practical and political reasons.^[3] Here, for the sake of accessibility, Enders has erred on the side of almost labored transparency in her exposition of the texts, leaving very little for the student or actor to discover on her own. But this, as I say, is inconsequential in light of the book's overall achievement. Like the farces themselves, Enders' exuberant generosity and robust wit are ready to jump off the page and fill the room with fun.

NOTES

[1] Jody Enders, *Rhetoric and the Origins of Medieval Drama* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992); Enders, *The Medieval Theater of Cruelty : Rhetoric, Memory, Violence* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999); Enders, *Death by Drama and Other Medieval Urban Legends* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Enders, *Murder by Accident: Medieval Theatre, Modern Media, and Critical Intentions* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[2] John Duval, *Fabliaux Fair and Foul*, with an introduction and notes by Raymond Eichmann (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval & Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992).

[3] Carol Symes, "The Medieval Archive and the History of Theatre: Assessing the Written and Unwritten Evidence for Premodern Performance," *Theatre Survey* 52(2011): 1-30.

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