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Jody Enders, ed., trans., *“Holy Deadlock” and Other Ribaldries: Another Dozen Medieval French Plays in Modern English*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. 552 pp. Illustrations, notes, appendices, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 US (cl). ISBN 978-0-8122-4874-6.

Review by Lofton L. Durham, Western Michigan University.

This is the second in a planned multi-volume series of modern English translations of fifteenth-century French farces, a corpus of some 200 plays many of which have never been edited or translated into modern French, let alone modern English. The first volume, *Farce of the Fart and Other Ribaldries*, included a wide range of topics, but for this second volume, Enders’s wit and sophistication has a sharper focus: farce’s desanctification of marriage. Though her work on these dozen selections predates by several years the 2016 U.S. election and the ensuing public ruckus surrounding misogyny and sexual harassment in politics and in all kinds of workplaces, Enders’s “*Traduction engagée*, a feminist appropriation” (p. 20), feels like a project ripped from the headlines. This work paradoxically focuses both on what the medieval (likely male) writers scripted into farce, and what a twenty-first-century feminist translation might extract from it: “Since French farce could not have commented more blatantly on the significance of female social actors, for my own part, I state that the medieval French farcical corpus specializes in binders full of women. And I conclude that they can be unbound. Their acts will be seen here, their agency felt, and their voices heard” (p. 22).

This is actually quite a trick, as the material in the farces puts women in unflattering positions, gives them unappealing attitudes, or makes them the butt of the joke more often than not and in more ways than one. But Enders ensures that all women characters, usually simply described in the originals, get names and full identities in the translations. More importantly, Enders’s sensitivity to the possibilities of performance allows her to suggest ways of recovering both dignity and agency through staging. For example, in play nine, “Wife Swap,” (*Le Savatier, Marguet, Jacquet, Proserpine et l’Oste*), the sparse and indeterminate original dialogue does not make clear what actually happens at the end, allowing Enders to entertain six possibilities for the make-up or the break-up of the swapping spouses (pp. 309-317). In the eponymous play seven, “Holy Deadlock” (*Le Pèlerinage de mariage*), she gives the three women pilgrims names and distinct personalities, whilst allowing the men to remain “nameless everymen” (p. 187). And several times, Enders suggests that much of the violence that takes place against women in these farces might lose some of its contemporary sting but little of its farcical punch if it is staged in a hyperreal fashion, as exaggerated or cartoonish violence. And in the end, it’s clear that by “bringing a sexist repertoire back to life, the translator turns all the infinite instability, virtuality, and potentiality to her advantage” (p. 22)—and enables all of us to investigate these issues by reading and performing these plays.

Now to the collection itself. The twelve plays are grouped as a kind of journey, beginning with “The Newlywed Game” (*Le Conseil au Nouveau Marié*), and continuing with five plays chock full of marital fears, adultery, and conflict, before arriving at “Holy Deadlock,” which stages a pilgrimage to marriage. The pilgrimage takes us to the remaining plays in the anthology, which deal with multiple couples simultaneously—complaining about, and ultimately swapping, one spouse for another, for better and for

worse. Fittingly, in the last play, “Marriage with a Grain of Salt” (*Les Hommes qui font saller leurs femmes*), the wives get the upper hand, beating and berating their husbands for their stupidity, bullying, and unfounded suspicions. And as for the translations themselves, Enders opts most often for easy-to read vernacular prose, rather than verse, with at least one outstanding exception. Her rendering of “For the Birds” (*La Mauvaistié des femmes*), in free octosyllabic verse shows off her considerable skill in poetic translation, reminding this reviewer strongly of the delightful parody of traditional folk tales, *Roald Dahl’s Revolting Rhymes*.^[1] The beguiling pairing of singsong meter and lines like “You wanna kill me, lousy brute? You pig! That’s what you wanna do?” (p. 132) is just one G-rated example of such skill.

The first forty pages of the anthology provide essential knowledge about the translation’s priorities, the editions, and printed sources, and pragmatic information about translating money’s value, foreign wordplay, versification, and music as an essential but unknowable aspect of the plays. Accompanying each play translation, extensive critical apparatus, including frequent reference in notes to the original Middle French text, surface the translator’s choices, makes clear what is being altered, and allows readers to judge for themselves. But as Enders states, this work is “intended not only for scholars, but for students and theatre practitioners,” so she has “sought a middle ground of user-friendliness for a fun but complex repertoire that eschews the middle in favor of extremes” (p. 23). This “middle ground” is still enormous—each play has an introductory section with a cast list, notes on its provenance, extensive commentary on plot, characters and character development, language, sets and staging, costumes and props, and a list of copyrighted songs referenced in the translated text. The text of each translation includes suggestions for staging in brackets, but keeps the pages of dialogue fairly free of commentary, to allow their use for production in a variety of contexts.

And use for production I hope many will! According to the acknowledgements, production—actual performance of these texts, by students, colleagues, and friends—has been essential to the translation process. I challenge anyone who reads this collection, or, even better, who experiences a production live, like spectators at the 2017 Mostly Medieval Theatre Festival in Kalamazoo did,^[2] to resist the wit, humor, unrestrained filth, and sheer explosive theatricality baked into both the originals and the inspired translations. Like the reviewers of the first volume, I found myself laughing out loud *a lot*, either from the dialogue, the suggested action, or the liberal use of popular music lyric call-outs. I can certainly see some objecting to the many inserted contemporary references, but the end product is so charming, and the insertions so clearly annotated, that it feels churlish to quibble about it—for if you dislike them, the translator herself asks that you leave them out!

Yet we are lucky that Enders has elected to be the twenty-first-century voice of the fifteenth-century French farce. Her erudition about the period and the source material will educate anyone who opens this volume. Her translations provide enviable models of scholarship, creativity, and wit, and the modern English versions of these plays showcase the best in cross-cultural transformation and adaptation. Enders makes no apologies for what she calls “adapted translations,” and after reading these multi-faceted jewels, I feel that none are necessary.

The fact is that this is the kind of collection that should be added to every syllabus in medieval literature, French drama, dramatic literature, or theatre history. It has the potential to turn students on to this material because it is at once eerily familiar and also undoubtedly from the distant past. From my own experience, these translations hook students in and get them asking questions about medieval society, medieval marriage, medieval gender roles and norms, medieval performance practices, as well as questions about how and why things are funny.

It’s clear from our contemporary moment that the overlap of entertainment and misogyny still resonates powerfully. This collection gives teachers, directors, scholars, and students alike ample relevant cause to use Enders’s translations as a helpful bridge to the Middle Ages via issues that remain, still, contested and unresolved.

NOTES

[1] Roald Dahl, *Revolting Rhymes* (New York: Bantam, 1986).

[2] Enders's translation of the *Farce de Saint Martin de Cambrai*, entitled *Cooch E. Whippet* in Jody Enders, *Farce of the Fart and Other Ribaldries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), was produced by Radford University faculty, students, and alumni and presented on Thursday, May 11, 2017 by the Mostly Medieval Theatre Festival, in cooperation with the International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, Michigan. The audience's delight was palpable throughout.

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