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Noah D. Guynn, *Pure Filth: Ethics, Politics, and Religion in Early French Farce*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020. viii + 261 pp. \$69.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-8122-5168-5.

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Over the last thirty years, scholarship on French farce has been emerging from the doldrums. Once we were at a standstill, unable to get beyond the either/or (farce is either politically subversive or a cultural tool to maintain the status quo). Then came the shining lights of Jody Enders, Jelle Koopmans, Sara Beam, and Marie Bouhaïk-Gironès, who in their different ways have shown that early farce (early, that is, vis-à-vis the offerings of Tabarin, Molière, et al. in the seventeenth century) amounts to much more than short, vulgar, trivial forms of entertainment that pander to the base appetites of their unruly spectators.[1] Now we have another contribution from Noah Guynn continuing that trailblazing form of Enders, Koopmans, Beam, and Bouhaïk-Gironès, whose work infuses Guynn's own sophisticated offering. Combining the historicist and archival sensibilities of Koopmans, the legal-literary awareness of Bouhaïk-Gironès and Beam, and the theoretical insightfulness of Enders—and on top of all of this, a layer of theological profundity—Guynn has produced a major contribution on French farce that will have appeal beyond medieval studies. Its tabloidesque title notwithstanding, *Pure Filth* is a scholarly yet very readable reappraisal of what farce is as a genre, and of how it is considerably subtler than we often assume. Guynn is commendably fair-minded in his criticism of those he disagrees with. He is scrupulously attentive to avoiding possible pitfalls of decontextualised analysis, whilst acknowledging that the performance history of early farce is always liable to be sketchy. All this makes for an exemplary study in the genre of farce.

Before considering the main body of the work, I would draw attention to the very helpful and intriguing note on sources that prefaces the main text. Here Guynn sets out succinctly the current state of the extant French farce corpus, and where his study will stand in relation to it. As specialists will know, all four collections of surviving farces were compiled in the sixteenth century: the *Recueil du British Museum*, the *Recueil Trepperel*, the *Manuscrit La Vallière*, and the mysterious *Recueil de Florence* currently in anonymous private ownership. Koopmans's critical edition of the *Recueil de Florence* (2011) was a major publishing coup: it now replaces the older (and flawed) *Recueil Cohen*, and constitutes probably a sequel to *Trepperel* or else a single, two-volume collection with the latter. *Pure Filth* benefits from Koopmans' work on *Florence*, and makes good use of *La Vallière*; Guynn also consults modern editions (Tissier, Droz-Lewicka) where appropriate.[2]

The introduction continues to establish Guynn's position in farce scholarship. His mission is to challenge the "rather flimsy essentialism" on which much farce scholarship has often relied: namely, that the genre has carried with it, across the centuries, "a historically extensive, socially pervasive, and inherently ephemeral and interactive performance tradition with a predetermined, uniform set of intentions and outcomes" (p. 10). To this essentialist yet still pervasive reading of farce, Guynn prefers an approach that unmasks the many faces of farce, based on what Václav Havel (the erstwhile Czech statesman, dramatist and one-time dissident) observed about the "many faces and hidden potentialities" of human societies. So Guynn is rightly suspicious of any methodology that claims knowledge of all the potentialities slumbering in French societies of the past, whilst denying "the supposedly benighted hoi polloi the capacity to imagine alternative social realities, or oppose existing ones, without a humanist intelligentsia to guide them" (p. 10). For Guynn, farce is not the theatrical expression of popular culture letting off steam at (controlled) festive moments such as Carnival—the "safety valve" theory, he reiterates, in line with many post-Bakhtin scholars, is well past its sell-by date. Even a skimming of performance records reveals how *farceurs* were regularly accused of sedition and *lèse-majesté*, suggesting that however successful municipal censors were in regulating performances (and in some cases they were), they could not regulate the genre: overall, farce remained a "vibrant and ubiquitous mass medium" rather than a "truly stable set of representations" (pp. 10-11). Having acknowledged this, however—and this is one of the key strengths of *Pure Filth*—Guynn is not content simply to extract yet more subversive potential from close readings of farces. Instead, his undertaking is altogether more subtle, arguing that "much of the richness of the extant farce corpus lies in its use of familiar and shared, but also elusive and multiaccentual, cultural codes to mediate, negotiate, and reflect upon the ethical, political, and religious complexities of late medieval and early modern urban life" (p. 15). Farce harbours contradictory forms of political engagement; "it parodies and ridicules, even as it revitalizes and extends, sacred texts, themes and rites" (p. 6). *Even as* is a key stylistic tic of Guynn's writing; it captures his willingness to find a new kind of nuanced, dialogic imagination that goes through and beyond Bakhtin.

*Pure Filth* contains four meaty chapters, which, despite the author's self-confessed proclivity for lengthy pieces, do not drag. Instead, the long-form, controlled with subtitles, affords many fruitful digressions that will please the historically-inclined, not least because they are unexpected: these include forays into nominalist philosophy and sacramental theology, a glance at female hecklers of preachers, and a compelling application of marital debt theory. The first chapter ("The Wisdom of Farts") takes its flatulent inspiration from a potentially explosive reference to breaking wind in *Le gentilhomme et Naudet* that is revealing of the ways in which subordinate peoples use theatrical play and performative resignification. Chapter one, which includes discussion of Carnival, is interesting for its ethicopolitical discussions of characters who submit to domination with apparent willingness only to transform obedience into a disruptive form of agency (p. 24). The chapter coalesces around a reading of several farces, most notably Pierre Gringore's *Le Jeu du Prince des Sotz et de Mère Sotte*. Guynn's reading is nourished by James C. Scott's notion of "infrapolitics" and Michel de Certeau's theory of everyday consumption, namely that the farceur's art is subtle enough to make seemingly hegemonic forms of comic representation look ambiguous.[3] As Guynn puts it, "translating political struggles into unresolved comic scenarios, it reveals the actual instability...at the heart of France's nascent absolutism" (p. 41). Farce historians will be reminded (Guynn acknowledges Beam's work) of the unpredictable swings between repression and encouragement of *farceurs* under François Ier.

Whereas chapter one was deliberately diffuse in its coverage of farces, chapter two has a single focus on the most well-known of all French farces: *La Farce de Maistre Pierre Pathelin*. This is usually the only farce that traditionally-minded critics will praise for its literary-artistic merits; it has also attracted a good deal of attention from poststructuralists for its linguistic slipperiness. Guynn opts for a poststructuralist engagement deriving from Derrida and John Caputo: hence linguistic *différance* and parodic play in *Pathelin* point both to the inadequacies of human morality and of legal processes in the present, and to the eschaton—the Final Judgement that is inescapably *à venir*. Looking in detail at the various theological utterance in *Pathelin* and in its sequels (*Le Nouveau Pathelin*, *Le Testament Pathelin*) Guynn shows how, even as various travesties of scriptural justice are displayed, they compel us to imagine what true, biblical justice might look like, however far off it may appear from the present.

Guynn's sensitivity to the ethicoreligious inflexions of medieval culture enable him to offer a more historically compelling paradigm of early farce than that of Bernadette Rey-Flaud (which was based on an absurdist, modernist understanding of farce).<sup>[4]</sup> In chapter three, the ethicoreligious analysis goes deeper in a sustained reading of Andrieu de la Vigne's *Le Mystère de Saint Martin* (1496). This demonstrates another key strength of *Pure Filth*, in line with recent tendencies in medieval theatre studies, which is to show how closely forms of popular spectacle overlapped. La Vigne's mystery play integrated two shockingly irreverent farces which both bear out, no less strikingly than *Pathelin's* casuistry, the sacred-profane dialectic in medieval theatre. If anything, they afford a more troubling engagement with the theological, especially as regards sacramental and penitential theology. In La Vigne's *Le Meunier de qui le diable emporte l'âme en enfer*, a miller defecates just before expiring, and thus his soul finds no metaphysical point of terminus—not even purgatory. If “the turd plays havoc with the doctrine of salvation” (p. 118), the confession scene with its infelicitous articulation of the last rites also points to deep-seated confusion that surrounded late medieval penance both in theory and in practice. The second farce, *L'Aveugle et le boiteux*, is even more closely integrated into the surrounding mystery play such that the confusion is accentuated further. Thus Guynn: “Farce and mystery play do not simply work in concert here but actually merge: both genres stage miracles and hoaxes, muddling the distinction between signs that execute God's will and those that simulate or distort it” (p. 131). If these confusions all suggest an open door to Reformation attacks, they also imply that the door had been open for some time: medieval theatre had long thrown into relief the idea that the most powerful of liturgies (the mass) potentially harbours the most powerful of sacramental delusions (transubstantiation).

The final and longest chapter shifts gears from the ethicoreligious to the ethicopolitical, moving to consider the quintessentially farcical theme of “woman on top” beloved of literary scholars and cultural historians since Natalie Zemon Davis. This chapter constitutes Guynn's most theoretically dense writing. Drawing on Mary Hartman's “subversive' history of the household” and Jack Halberstam's queer account of “shadow feminism,”<sup>[5]</sup> Guynn looks at two plays: *Serre Porte et Fin Verjus* and *Le Poulcier à six personnages*. With his characteristic both/and approach, he finds that both normative charivari and revenge fantasies (those of women and of “feminized” subalterns) can readily coexist in these farces. It is not simply a matter of rehearsing classic “woman-on-top” arguments or testing them against the play-texts; instead Guynn's chief aim is to “queer the farce wife by demonstrating how she works to disclose the tenuous relations, cultural anxieties, and ideological fissures at the heart of late medieval heterosocial regimes, whether she submits to their dictates or repudiates them” (p. 153). So chapter four offers further elaboration on chapter one's melodic line of rebellion/compliance that sometimes become

indistinguishable. But there are also hints of chapters two and three, except that all attempts at lay religiosity are now mocked: *Serre Porte et Fin Verjus* offers no eschatological hope, only cynical depictions of sacraments abused by sadistic confessors to gratify their lust. And yet, despite this, there is still scope, within a provisional, situational capitulation to the oppressor, for an oppressed woman to queer the situation, set her husband in the role of woman on top, and enfold his identity and agency into hers (p. 185). Moreover, as *Le Poulter à six personnages* implies (in the light of marital debt theory), mutual submission between marriage partners, as taught in the New Testament, gave women the opportunity to turn acts of compliance and self-abnegation into oblique acts of resistance and self-assertion (p. 190).

*Pure Filth* thus uses careful case-studies to show how early French farces reveal—more abruptly than is comfortable—significant blind spots that persist in twenty-first-century academia. In particular, Guynn demonstrates how classic accounts of domination and resistance (namely Foucauldian and Bourdieusian models of social power) cannot account for the flexibility of popular social practices in medieval France (pp. 64-5). Furthermore, in his subtle use of queer theory, Guynn shows how feminist studies can become blind to forms of agency that resemble acts of compliance (p. 185). Having done this in chapter four, in his afterword, Guynn signs off by questioning the validity of “proto-” in “proto-feminism.” What does the prefix do? Does it tacitly invalidate anything that might be deemed “feminist” about the pre-modern world? Whilst “proto-” is doubtless intended as a politically and intellectually responsible gesture, Guynn argues that such a gesture poses “immense problems of presentism” (p. 220). His study of farce, on the other hand, foregrounds how a genre binned for its vulgarity “displays an uncanny ability to challenge cherished conceptions of modernity as rupture and to make a repudiated past live again” (p. 224). This kind of critical repudiation is salutary. As I read this book, I found myself asking time and again: how representative are Guynn’s case-studies of the whole French corpus? Surely there are many, many more that are, purely and simply, misogynistic, godless, and cynical? The challenge that *Pure Filth* put back to me was to expect greater subtlety rather than uncomplicated vulgarity when exploring medieval popular theatre. And Guynn’s book amply equips us to appreciate that subtlety in the many faces of farce, if only we would look again.

## NOTES

[1] See for instance the following: Jody Enders, *Rhetoric and the Origins of Medieval Drama* (Ithaca, N.Y.; London: Cornell University Press, 1992); Enders, *The Medieval Theater of Cruelty: Rhetoric, Memory, Violence* (Ithaca, N.Y.; London: Cornell University Press, 1999); Jelle Koopmans, (ed.), *Le Recueil de Florence: 53 farces imprimées à Paris vers 1515* (Orléans: Paradigme, 2011); Sara Beam, *Laughing Matters: Farce and the Making of Absolutism in France* (Ithaca, N.Y.; London: Cornell University Press, 2007); Marie Bouhaïk-Gironès, *Les Clercs de la Basoche et le théâtre comique: Paris, 1420-1550* (Paris: Champion, 2007).

[2] André Tissier, *Recueil de farces, 1450-1550* (Geneva: Droz, 1986-1990); Eugénie Droz and Halina Lewicka, *Le recueil Trepperel* (Paris: Droz, 1961-1974).

[3] James C. Scott, “Infrapolitics and Mobilizations: A Response by James C. Scott,” *Revue française d’études américaines*, 131:1 (2021), 112-17; Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

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[4] Bernadette Rey-Flaud, *La Farce ou la machine à rire: Théorie d'un genre dramatique, 1450-1550* (Geneva: Droz, 1984).

[5] Mary Hartman, *The Household and the Making of History: A Subversive View of the Western Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011).

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