

“And they laughed after all”

*Comedy on the Late Medieval
German Stage: With a Focus on
the Hessisches Weihnachtsspiel
and the Innsbrucker Osterspiel*

The Blending of the Sacred
with the Mundane

ALBRECHT CLASSEN

Abstract

Even though the representatives of the medieval Church seemed to have been adamantly opposed to the expression of humor and laughter, a closer analysis of numerous vernacular plays based on biblical themes reveals that humor mattered much and was utilized strategically to connect the spiritual events with ordinary people's common concerns about their private lives. This paper examines this thesis in light of the *Hessisches Weihnachtsspiel*, the *Innsbrucker Osterspiel*, the *Erlauer Weihnachtsspiel*, the *Osterspiel von Muri*, and others, where we commonly observe how the element of the *numinosum* is drastically paired with trivial, mundane statements and actions. This blending of the sacred with the secular obviously served to create laughter and thereby also established a better connectivity between the audience and the spiritual dimension presented on the stage.

Laughter in the Middle Ages? A New Turn

Modern scholarship has witnessed rather amazing turns in our methodological approaches to historical phenomena, situations, and conditions. There was the linguistic turn, the spatial turn, the ecological turn, and now we are in the midst of the emotional turn.¹ It is of supreme importance for us today to understand how people felt in the past and how those feelings determined or influenced their decisions and value system because this allows us to connect with them and to comprehend the historical development from then until the present time. We establish meaning for ourselves by understanding why they laughed and cried in the earlier periods, and how we would respond to the cause of their feelings or the occasion that brought about their laughter. Of course, we cannot ask them directly, but the literary documents, for example, which they have left behind, which often contrast intriguingly with the standard norms and expectations as we know them from other works, clearly indicate where transgressions take place, where irony or satire come into play, and where a shock reaction was specifically intended. Hans Rudolf Velten points out, for instance, that in some early sixteenth-century comments about theatrical performances we are explicitly informed about how much the audience enjoyed a play and laughed about the actors' actions on the stage.²

As scholars have demonstrated over the last decade or so, there are many materials available that permit us to gain a glimpse into the emotional makeup of medieval people, such as paintings, sculptures, stained-glass windows, literary texts, legal documents, sermons, and even musical compositions. Understanding how individuals responded to military threats, to strange visions (ghosts, spirits, demons, etc.), to erotic experiences, or to communicative situations makes it possible to enter much more deeply into the mental history of the Middle Ages, though I would be hesitant to talk about a history of medieval psychology, as some scholars have ventured as well.³

We have also realized that the old myth, according to which members of the Christian Church were not allowed to, or at least were not supposed to, laugh or to express any kind of mirth, which was the thematic basis for Umberto Eco's famous novel *Il nome della rosa* (1980), has to be dismissed. In fact, recent years have witnessed an explosion of relevant studies highlighting the full degree to which humor, comedy, and laughter were important features both of everyday life and also in the circles of the clerics. Human life cannot exist without some sense of humor because of the often seeming absurdity of reality, and so it does not

come as a surprise that we are able to identify meaningful examples of irony, satire, parody, mockery, sarcasm, black humor, and the like, and this already in the sources from the early Middle Ages, if we think, for instance, of the Latin epic poem *Waltharius* (ninth or tenth century)⁴ or of the at times rather hilarious plays and legendary narratives by Hrotsvit of Gandersheim (tenth century).⁵

In fact, it might be relatively easy to accept that people in the Middle Ages laughed about many different situations and for many different reasons, especially if we think of the myriad of courtly romances⁶ and the large corpus of late medieval *fabliaux*, *mæren*, *novelle*, or tales. Both Boccaccio and Chaucer, both Heinrich Kaufringer and Franco Sacchetti, demonstrated powerfully that they had a good sense of humor and that they could trust their audiences to laugh with them over a successful joke or pun. There would be little problems even to identify forms of sarcasm or black humor, despite the seemingly gross disrespect of human life or the human body, God's greatest creation, in jokes determined by this kind of laughter.⁷ Most intriguingly, a fairly large number of sculpture programs in Gothic churches and cathedrals, especially those displaying scenes showing the Day of Judgment, are enriched with smiling, laughing, or grinning figures.⁸ Many times laughter here signals a form of criticism or rejection of fools and sinners who do not understand their own shortcomings and failures in the face of God and so burst out in laughter, most disrespectfully or ignorantly. The sculptures of the foolish virgins, for instance, appear many times at the west façades of many church buildings, such as the Magdeburg or the Strasbourg cathedral.⁹

Importantly, it would be a wrong assumption to claim that Christ never laughed, one of the central battle cries of those modern critics who challenge the notion that the Middle Ages also knew of humor and personal happiness in worldly terms. A close reading of the New Testament easily yields numerous passages that can only be read as expressions of irony or even satire, as Marius Reiser has observed, even though we never hear of Christ laughing out loud as such.¹⁰ The huge corpus of texts determined by anti-clericalism clearly outlines how much laughter was utilized already in the late Middle Ages to undermine clerical authority.¹¹ We can identify forms of humor in many other contexts as well, even though we have to argue carefully in the application of modern terms concerning laughter to medieval conditions and contexts.¹² In short, religion and laughter are not necessarily in contradiction with each other since religious teaching was regularly aimed at people's foolishness, lack of virtue, and ignorance, which could be challenged most easily by way of laughter.

This now invites us to turn our attention to a large, heretofore relatively little investigated late medieval genre, religious plays, where we can easily identify numerous passages where laughter breaks out, where even sacred issues are viewed in a ridiculous fashion, and where the worst space possible for Christians, hell, appears, along with its demonic inhabitants, as something the viewers were invited to laugh about. While Wim Verbaal (2017) has discovered a number of passages in the writings by Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) that certainly underscore a certain sense of humor,¹³ Olle Ferm demonstrated how much members of the Church were certainly inclined and even permitted to enjoy humor, even if only in a subtle and controlled form to avoid the outburst of loud laughter.¹⁴ To these observations we can now add our own, pertaining to religious plays performed in public.

Laughter on the Medieval Stage

This is all pretty serious stuff, almost a contradiction to the topic to be pursued here and not an intentional pun, that is, the critical examination of laughter as it erupted in late medieval churches. We know by now that there was a whole culture of dancing performed during mass, or in preparation, or thereafter in the Middle Ages.¹⁵ Similarly, the genre of plays—Christmas, Easter, Passion—also offered numerous possibilities to combine the serious, religious theme with the lighthearted, entertaining, and yet also didactic elements, basically a phenomenon that was typical of the late Middle Ages. But how did the various poets achieve their comical effect? What strategies were used to implement humor within the theatrical performance? How did they combine the religious with the comical features, and thus, how did they justify implicitly the presentation of such plays? Was it even possible to supplement the sermon with a Christmas play, for instance, without falling prey to blasphemy?

Helmut Plessner argued that comedy is always situated at the threshold between two extreme positions, triggered by a crisis to make sense out of reality again, while normalcy and the extraordinary clash with each other.¹⁶ In light of the examples to be discussed below, however, I would suggest that the very opposite might also be the case, with the ordinary entering the sacred space and profiling and distinguishing the *numinosum* by means of everyday-life perspectives, allowing the basic human dimension to profile and qualify the spiritual in a practical fashion. After all, most people have a hard time comprehending the ineffable and can be relieved of their fear and lack of understanding by way of

laughter, which builds, if not predicated on sarcasm or black humor, sympathy, pity, and even a sense of community. Laughter erupts from the realization of contrast or conflict, or the dialectics of the spiritual with the real, which religious plays could already employ quite effectively in the late Middle Ages.

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were filled with numerous highly entertaining secular plays, such as the Shrovetide plays, produced and performed all over the German-speaking lands and in other parts of Europe.¹⁷ Many of the major poets of that time were actively involved in creating those plays, whether we think of Hans Rosenplüt, Hans Folz, or Hans Sachs, not to forget Jacob Ayrer and Vigil Raber.¹⁸ In their plays they seemingly targeted primarily farmers, simple folk, and women, but also priests and at times urban dwellers, but in reality they pursued a careful strategy not to hurt their audiences directly when formulating criticism of basic wrongdoing or people's failure everywhere to observe virtues, reason, and logic. Shrovetide plays are a sort of dramatic genre free for all, allowing the authors to laugh at everyone and holding up a mirror to the audience itself, without formulating direct criticism. As is the case today and universally, the best laughter always erupts when it targets ourselves.

The history of religious and secular plays has been investigated for a long time, so suffice it here to summarize our basic knowledge, with a focus on the situation in medieval Germany.¹⁹ The Nativity was not the object of many plays, but we know of the plays from St. Gall, Erlau, Bozen, and Swabia, not to forget the Hessian play.²⁰ Easter plays can be traced back to the early Middle Ages when they grew directly out of the liturgy, celebrating, for instance, the scene of the three virgins visiting Christ's tomb and finding it empty, and an archangel inquires from them, "quem queritis," a strong trope used throughout the ages. However, very quickly the plays were no longer performed in the narrow space of the church but outside, and soon enough in the market square, involving ever more actors, commonly using the vernacular, since Latin was the language only for the learned. Many scenes from Christ's life became the subject of those religious plays, soon accompanied by plays dealing with the lives of saints, the prophets, then also with the Antichrist, Christ having returned to this world, and other religious themes. It would be impossible to locate the center of play production, but we know that the regions of Tyrol, Vienna, Lucerne (CH), northern Germany, and also Brandenburg and elsewhere were the locations where a majority of plays emerged. In essence the purpose was to continue with religious teachings, but because of their character of being public performances,

the situation changed fairly rapidly, generally allowing much humor to enter the stage.²¹

This vast corpus of religious plays was virtually always associated with urban settings and substituted in many cases for religious instruction provided by the priest. More importantly, those plays conveyed the fundamental biblical messages about the highlights of Christ's life, from the Nativity to his Ascent to Heaven. Throughout time, these plays grew in length and in the number of actors, finally requiring hundreds of participants and days to reach the conclusion. For a long time clerics were the main actors, especially in the case of the religious plays, whereas there was a growing number of secular plays, such as the Shrovetide plays. The audience is regularly addressed as a church community and asked to get spiritually engaged and to sympathize deeply with the events presented on the stage. We know of around two hundred relevant texts composed from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century, but many others must have existed, considering the high popularity of this genre and its effectiveness in conveying the religious message in an entertaining, drastic fashion appealing to the senses. Many plays also treated episodes from the Old Testament and from the life of the Virgin Mary; moreover, the composers enjoyed staging the suffering of Christian martyrs and the triumphs of saints such as St. Catherine and St. George. The didactic intentions of all those plays are self-evident, but we can also be sure that the ever-growing number of actors—the Day of Judgment Play in Lucerne from 1549 required five hundred actors—provided the members of the urban elite with new possibilities to present themselves and to display their wealth, since they all had to pay for their own costumes. With very few exceptions, all roles were played by men.²²

The Hessisches Weihnachtsspiel

Most interestingly, some of these religious plays draw from ordinary situations in the countryside, especially the Nativity plays, because here the world of the shepherds comes into focus, virtually by default according to the biblical account. This can be impressively documented with the help of the *Hessisches Weihnachtsspiel*,²³ which was composed in the area of Friedberg around 1450 to 1460 and which deliberately incorporates the ordinary situation of the poor people who fight over silly things and desperately try to carve out a living for themselves under difficult circumstances and yet are suddenly confronted by the holy appearance of the Christ child. Although, or just because, Mary delivers the Savior,

Jesus, the entire scene highlights their poverty, then Joseph's desperate attempts to secure a manger for the infant about to be born, thereupon fights with the maids over who is supposed to carry out what tasks, and conflicts with the shepherds.²⁴ Even if the majority of plays pursued specifically religious themes, some of them, such as the *Hessische Weihnachtsspiel*, did not shy away from embedding the holy events into ordinary life conditions, thus inviting the audience not only to sympathize with the events but also to break into laughter because of the drastic confrontation of the ordinary with the spiritual.

Right from the start we are confronted with hilarious scenes, so when Joseph, having realized that Mary is about to deliver a child, almost loses his mind, not understanding the true condition, and being afraid of himself losing his honor since he cannot possibly be the biological father, he wants to run away and abandon his pregnant wife. Even though Mary assures him that her pregnancy was the result of divine intervention, he does not understand it and cannot figure out the real situation, maybe because he thinks that she is a prostitute. Subsequently, it takes much effort by the archangel Gabriel to calm him down and to convince him of his divinely ordained task in all of these matters (75–80).²⁵

He is suddenly willing to accept his role as the father of the divine child, but he does not seem to understand the true implications, just as most members of the audience would have wondered about the miracle to happen in front of their eyes. The good old man willingly listens to Gabriel and accepts the holy event without further questioning the situation. He promises never to abandon Mary again, which might be an indirect allusion to common practices in late medieval society of men neglecting their responsibilities vis-à-vis women whom they had impregnated. Whatever the situation might be, the play opens up with a rather ordinary scene presenting poor people in need because Mary is about to deliver her baby.

The emphasis specifically rests on the real, practical problems that Joseph faces since no innkeeper wants to rent a room to them. Some are afraid that they might not be able to pay; others distrust the claim that Mary is still a virgin and carries God's own son. Others, again, insist that they do not have enough room for the strangers and are worried that the delivery of the infant will unbearably overcrowd the remaining space (907–8). Finally, the desperate couple withdraws to a communal shed where the delivery takes place, with the help of the angels. The author made sure to project the entire scene with the pregnant mother, the impoverished father, and the desperate situation of not finding housing in this time of crisis in a personal, realistic fashion, and we are

constantly invited to chuckle because things seem to be so realistic and run-of-the-mill, although we are supposed to understand that a miracle is happening in front of our eyes.

However, even the religiously decisive moment of the birth and the initial task of taking care of the infant is translated into the ordinary, mundane activity of rocking the cradle, which Joseph does on behalf of Mary (910). He and one of his servants then break out in a jubilant song praising God. Similarly, the young mother kneels down and utters a long prayer (911) while the angels sing and other people join the choir. Nothing prepares us thus for the subsequent events, which quickly bring us back to the world of common people who talk about their own experiences, perceptions, feelings, and desires, and hence are seemingly not at all interested in or concerned with the miracle. They are all connected with the sacred events of the divine birth, but they represent the everyday community, which is thus invited to partake in the spiritual moment in their own way, as hilarious as this might sound both for us today and for the late medieval audiences, since the deliberate clash between the spiritual and the material dimensions that demarcate the entire play thus comes starkly into focus. Most significantly, the contrast between the scene with the angels and Jesus' parents singing and the subsequent events with the shepherd awakening his servant and alerting him to the miraculous happening is predicated on the strategy of creating laughter since the servant identifies the shepherd's comments as dreams, as he himself had just experienced some. He believes that in his sleep he had perceived himself as a cow, then as a swine, and so he thinks that his master must have been equally deceived and hence should have left him alone and grant him to get enough sleep (918). Nevertheless, the shepherd insists that he had truly noticed angelic singing and that he did not intend to pull the servant's leg. In fact, for him, and thus for the audience, the miracle has happened because the Lord God had been born in the miserable communal shed (919). He had been awakened from his sleep and had received the message, which he now wants to verify. But he is surrounded by very simple folks, with his two servants being called "Ziegenbart" (Goat's Beard) and "Unvortrosßen" (the Undeterred One) (920), a common feature in much contemporary late medieval literature employed to trigger laughter, such as in Heinrich Wittenwiler's *Der Ring* (ca. 1400) or the various *Neidhart* plays.²⁶ In other religious plays, such as the *Erlauer Spiel* (ca. 1400–1440), with its focus on the scene with the merchant, or rather quack, selling the salve to the three virgins, the narrator addresses his listeners by names, listing mostly peasants, such as "Gumpolt, Rumpolt, Harolt, Marolt, / Seibolt,

Neidholt, Hirolt, Mirolt, / Leupolt, Deupolt, Hospolt, Rospolt . . . ,” poking fun at the audience while calling upon them all to pay attention to the performance of their play.²⁷

This is all mild humor, not determined by satire or sarcasm. This play does not intend at all to ridicule the religious account presented here on the stage; instead, it simply brings it down to the level of common folks and reflects what they would have expected from this miraculous event. When we learn what the shepherd then requests from the Christ child, we recognize immediately the basic human level of the performance and its practical implications. The shepherd requests from the newly born Savior in the name of the Holy Trinity that they and their herds would be spared from wolves, that they would be allowed to drive their herds beyond the commonly shared pasture, and to have access to the cow pasture. Moreover, his basic needs would be nothing else but that they could grow in their gardens vegetables such as onions and garlic, carrots, leeks, and fruit since all that would be good nourishment for them. He also adds a whole list of other edible plants, which would be essential for their well-being. Once they would have their necessary fill, they would also be able to strive for Christ’s love (921).

The second shepherd at first engages in pious prayer, but then also turns to plain foodstuff and needs for their animals. He would like to have permission to take his herd into the forest for feeding purposes, obviously because that area was off-limits for the ordinary people so that the aristocrats could go hunting there. But he is dreaming of collecting all kinds of berries there, which then would make them all happy and physically satisfied (922). The third shepherd addresses other types of foodstuff, including buttermilk, turnips, and cherries, with which they could satisfy their hunger (923).

Even though these speakers know how to address the Christ child in a devout fashion, they are only concerned with their material needs and identify the Savior as the one who would make their daily lives easier and more comfortable. There is no clear indication that they might understand the spiritual dimension, but they are only simple shepherds, from whom not much could be expected. Hence, the audience would have smiled about their naive requests and prayers. After all, why would Christ care about such mundane matters as the basic foodstuff, farm animals, herding rights, wine, and the shepherds’ general well-being? Nevertheless, the poet projected all those requests onto the stage, not with tongue in cheek, but quite seriously, although the audience still must have smiled about this setup that seems to trivialize the divine happening during the Nativity.

Once the shepherds had their chance to speak, which represents a kind of comic relief, other actors appear on the stage, such as girls, cantors, then Mary, and Joseph. We are suddenly back within the realm of the divine and are encouraged to recognize the miraculous grace granted to mankind through the birth of this special child. However, the seriousness of the matter is soon interrupted again because mundane concerns have to be taken care of, insofar as the child must be nursed, which brings Joseph back to the stage who angrily interacts with one of the maids, Hille, who accosts him rather aggressively, ridiculing him by calling him names (again, goat's beard, 927).

The poet was clearly aware of the need to intermingle the religious play with many ordinary human interchanges, allowing the audience to laugh when it did not matter and to pay close and serious attention to the presentation when it truly mattered. Joseph, for instance, has to fight seriously with the maid and her companion, Gutte, since they resist his requests; he even needs to threaten them with violence if they do not obey him (927). But Gutte assures her companion, Hille, that they would be strong enough to teach old Joseph a good lesson, beating him up badly as a punishment for his intemperance (928). Only once he reminds them of the child's basic needs are they finally willing to follow his instructions. At the same time, a fight breaks out between these two women, who seem to care little about the holy child and rather fight against each other in order to defend their own work responsibilities (928). This grotesque mixture of the sacred and the vulgar-physical was so deliberately created that there cannot be any doubt about the presence of laughter, not to undermine the spirit of the Nativity scene, but to frame it with the everyday life of shepherds, ordinary families in the city, maids, servants, and others.

We would not have to worry about the problem of anachronism in our investigation of these kinds of emotions, as Piroska Nagy now assures us: "In the framework of a comparative and heuristic approach, we can study what people of a given culture describe or live as an equivalent or a sibling of our 'emotion' described for instance as *passio*, or *motus animi* in the Middle Ages. . . . We can study the way emotions are embedded in, and produced by, a given anthropology or vision of man, which are in their turn strongly tied to social and cosmological structures."²⁸

The fight between the two women proves to be ridiculous, simply silly, but appears to be rather typical for those kinds of persons who accuse each other of certain infractions, or threaten to reveal secrets about the other, such as a sexual transgression (928), simply in order to get even with them. The maids reject the outrageous insinuations and then attack

each other physically, although they are supposed to take care of the Christ child. Even though Joseph then separates the two, reprimanding both for their foolish behavior, alerting them to the fact that they are observed by the people and are making a shame out of themselves: "schemmet uch vor den luden!" (929, v. 681). He is deeply grieved that they have ignored the infant and instead have begun to tear each other's hair. Even though the two maids defend themselves and explain how they got into their fight, Joseph reminds them that there are bigger tasks at hand, so peace is established, and the act can continue, but not without a strong sense that the audience must have been mightily entertained by these two crude characters.

While the subsequent exchanges enter the ordinary discourse about what to do in this situation, with the angels singing, the interlocutor, or narrator, gives directions in Latin, and even Joseph uses some phrases in that language. Nevertheless, all the present actors begin to dance and create rather a ruckus around the manger, with the specific purpose of expressing their joy and adoration. At the same time, since some men join the women in the dance, we also sense an erotic component, especially because of the explicit use of erotically charged language, such as when Hillegart compliments Arnold for his impressive appearance or when Zeulrich praises the maid Gutte for her beauty (931).

The most dramatic element of the *Hessische Weihnachtsspiel*, however, proves to be the convention of devils assembled by Lucifer personally since they are all deeply concerned about their own existence now that the Savior Christ has been born. The interest in hell and its inhabitants enjoyed tremendous popularity especially since the late Middle Ages, and here we encounter a truly vivid scene with many devils identified by name.²⁹ Upon Lucifer's request, one devil after the other appears before his throne and offers advice on how to defend themselves against Christ. Since He would break open the gates to hell and free the righteous, they come up with numerous plans on how to deceive more people while still alive and thus to corrupt their souls. This would hence substitute for the considerable loss resulting from Christ's workings.

Belial, for instance, urges his lord to ignore the little infant in the manger and instead to focus on people's common greed. It would be easy enough to identify an infinite number of people who commit usury (934). Irrespective of Christ's activities during His lifetime, providing salvation for all of mankind, he is sure about collecting plenty of evil souls who would not be entitled to that salvation: "er wirt dannige eyn gut teul, / die da kummen an unser seil!" (934).³⁰ Another devil, Machadantz, calms down their fears about the divine infant, assuring them

that he might be able to break into the house and kidnap it by way of dressing up as an angel. He would go so far as to speak as God's own messenger: "und wel das kint in gotes name grußen" (934, 800). A devil pretending to be an angel would be a rather ridiculous imagination, though a late medieval viewer might also consider this as a threatening proposition, reminiscent of the Antichrist. However, the entire salvation history, as was mostly known to the audiences, confirmed from the beginning that this plan would never work out, so this devil's strategy, as frightening as it might be because of its operation of deception, easily appears as just laughable and a foolish attempt.

Better even, rounding off this hellish scenario, Lucifer concludes their convention with a speech in which he addresses an entirely different topic unrelated to the arrival of Christ and his threat for hell and its inhabitants. Remarkably, he warns people about the problems that a master might have with his servants and maids, which obviously applies to himself since he does not believe that his subordinate devils might achieve their goals or could be trustworthy. First, he comments that they would be rewarded for their efforts if they could make a nun to defecate before mass (935), a curious scatological formulation. But then he rattles off a list of complaints, warning the audience about their own households if the following condition were to prevail: the guardsman being deaf, a gatekeeper who does not get up early, a cellarer who cannot be trusted, a cook who cannot taste his own food, and a servant who would commit adultery with the master's wife. It is not clear why Lucifer formulates all those gravamina, but they comprise more or less all those issues that would normally vex ordinary people in the city.

The play itself is thus in danger of losing its focus, moving entirely away from the salvific account according to the biblical testimony, but the more those ordinary themes, motifs, concerns, worries, and fears enter the picture, the more the audience was apparently invited to laugh about the presentation. In many respects we can recognize here elements of the Shrovetide genre, until the choir of angels calls for silence (935) and another angel appears to Joseph in a dream, warning him about the danger resulting from King Herod's strategy to have all newborns killed (the Slaughter of the Innocents).

Joseph quickly prepares Mary for their departure, but he cannot even secure any provisions because he is afraid that people in the marketplace would attack and hit him on his head, the reasons not being fully explained. It would be better—and here we face yet another humorous feature—to send Mary's veil and his own hat to fetch some beer (936–37), a deliberately grotesque suggestion that must have triggered

laughter. But without further explaining this curious idea, perhaps playing with the option of masquerading some other people to stand in for themselves, Joseph suddenly turns to the audience and encourages them to join him in the tavern and to drink some beer with him (937), specifically leaving his stage role behind and thus destroying the intended theatrical illusion, which was the basis for communal comedy. Lucifer then appears one more time and repeats his warning about severe problems in one's household, including the wife sleeping with the servant.

The narrator finally intervenes and concludes by warning people about the devil, encouraging the audience to return to the same play the following year, while now would be the time to sing and dance around the manger (937), which Gerhard Wolf explains as an indication that during the performance of this play the contrast between everyday life and religious transcendence had been lifted. He means that the comedy performed within this Nativity play assures the spectators "daß die christliche Verheißung durch die Existenz menschlicher Schwächen nicht außer Kraft gesetzt wird" (171; that the Christian promise would not be undercut through the existence of human weaknesses).

It seems to be more important, however, that the humor of this play allows the audience to identify much more personally with the sacred events since they take place within ordinary village life. The world of hell proves to be entirely ineffectual, which facilitates further laughter among the audience. Even though the devils appear on the stage laughing loudly (932), in reality they are the object of public entertainment. The requests by the shepherds voiced while adoring the Christ child utterly remove the sacred aura and transform the scene in the shed into a site where common people are invited to formulate their basic instincts and desires irrespective of the spiritual setting. Ultimately, the *Hessisches Weihnachtsspiel* does not give vent to a disrespectful treatment of the Nativity itself but removes it from its traditional realm of holiness.

The holy family is simply one of them all, equally poor and almost despondent because they do not even have diapers for the baby; hence Joseph's decision to donate an old pair of pants (926).³¹ The devils try to play their usually threatening role, but it all boils down to rather ridiculous and meaningless proposals for how they might win over the Savior and gain more souls for their own pleasure. Joseph appears as a bumbling, insecure old man who needs the angels' help; he is surrounded by rambunctious maids and can barely keep the peace, and the entire setting invites the audience to enjoy the performance as entertainment, irrespective of the holy nature of the motif acted out here.³²

This and many other plays are not predicated on the deliberate contrasting of opposites, i.e., the sacred and the profane, as Katja Gvozdeva and Werner Röcke have already observed,³³ but rather on the integration of the ordinary into the sacred, creating a surprising and refreshing blend for the audience that ultimately makes it possible for the spectators to sympathize, to participate, and to share the suffering and joy of Christ the Savior because he appears to be an ordinary individual the audience can empathize with.

Erlauer Weihnachtsspiel

Normally, of course, neither the Nativity scene nor the Passion or the Easter scene lends itself to laughter and other forms of humor because of the serious religious message presented on the stage. In fact, the religious framework generally speaks a very different language, although there is also joy, such as when the Christ child is born or when the three virgins realize that Christ has risen from the dead. The question here, however, addresses the issue of how those holy moments were conveyed to the public in a strategic way to facilitate the religious instructions. The plays consist, of course, of dialogues, so there would be many opportunities to inject some deliberate misunderstandings or ironic comments.

After all, the appearance of the *numinosum* in the middle of ordinary human life like an epiphany has never been easy to come to terms with. If, however, the distant world of the New Testament could be connected with the world of late medieval urban or rural life in a realistic way, then the religious teaching could be relayed much more easily. In this regard, comic situations served a centrally important function.

One small but significant example can be found in the *Erlauer Weihnachtsspiel* in which the three Magi arrive at the court of King Herod and inform him about their goal to visit the Christ child.³⁴ He pretends to support their cause, and he even requests that they return to him later and inform him about the birthplace of the Savior. Soon thereafter he will launch his Massacre of the Infants, as is well known, but in this situation, we hear first about the ordinary need to get nourishment. One of Herod's courtiers, who later turns out to be the leader of the murderous group, Lappa, drastically brings it all down to the point by emphasizing how hungry he is and that he no longer wants to fast and is determined to set the table. Although he is in the presence of his own lord, King Herod, and of the three Magi, he thinks of nothing but to satisfy his

stomach, talking about a sausage or two that would appeal to him now most urgently. He also would not mind some wine, even though this would lead to his own drunkenness and hence silly talk (944). Laughter is thus thematized within the play while the figure causes laughter among the audience through his foolish talk. Food is more important than the Savior, whom Herod wants to kill anyway. The absurdity of the entire situation could not be more egregious, which underscores how much the poet intended his play to be predicated both on the sacred and the humorous. While the Magi represented the devout and pious people, Herod pretends to be a religiously minded ruler, but he later reveals his murderous instincts. Of course an angel alerts Joseph in time about the imminent danger, which allows the Holy Family to flee to Egypt and save their lives.

In the meantime, the knight Lappa reappears and carries out the king's command, perpetrating horrendous carnage among the infants in Bethlehem, which of course makes the audience choke out of horror. Nevertheless, even here, amidst the terrible slaughter, we are invited to laugh because one of Lappa's servants comments to him that he killed even a monk's child (951), revealing thus that the good man had transgressed his vows of celibacy and was thus punished badly, losing his own offspring in the bloody attack.

Even here, as part of a religious play, traditional anti-clericalism raises its head and invites the audience to laugh about the evil representatives of the late medieval clergy.³⁵ It might be very difficult to fathom the nature of the humor applied here, since it is still a gruesome situation, but the poet might have intended to imply that the audience would regard this ill fate for the poor child as justice after all since the monk had not obeyed his own celibacy oath and thus could not save himself from this personal suffering. Would that perhaps be a case of late medieval *Schadenfreude*?

Innsbrucker Osterspiel

If we combed through many other surviving plays, such as the *Innsbrucker Osterspiel* (Innsbruck Easter Play) from 1391, and focused on the various scenes where ordinary people enter the stage and interact with the central figures determining the Passion scenario, such as the merchant who is selling his salves to the three virgins, laughter erupts over and over again, inviting the audience to relax from time to time and to engage with the sacred moments in a more basic manner, allowing them

to contextualize the events and to situate themselves within the respective framework.³⁶

Here we encounter the intriguing list of sinners whom the master of all devils, Lucifer, hopes to collect after Christ had arrived and broken the harrows of hell. He charges his servants first to go to Avignon and to capture the pope, then the cardinals, patriarchs, and legates, that is, all those who have given evil advice to the people and would deserve to be condemned for eternity for their hypocrisy and vices.³⁷ The audience was probably invited to laugh about this development, beaming for joy that even the highest-ranking members of the clergy were subject to the devil's persecution and were now exposed in their holier-than-thou attitude. However, very quickly, Lucifer extends the list of other sinners whom he wants to assemble in hell, and here we learn very soon that he has virtually everyone in society in mind, including those belonging to the lowliest professions and even those women who do nothing but spread rumors: "klappermynnen" (36, 444).³⁸ While the social pattern proves to be rather traditional, and not at all funny, the narrative presentation here appears to be intended for comic relief, since no one is excepted, and all are in danger of getting into the devil's clutches.³⁹

All the souls who have finally arrived plead with Lucifer to grant them grace, but he does not pay attention and lets them simply confess their sinful behavior from the time while they had still been alive. As serious and terrifying as this all must have been for the mixed audience, seeing themselves represented on the stage, there is comic relief as well when a soul admits having been a male prostitute offering his service to many different women ("helser," 42, 500). When Lucifer recognizes who he is, he immediately instructs Satan to lead that soul away and keep him out of hell because otherwise they all would turn into bastards, meaning that the prostitute would sleep with the female inhabitants of hell and thus dishonor them.

The playwright does not explain the situation further and only indicates that the sinner had received payment for his service by virgins ("lot," 501; money) and married women ("brot," 502; bread). It remains unclear how the sexual joke was supposed to work, and how the devils could be regarded as bastards as a result of the young man's sexual activities, but Lucifer's fright underscores how much even in this situation laughter was supposed to break out over the master devil's fear that the sinner would continue doing his business even in hell. Insofar as the text here creates a kind of moral transgression, it does not come as a surprise that, immediately following, Satan leads the other sinners away, and one of the three Virgins appears and laments her sorrow.

From here the scene switches to the merchant from whom the three Marys will purchase the salve. Once again, comic interjection emerges here and underscores how much the playwright intended to cause laughter among the audience. The merchant is looking for a servant, whom he finds in a man called Rubin, who prides himself for a series of most evil talents, including his readiness to sleep with the merchant's wife (46). Shockingly, the merchant does not even object to the servant's intention to fool around and only asks that he would not have to witness it himself (50). He might be impotent, or gay, since he does not seem to care about his wife, but the crudeness of the sexual implications clearly serves to release the tension on the religious stage and allows the audience to enjoy a short moment of comic relief. After all, the merchant instructs Rubin to help him in his efforts to trick people out of their money (50), but when the servant calls out to the people, alerting them about his master's skills, he reveals, indirectly, that he is nothing but a quack.⁴⁰ He identifies him as the new Hippocrates who has seen the world and is a miracle creator in terms of medical issues (52). The entire scene quickly devolves into a burlesque of a drastic kind, with scatological jokes mixed in, so when the merchant asks Rubin whether he is pressing the roots in preparation for a medication, the latter responds that he is not doing that but instead is pressing donkeys' farts, which is predicated on the rhyming words "worze" (66; roots) and "fuerze" (68; farts).

After some time, filled with further verbal joking, the religious component reemerges, when the three women appear, asking for the salve. In an explicit allusion to Matt. 25, which addresses the five wise and the five foolish virgins, Rubin wonders about the group of women, asking why they are only three (76) and not five, whereupon the conversation focuses on the miraculous salve that the women want to purchase. While they lament their suffering over Christ's death and resort to the appellative "Heu" in their Latin statement, Rubin misunderstands them and reads the term not as "Oh dear" but as "hay," since "Heu" is also the German word for "hay" (80). The servant must have addressed the audience to make it laugh, whereas the maids approach the merchant and negotiate with him over the salve that they want to purchase. More rambunctious scenes follow, but eventually the play returns to the actual topic of the merchant selling his salve, although at an exorbitant price. Angels welcome the women, who explain once again the purpose of their visit, which thus proves to be very standard again in close conformity with other Easter plays. Finally Christ himself appears and makes himself known to the women. In addition, the

play concludes with further episodes of Christ appearing to the various apostles, including the incredulous Thomas (102–4), but there is nothing of the same humor anymore, especially because John then announces that they have all been redeemed from eternal death through Christ's intervention and his self-sacrifice (108).

Osterspiel von Muri and Wiener Osterspiel

In other Easter plays, such as the very early *Osterspiel von Muri* (middle of the thirteenth century), we observe another scene with the merchant, who sells his wares at prices that are too high, but there is no comedy implied, and the entire play retains its serious religious tone and content.⁴¹ We can observe, however, how easily late medieval playwrights could transform this scene with the merchant into an episode filled with deft humor, allowing the audience to break out in laughter even within the religious framework of Easter.⁴² The playwright of the Muri play sensed already the potential of the purchase scene, with the merchant demanding an excessive price, but he mostly passed it over, since the women are most anxious to get to the grave, so they pay whatever he is demanding and rush off (142).

Another but late example would be the *Wiener Osterspiel* from 1472,⁴³ where the merchant demonstrates a good and friendly mind, willing to hand over his salves even without payment, but he is then interrupted by his wife who bitterly intervenes and prevents him from gifting the ware to the virgins because she herself had prepared them the other night, working hard. She threatens the women with hitting them with her rope. Soon enough a bitter fight erupts between the merchant and his wife, which must have entertained the audience considerably, especially because she responds to his threats with meaningless but rhyming verses. He: "ich gebe euch eynen puff!" (102, 726; I will strike you), and she: "Dorte geth der monde uf!" (102, 727; here the moon is rising). The husband then tries to establish peace with his wife, which she rudely rejects. She would forgive him only if he were finally resting in his own grave, that is, dead (103), so he sees no other alternative but to depart from the land and to move to the Arabic world (103), certainly an absurd notion particularly at that time. The playwright, in his intention to entertain his audience through this grotesque scene, draws on the old topos of the *vetula*, which guaranteed him, even within the religious context, that his audience would break out in laughter.⁴⁴

Altogether, then, we can thus draw important conclusions about the presence of comedy even in the various religious plays as they emerged since the thirteenth century and developed extensively in the following centuries. However, nowhere do we observe that the holy moments, the sacred events, the biblical evocations, or the spiritual messages are undermined, belittled, or ridiculed. The authors closely followed the religious texts and only mixed them with individual scenes strongly reminiscent of ordinary people and ordinary situations. Both the world of the shepherds and of the merchants, or rather quacks, both the situation at a farm and at the market emerge here amidst the holy events of the Nativity or Easter.⁴⁵ The Passion plays do not seem to include any real humor, whereas the joy over Christ's birth and later his rise from death made it possible to incorporate comedy. Nowhere do we notice any attempt to predicate the laughter on crisis, on extreme situations, or on the experience of the absurd or the extraordinary. Modern theories on laughter do not operate well in the context of these religious plays and often tend to be constructs imposed on the medieval comedies. Instead, the religious component simply gains in weight because of the possibility to laugh about foolish and silly situations even in the framework of the sacred moment. In this way, the playwright brought the biblical account much more down to earth and made it digestible for a wider audience.

Other scholars such as Werner Röske wanted to recognize forms of mockery or satire at work in medieval works,⁴⁶ but the religious plays operate on a different level. Hell is no longer a place to be feared because Christ will break the harrow. The devils emerge as scared, foolish creatures who can no longer threaten people, and they deserve to be laughed at. We are also invited to laugh, not satirically or sarcastically, about and with the shepherds in their simplicity and innocence. The merchant and his rude servant are easily exposed as cheats, but they allow a brief respite from the drama with the three virgins rushing to Christ's grave. In fact, the element of laughter in all these plays indicates how much in late medieval public culture the devotion and piety had become matters for the stage where entertainment could be offered for the masses along with religious instruction. The often rather drastic and body-specific humor presented at particular moments indicated that even the holiest aspects could be perceived as happening within people's ordinary lives. The plays thus conveyed a sense of familiarity, happiness, and confidence, and this in the face of the ever-present fear of the afterlife.

Conclusion

After all, the Christian message was predicated on hope and provided confidence, so the plays could perform scary moments pertaining to eschatology, but laughter was permitted after all because the Christian message carried a profound promise of salvation. Laughter and comedy on the stage thus operated as significant catalysts for late medieval theology, appropriately prepared for the larger urban and other audiences. Similar phenomena could be observed in Latin plays from the late Middle Ages,⁴⁷ but those operated, due to their old learned tradition, on a more sophisticated level. While laughter does not seem to support the effort by the Church to intensify or reform people's religiosity, a global concern in the fifteenth century, the humorous scenes on stage underscored rather the opposite because the engendered laughter made it possible to carry the religious message directly home to the ordinary audience, especially in the urban setting, even though it tended to undermine the authority of the Church.⁴⁸

Notes

1. Elina Gertsman, ed., *Crying in the Middle Ages: Tears of History*, Routledge Studies in Medieval Religion and Culture (New York and London: Routledge, 2012); Jutta Eming, *Emotionen im "Tristan": Untersuchungen zu ihrer Paradigmatik*, Berliner Mittelalter- und Frühneuzeitforschung 20 (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2015); Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling: A History of Emotions, 600–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). Most curiously, there are also critics who claim that we cannot really learn much at all about the history of emotions because our sources refuse to relent such data. This tends to be more polemics than a fair assessment. An extreme example would be Rüdiger Schnell, *Haben Gefühle eine Geschichte? Aporien einer History of Emotions*, 2 vols. (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2015). The reviews have been consistently negative; see my own in *Mediaevistik* 29 (2016): 361–64. For a positive review, however, see Armin Nolzen, August 2017, who contradicts himself by insisting that good scholarship should be "sine ira et studio," and yet then observes this at work in Schnell's work, which he strongly approves of; see online at: <http://literaturkritik.de/schnell-haben-gefuehle-eine-geschichte-leidenschaft-schreibens-ueber-ruediger-schnells-streitschrift-wider-history-of-emotions,23418.html> (last accessed 8 Feb. 2018).
2. Werner Röske and Helga Neumann, eds., *Komische Gegenwelten: Lachen und Literatur in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit* (Paderborn, Munich, et al.: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1999); Stefan Seeber, *Poetik des Lachens: Untersuchungen zum mittelhochdeutschen Roman um 1200*, Münchener Texte und Untersuchungen zur deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters 140 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010); Hans Rudolf Velten, *Scurrilitas: Das Lachen, die Komik und der Körper in Literatur und Kultur des Spätmittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit* (Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto, 2017), 268–77.

3. Christiane Ackermann and Michael Egerding, *Literatur- und Kulturtheorien in der Germanistischen Mediävistik: Ein Handbuch* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2015); Ralph Frenken, *Gefesselte Kinder: Geschichte und Psychologie des Wickelns* (Badenweiler: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Bachmann, 2011); Jürgen Kühnel, ed., *Psychologie in der Mediävistik: gesammelte Beiträge des Steinheimer Symposions*, Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik 431 (Göppingen; Kümmerle, 1985).
4. Abram Ring, ed., trans, and intro., *Waltharius*, Dallas Medieval Texts and Translations 22 (Leuven, Paris, and Bristol: Peeters, 2016); cf. Dominique Bertrand, *Dire le rire à l'âge classique: représenter pour mieux contrôler* (Aix-en-Provence: Université de Provence, 1995); Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg, eds., *A Cultural History of Humour: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press; Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997); Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997); Sebastian Coxon, *Laughter and Narrative in the Later Middle Ages: German Comic Tales, 1350–1525*, *Legenda* (Leeds: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2008); Katja Gvozdeva and Werner Röcke, eds., “*risus sacer—sacrum risibile*”: *Interaktionsfelder von Sakralität und Gelächter im kulturellen und historischen Wandel*, Publikationen zur Zeitschrift für Germanistik. Neue Folge 20 (Bern, Berlin: Peter Lang, 2009); Albrecht Classen, ed., *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Epistemology of a Fundamental Human Behavior, Its Meaning, and Consequences*, *Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture* 5 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010); Per Förmegård, Mia Åkestam, and Gunnel Engwall, eds., *Tears, Sighs and Laughter: Expressions of Emotions in the Middle Ages*, *Konferenser* 92 (Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, 2017); for irony, see Gerd Althoff and Christel Meier, *Ironie im Mittelalter: Hermeneutik—Dichtung—Politik* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2011); Christian Kuhn and Stefan Biebenecker, eds., *Valenzen des Lachens in der Vormoderne (1250–1750)*, *Bamberger Historische Studien* 8 (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2012); Albrecht Classen, “Irony in Medieval and Early Modern German Literature (Nibelungenlied, Mauritius von Craün, Johannes von Tepl’s Ackermann): The Encounter of the Menschlich-Allzumenschlich in a Medieval Context,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 113, no. 2 (2014): 184–205.
5. Albrecht Classen, “Sex on the Stage in an Early Medieval Convent: Hrotsvita of Gandersheim. A Tenth-Century Convent Playwright’s Successful Struggle against the Roman Terence,” *Orbis Litterarum* 65, no. 3 (2010): 167–200; Albrecht Classen, “Performance, Orality, and Communication in Medieval Women’s Convents in Light of the Plays of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim,” in *Understanding Monastic Practices of Oral Communication (Western Europe, Tenth–Thirteenth Centuries)*, ed. Steven Vanderputten, *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2011), 231–43; Wolfgang Maaz, “Das Lachen der Frauen vor des Teufels Küche: Ridicula bei Hrotsvita von Gandersheim,” in *Komische Gegenwelten*, ed. Röcke and Neumann (1999), 133–54.
6. Philippe Ménard, *Le rire et le sourire dans le roman courtois en France au moyen âge: (1150–1250)*, *Publications romanes et françaises* 105 (Geneva: Droz, 1969); Klaus Stierstorfer, “Markers of Transition: Laughter in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*,” *Chaucer Review* 14 (1999): 18–37; Jean Verdon, *Rire au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Perrin, 2001).
7. Albrecht Classen, “Angst vor dem Tod: Jämmerliche Männerfiguren in der deutschen Literatur des Spätmittelalters (von *Mauritius von Craün* zu

- Heinrich Kaufringer und Till Eulenspiegel),” in *Jenseits: Eine mittelalterliche und mediävistische Imagination: Interdisziplinäre Ansätze zur Analyse des Unerklärlichen*, ed. Christa Agnes Tuczay, Beihefte zur Mediävistik 21 (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2016), 213–31; Martha Bayless, “Laughter in a Deadly Context: *Le Sacristain*, *Maldon*, *Troilus*, *Merlin*,” in *Tears, Sighs and Laughter*, ed. Förmegård, Åkestam, and Engwall (2017), 153–65.
8. Mia Åkestam, “‘I Felt Like Jumping for Joy’—Smile and Laughter in Medieval Imagery,” in *Tears, Sighs and Laughter*, ed. Förmegård, Åkestam, and Engwall (2017), 214–38.
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 11. Birgit Beine, *Der Wolf in der Kutte: Geistliche in den Mären des deutschen Mittelalters*, Braunschweiger Beiträge zur deutschen Sprache und Literatur 2 (Bielefeld: Verlag für Regionalgeschichte, 1999).
 12. Klaus Kipf, “Lachte das Mittelalter anders? Relative Alterität und kognitive Kontinuität komischer Strukturen in Schwank Erzählungen des 13.–15. Jahrhunderts,” in *Wie anders war das Mittelalter? Fragen an das Konzept der Alterität*, ed. Manuel Braun, *Aventiuren* 9 (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2013), 233–63.
 13. Wim Verbaal, “Bernard’s Smile and the Conversion of Laughter,” in *Tears, Sighs and Laughter*, ed. Förmegård, Åkestam, and Engwall (2017), 193–214.
 14. Olle Ferm, “Laughter and the Medieval Church,” in *Tears, Sighs and Laughter*, ed. Förmegård, Åkestam, and Engwall (2017), 167–81; see also Karl-Josef Kuschel, “Christus hat nie gelacht: Überlegungen zu einer Theologie des Lachens,” in *Vom Lachen: Einem Phänomen auf der Spur*, ed. Thomas Vogel, *Attempto Studium Generale* (Tübingen: Attempto, 1996), 106–28.
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- S.: Max Niemeyer, 1920); Michael Gebhardt and Max Siller, ed., *Vigil Raber: Zur 450. Widerkehr seines Todesjahres. Akten des 4. Symposiums der Sterzinger Osterspiele* (25.–27. 3. 2002), Schlern-Schriften 326 (Innsbruck: Universitätsverlag Wagner, 2004); Edelgard E. DuBruck, *Aspects of Fifteenth-Century Society in the German Carnival Comedies*, Studies in Russian and German 8 (Lewiston, Queenston, and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1993).
19. Eduard Hartl, ed., *Das Drama des Mittelalters: Sein Wesen und sein Werden. Osterfeiern*, Deutsche Literatur. Drama des Mittelalters 1 (Leipzig: Philipp Reclam jun., 1937); Richard Froning, ed., *Das Drama des Mittelalters*, part 3, *Passionsspiele. Weihnacht- und Dreikönigsspiele. Fasnachtsspiele*, Deutsche National-Litteratur. Historisch-kritische Ausgabe 14, no. 3 (Stuttgart: Union Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft, 1964).
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 21. Hans Rupprich, *Die deutsche Literatur vom späten Mittelalter bis zum Barock*, part 1, *Das ausgehende Mittelalter, Humanismus und Renaissance 1370–1520*, Geschichte der deutschen Literatur von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart 4, no. 1 (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1970), 236–72.
 22. Thomas Cramer, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur im späten Mittelalter* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1990), 219–30; *Die deutschen Weltgerichtsspiele des späten Mittelalters: synoptische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Hansjürgen Linke (Tübingen: Francke, 2002).
 23. <http://orka.bibliothek.uni-kassel.de/viewer/image/1297867538230/9> (last accessed 8 Feb. 2018). See now Schulze Ursula, *Geistliche Spiele im Mittelalter und in der Frühen Neuzeit: Von der liturgischen Feier zum Schauspiel. Eine Einführung* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2012), 75–77.
 24. Richard Froning, ed., *Das Drama des Mittelalters*, part 1, *Die lateinischen Osterfeiern und ihre Entwicklung in Deutschland. Osterspiele. Passionsspiele*, Deutsche National-Litteratur. Historisch kritische Ausgabe 14, no. 1 (Stuttgart: Union Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft, n.y.), 904–37; Klaus Vogelgsang, "Dona Infernalis. Die Teufelsszene des 'Hessischen Weihnachtsspiels,'" in *Forschungen zur deutschen Literatur des Spätmittelalters. Eine Festschrift für Johannes Janota*, ed. Horst Brunner and Werner Williams-Krapp (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2003), 233–54.
 25. For a convenient access, one can also draw from the slightly adjusted modernized version, online at: <http://www.staff.uni-giessen.de/~g91159/dokumente/HESSE.pdf> (last accessed 8 Feb. 2018).
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 27. *Die lateinischen Osterfeiern und ihre Entwicklung*, ed. Froning (n.y.), 62, 57–60.
 28. Piroska Nagy, "The Power of Medieval Emotions and Change: From Theory to Some Unexpected Uses of Spiritual Texts," in *Tears, Sighs and Laughter*, ed. Förmegård, Åkestam, and Engwall (2017), 13–30, here 21.

29. Alice K. Turner, *The History of Hell* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994); *Himmel, Hölle, Fegefeuer: Das Jenseits im Mittelalter*, ed. Peter Jezler, 2nd rev. ed. (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1994); Peter Dinzelsbacher, *Himmel, Hölle, Heilige: Visionen und Kunst im Mittelalter* (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 2002); Andrew McCall, *The Medieval Underworld*, Sutton History Classics (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2004); Alan E. Bernstein, *Hell and Its Rivals: Death and Retribution among Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).
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31. Josef de Coo, "Das Josefshosenmotiv im Weihnachtslied und in der bildenden Kunst," *Jahrbuch für Volksliedforschung* 11 (1966): 58–89.
32. Walter Haug, "Das Komische und das Heilige: Zur Komik in der religiösen Literatur des Mittelalters," in id., *Strukturen als Schlüssel zur Welt: Kleine Schriften zur Erzählliteratur des Mittelalters* (1982; Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1989), 257–74. Haug does not address the *Hessische Weihnachtsspiel* and focuses mostly on the various Easter plays, but he concludes, "im Komischen dramatisiert und radikalisiert sich die Erfahrung von der spielerischen Setzung aller Entwürfe, in denen der Mensch sich selbst übersteigt" (274). This seems to be an excessively abstract and theory-driven concept that ultimately ignores the fundamental significance of laughter in the first place, humanizing human beings.
33. Gvozdeva und Röcke "risus sacer—sacrum risibile" (2009), 17–19.
34. Bernd Neumann, "Erlauer Spiele," in *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters: Verfasserlexikon*, ed. Kurt Ruh et al., 2nd rev. and expanded ed., vol. 2 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1978), cols. 592–99; Schulze, *Geistliche Spiele im Mittelalter* (2012). The *Erlauer Spiel* has recently been translated into English, which I noticed only recently. *The Erlau Playbook: Five Medieval German Dramas for Christmas and Easter*, trans. with an intro. and commentary by Stephen K. Wright, *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies* 511 (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2017). Wright lists all the earlier editions, especially by Froning (*Das Drama des Mittelalters*) and Hartl (*Das Drama des Mittelalters*), which he rightly identifies as extremely problematic.
35. Peter A. Dykema and Heiko A. Oberman, eds., *Anticlericalism in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, *Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought* 51 (Leiden, New York, and Cologne: Brill, 1993); Beine, *Der Wolf in der Kutte* (1999).
36. Manfred Brauneck, *Die Welt als Bühne: Geschichte des europäischen Theaters*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart and Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 1993), 364–69; Johan Nowé, "Wir wollen haben ein spil": *Zur Geschichte des Dramas im deutschen Mittelalter: Darstellung und Anthologie* (Acco, Leuven, and Amersfoort: Academische Cooperatief, 1997), 42–52.
37. *Das Innsbrucker Osterspiel. Das Osterspiel von Muri*, *Mittelhochdeutsche und Neuhochdeutsche*. Herausgegeben, übersetzt, mit Anmerkungen und einem Nachwort versehen von Rudolf Meier (1962; Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 1970), 34; Rudolf Höpfner, *Untersuchungen zu dem Innsbrucker, Berliner und Wiener Osterspiel* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1977). Cf. now Schulze, *Geistliche Spiele*

- in *Mittelalter* (2012), 60–65. She notes the comic elements, which she associates with the genre of the *Schwank*, but she does not reflect further on the relevance of comedy in the first place.
38. This is, of course, the same concept as can be observed in many stone tympanoi depicting the Day of Judgment, and in contemporary literary documents, such as *Des Teufels Netz*; see Classen, “Death, Sinfulness, the Devil, and the Clerical Author” (2016); Åkestam, “‘I Felt Like Jumping for Joy’—Smile and Laughter in Medieval Imagery,” in *Tears, Sighs and Laughter*, ed. Förmegård, Åkestam, and Engwall (2017).
 39. Rolf Max Kulli, *Die Ständesatire in den deutschen geistlichen Schauspielen des ausgehenden Mittelalters*, Basler Studien zur deutschen Sprache und Literatur 31 (Bern: Francke, 1966).
 40. Albrecht Classen, “Die Figur des Arztes in den spätmittelalterlichen Fastnachtspielen,” *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 47, no. 3 (2012): 429–42.
 41. *Das Innsbrucker Osterspiel*, ed. Rudolf Meier (1962/1970); Christian Haller, ed., *Das Osterspiel von Muri: Urtext, Spielfassung, Materialien* (Baden: Baden-Verlag, 1994); cf. Schulze, *Geistliche Spiele im Mittelalter* (2012), 56–60.
 42. Cornelia Herberichs, “Plädoyer für den Mercator: zur hermeneutischen Funktion der Salbenkauf-Szene in bildlichen Darstellungen des Mittelalters, im lateinischen Osterspiel sowie im ‘Osterspiel von Muri,’” in *Liturgie und Literatur: historische Fallstudien*, ed. Cornelia Herberichs, *Lingua Historica Germanica* 10 (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), 235–85.
 43. Eduard Hartl, *Das Drama des Mittelalters: Osterspiele*, ed. Eduard Hartl, *Deutsche Literatur: Drama des Mittelalters* 2 (Leipzig: Philipp Reclam jun., 1937); *Das Wiener Osterspiel: Abdruck der Handschrift und Leseausgabe*, ed. Hans Blosen, *Texte des späten Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit* 33 (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1979).
 44. Gretchen Mieszkowski, “Old Age and Medieval Misogyny: The Old Woman,” in *Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Interdisciplinary Approaches to a Neglected Topic*, ed. Albrecht Classen, *Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture* 2 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 299–319; Karen Pratt, “*De vetula*: The Figure of the Old Woman in Old French Literature,” in id. (2007), 321–42.
 45. For the *Neidhart* plays and Shrovetide plays, see Velten, *Scurrilitas* (2017); see now also Andrea Gafestätter, “Die Neidhartspiele,” in *Neidhart und die Neidhart-Lieder: Ein Handbuch*, ed. Margarete Springeth and Franz-Viktor Spechtler (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2017), 353–73.
 46. Werner Röcke, “Heiliger Spott: Lachende Überlegenheit und Glaubensgewissheit in der Literatur der Spätantike und des Mittelalters,” in Gvozdeva and Röcke, “*risus sacer—sacrum risibile*” (2009), 31–46.
 47. Fidel Rädle, “Komik im lateinischen Theater des Frühen Neuzeit,” in *Ut granum sinapis: Essay on Neo-Latin Literature in Honour of Jozef Ijsewijn*, ed. Gilbert Tournoy and Dirk Sacré (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1997), 309–23.
 48. Ferm, “Laughter and the Medieval Church,” in *Tears, Sighs and Laughter*, ed. Förmegård, Åkestam, and Engwall (2017).

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