

Caught in the (One-)Act: Staging Sex in Late Medieval French Farce

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Part I: ForePlays

Among the myriad subjects for comical delectation of audiences of late medieval France, the rules and roles of men and women were eternal favorites.¹ Gender warplay in the farces, moralities and sermons joyeux that were occasionally intercalated into large theatrical presentations served as a kind of foreplay for the larger, meatier productions displaying the passions of sundry saviors, saints, and martyrs.² Often the genderbending urban legends that were *fabliaux* and *nouvelles* were transformed into comic theatre, as in the story of the ‘Galant qui a fait le coup’.³ In the farce based on this tale, a husband tricks his aging wife, just back from pilgrimage, into letting him sleep with her chambermaid by himself feigning pregnancy.⁴ Virtually all of these were domestic farces

¹ The plays studied here are delimited to those from 1450 to 1550, following the Tissier editions of French farces. For an introduction to some of the themes of farce, see Barbara Bowen, *Les caractéristiques essentielles de la farce française* (Urbana, IL: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1964), pp. 25-35. In addition, the first volume of Faivre’s edition of farces of this era specifically groups together those plays with comical male-female confrontations and is subtitled “La Guerre des sexes.” See Bernard Faivre, *Les Farces: Moyen Age et Renaissance* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1997), vol. I. I am also indebted to a groundbreaking work in this area by André Tissier, given at this very colloquium 30 years ago and published in the 1983 *Atti Del IV Colloquio della SITM*: “Evocation et représentation scénique de l’acte sexual dans l’ancienne farce française” (pp. 521-547).

² In addition to Petit de Julleville’s catalogue of performances composed of different genres, André Tissier, in his introduction to the anthology of late medieval farces, provides a short summary of some of the most well-documented instances. See Petit de Julleville, *Répertoire du théâtre comique en France au moyen-âge* (Paris: Léopold Cerf, 1886), pp. 321-402. See also *Recueil de Farces (1450-1550)*, ed. by André Tissier, XII vols, (Genève: Droz, 1986-98), I (1986), pp. 46-50.

³ See L. Petit de Julleville, *La comédie et les mœurs en France au moyen âge* (Paris: Léopold Cerf, 1886), pp. 54-56. Tissier follows a 1610 edition in assigning the title of this anonymous play. See *Le galant qui a fait le coup*, in Tissier, *Recueil VI* (1990), pp. 314-18.

⁴ This issue has renewed relevancy in the light of recent medical developments in artificial womb design and transplantation, raising the (remote) possibility of “pregnant men.” See William Saletan’s column “Human Nature: Science, technology, and life” for 1/19/07 and 7/27/07 in the online magazine *Slate* (<http://slate.com>) for a more thorough discussion of this trend. See also Roberto Zapperi, *The Pregnant Man* (Chur, Switzerland/ New York: Harwood Academic Press, 1991) for a thorough analysis of this motif in folklore, literature, and art.

which humorously depicted gender through stereotypical sex roles and behavior,⁵ representations which might be akin to those found in modern Western sitcoms such as *Married...with Children* and *Fawlty Towers*. It is evident that the mostly anonymous (with some notable exceptions) playwrights of late medieval and early modern French domestic farce were, so to speak, intimately aware of how well sexual situations and suggestive dialogue worked on their stages. Both recognizably realistic and humorously improbable, sexually charged characters and ribald predicaments are among the best tools in the comic performance toolkit, then and now.⁶

I know this well, in theory and from experience. For nearly twenty-five years I've staged several dozen late medieval / early modern French farces, honing my craft in directing comedy, nabbing actors that are willing to work for little pay and outside the regular Hollywood venues. I always use my own translations, usually in octosyllabic rhyme, that strive to catch both the medieval spirit and a hint of the contemporary moment. Sexual encounters are often, though not always, the point of these very short, very funny, quite portable plays. With my ad-hoc theatre troupe *Les enfants sans abri*, I have undertaken numerous productions in which characters hint at sex, toy with it, allude to it.⁷ But somehow, I'd always make sure the characters pulled back from the brink before the deed was done. I was a good girl; I never went all the way.

⁵ I am aware of at least one arguable exception, the *sermon joyeux Saint Jambon et Sainte Andouille*, which seems to allude to a homosexual encounter: a *verd gallant* shirks his duties to women, steals Sister Sausage (the phallic image that impregnates women) and "translates" Brother Ham (a possible allusion to anal sex) to another place. This interpretation is not definitive; the text's editor reads the passage as a political allegory. See *Quatre sermons joyeux*, ed. by Jelle Koopmans (Genève: Droz, 1984), pp. 27-31, 47-56.

⁶ Recent smash Broadway plays highly charged with sexual under (and over) tones include *Avenue Q*, *Book of Mormon*, and *Venus in Furs*.

⁷ My website lists the most salient performances, including an early few which I did not direct.
www.lesenfanssansabri.com

The Tinker was one my earliest forays into theatrical titillation.⁸ In this medieval farce, an itinerant tinker wanders into the midst of a domestic battle royale, in which neither husband nor wife will speak first or lose their bet. This appeals to the playful spirit of the handyman, and he makes hay while the sun shines, seeing how far he can go both in humiliating the husband and being frisky with the wife before someone says something. He gets amazingly far. In my production, he fondles her fore and aft, subtly, then not so subtly, then lays her down on a bench. He is about to jump on top of her when the outraged husband tells him to knock it off (it appears part of the joke that the husband has to do so with WORDS, rather than merely cuffing the fellow in silence). Several years later, I produced *The Miller Whose Soul Went to Hell*, in which the ailing miller's wife flirts outrageously with the priest, who returns the favor: "A thousand times I'll make you howl," he tells her, as the husband writhes in pain from what turns out to be merely a devilishly bad case of constipation.⁹ I had them caress a few times--though because both were standing, some of the positions were rather gymnastic--in full view of the husband, who they presumed was on his way out and in no position to challenge them. But true fornication was for all intents and purposes only envisioned.

This "limited licentiousness" was also used in my staging of the play *Master Morton The Scholar*. In this farce, the credulous would-be Latin clerk Morton makes scandalously explicit propositions—in equally scandalously bad Latin—to his bride-to-be: "Ars longa, vita brevis / How I wish we were in beddus!"¹⁰ At several points the pair must be physically separated by Ma and Pa In Law, who want nuptial closure before the

⁸ Anonymous, *Le chauldronnier*, found in Tissier, *Recueil* III (1988), pp. 81-115.

⁹ *The Miller Whose Soul Went To Hell*, copyright 1991 Sharon D. King. The original anonymous work is *Le meunier de qui le diable emporte l'âme en enfer*, in Tissier, *Recueil* IV (1989), pp. 169-243.

¹⁰ *Master Morton the Scholar*, copyright 1989 Sharon D. King. The original anonymous work is *Maître Mimin étudiant*, in Tissier, *Recueil* III (1988), pp. 215-272.

couple proceeds with connubial bliss. And in *The Pilgrimage to Her Holiness, Saint Blabbermouth*, I actually interpolated a scene, mindful of the extracurricular activities evoked on the pilgrim route à la the Wife of Bath.¹¹ The wife in Blabbermouth, who is in need of a cure from her ailment of being suddenly stricken dumb—about which she speaks without ceasing—sets off to the shrine of the eponymous saint. Despite her protestations, her jealous husband insists on accompanying her. When she strays from the route, ostensibly to do her necessity, she attempts to have an illicit quickie rendezvous with a male passerby. Alas, her tryst is cut short by the infuriated husband, who literally drags her back onto the straight and narrow. All of this was done very fast, with no additional dialogue; the audience ate it up.¹² In other plays, such as *Martin de Cambrai*, the woman and the priest her lover flirt, tease, and all but eat each other up...but strictly with words. Whatever hanky-panky goes on takes place offstage.

But among the farces that DO go there, there was a subgenre of medieval French farce I'd never attempted to stage but which had long intrigued me. These plays were relatively unexplored in terms of modern staging, and potentially very amusing. I knew less about them than I liked. So I did my homework....

Part II: A Part For Her (W)hole

This subgenre was the dual-track metaphorical representations of male-female gendering and sexual activity that, on one level, were blushingly explicit. Farces such as *Raoullet Ployart*, *Les femmes qui font écurer leurs chauldrons* (aka *Les femmes et le chauldronnier*), *Le ramonneur de cheminées*, *Les chambrières qui vont à la messe de*

¹¹ Anonymous, *Le grand voyage et pèlerinage de Sainte Caquette*, in Tissier, *Recueil II* (1987), pp. 17-72.

¹² Sometimes the invented “bit” or *lazzo*, as they would say in *commedia dell’arte*, turns out to be the funniest or most memorable part of the play. But that’s a subject for another paper....

cinq heures pour avoir de l'eau beniste and *Les femmes qui font renbourer leur bas*¹³

shamelessly exhibited walking and talking (plowing, stuffing, chimneysweeping, sprinkling) metaphors of male and female sexuality. Men were signified by their private parts that were in turn represented by generally mundane if phallic objects such as brooms, plows, or spades; in turn they were also the workmen operating these tools. Concave items, such as chimneys, stockings, vineyard furrows, and cauldrons evoked woman's "present absence,"¹⁴ which of course stood for the whole woman, though women were also shown as the proprietors of these things.¹⁵ Through these extended and literally embodied metaphors,¹⁶ the farces described (and the characters to some extent probably mimed¹⁷) human sexual behavior in a panoply of ways, including different types of participation (actor, actor-observer, observer, with other possibilities alluded to) and alternative practices that might still shock audiences today.

These dual-level plays presented real challenges to most 19th- and 20th-century editors and critics. Not only were they considered scandalous; they were not even seen as comical. Petit de Julleville dismissed *Les femmes et le chaudronnier* as literally unsavoury, a mere "parade grossière et depourvue de toute espèce de sel"; *Les*

¹³ With the exception of *Les femmes qui font écurer leur chaudrons* and *Raoullet Ployart*, I retain the original spelling and titles of these texts.

¹⁴ With deference, as well as *différance*, to Jacques Derrida.

¹⁵ One can (for good or ill) make a comparison to the genital/spatial correlations noted by psychologist Erik H. Erikson in his book *Childhood and Society*. In the subchapter "Genital Modes and Spatial Modalities," Erikson discussed a University of California study of children's tendencies in playing with building blocks, which seem to parallel the morphology of sex organs. Boys tended towards making high, towerlike (dare one say phallic?) structures, while girls constructed static interiors that had an opening and closing. See *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1963), pp. 97-108.

¹⁶ I differentiate these character / metaphors in farces involving representation on more than one level from the outright allegories involving body parts asserting various degrees of independence (and demanding respect, such as M. le Cul in *Les cinq sens de l'homme*). Obviously, however, the two genres are related.

¹⁷ For the most part these plays contain virtually no stage directions; the characters' interchange, however, often gives an idea of onstage action. In his prefaces to the editions of several farces (including *Raoullet Ployart*, *Les femmes qui font écurer leurs chaudrons*, and *Le rammoneur de cheminées*), Tissier makes some very plausible conjectures as to how they might have been staged.

chambrières qui vont à la messe was deemed appropriate only for the rabble: “Parade très grossière telle que les bateleurs les offraient à la plus vile populace.”¹⁸ Gustave Cohen in 1949 concurred with his earlier colleague in considering them mere elongated forms of “équivoques grossières,”¹⁹ vulgar puns unworthy of analysis. At best they were deemed clumsy and hard to parse.²⁰ Modern scholars such as André Tissier have only begun to unpack the richness of linguistic humor—albeit of a most ribald nature—in these texts.²¹ It must be noted that the plays of this type are shorter than the standard farce length by about a third to a half, suggesting that the writers knew that once the audience got the joke, their interest could not be sustained for too long.²² Still, the subgenre’s substantial representation in the extant literature²³ testifies to its popularity; people of the 15th and 16th centuries evidently found this subgenre with its multi-level banter both entertaining and worthy of imitation.

¹⁸ Petit de Julleville, *Répertoire du théâtre comique*, p. 133; p. 118.

¹⁹ Petit de Julleville in like manner found little of worth to be had in Pierre Gringoire’s farce *Raoullet Ployart*: “la pièce est fort libre et toute en équivoques grossières” (*Répertoire*, 226). Cohen was similarly dismissive of *Le ramonneur de cheminées*: “un dialogue plein d’équivoques grossières.” Cohen’s evaluation of *Les femmes qui font renbourer leur bas* was virtually identical: “Farce qui n’est qu’un tissu d’équivoques grossières sur l’expression mentionnée dans le titre.” See Cohen, *Recueil de farces françaises inédites du XVe siècle* (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1949), pp. xv-xvi.

²⁰ Petit de Julleville described *Le ramonneur de cheminées* as a “farce obscure et grossière” (*Répertoire*, 225); similarly, the sizzingly salacious *sermon joyeux Saint Jambon et Sainte Andouille* was deemed simply an “inepte facétie” (*Répertoire*, p. 288).

²¹ See Tissier, *Raoullet Ployart*, in *Recueil II* (1987), pp. 241-52. Such scholarly focus is truly a recent change; even renowned medieval scholar Halina Lewicka, writing in the 1970s, noted that these “farces grivoises... basées sur la confusion constante du sens figuré et du sens propre de métaphores érotiques” were abstractions created from “associations scabreuses.” See Lewicka, *Etudes sur l’ancienne farce française* (Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1974), p. 69.

²² In teaching these works as medieval pop culture, I compare them to *Love, American Style* skits (usually 10- to 15-minute segments) rather than regular half-hour sitcoms. Standard domestic farces ran from about 400 to 600 lines; the five plays discussed in this analysis run from 178 to 341 lines in total (*Les femmes qui font renbourer leur bas*, 178; *Les chambrières*, 248, *Les femmes qui font écurer*, 282; *Raoullet*, 300; *Le ramonneur*, 335/341).

²³ Medieval farces which either are based on or contain elements of the erotic double-entendre (though sometimes less cleverly developed or not as well articulated as those in this study) include *Une femme qui demande les arrérages à son mari*, *Les femmes qui vendent amourettes en gros et en détail*, *La femme à qui son voisin baille une clystère*, *Pernet qui va au vin*, *Le paté*, *Le faulconnier de ville*, and *Le couturier, son valet, deux jeunes filles, et une vieille*.

Before discussing how I staged my play, I want to give a brief close analysis of five representative examples reexamining these marginalized plays in light of their means to humorous ends,²⁴ with the aim of restoring them to the canon of comedy, both then and now. Humor, as sociologist Michael Mulkey has articulated, arises from the juxtaposition of two incongruous or incompatible frames,²⁵ an incongruity that is suddenly perceived to be made congruous. The ambiguity—the “contrast, contradiction, and incongruity” that constitutes the joke—must register in the mind of the audience at the same time as the connection is made.²⁶ Additionally, no small measure of comedy emerges, as Henri Bergson described it, from the *mechanical* element that is present in (presumably organic) human behavior: “the attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine.”²⁷ The more precisely the images of person and machine—here, of person and tool or implement—“fit into each other,” he noted, “the more striking[...] the comic effect.”²⁸

These two aspects of comedy together describe the representative shorthand that constitutes the embodied metaphors of this late medieval subgenre. The humor arises from the audience’s apprehension of one metaphorical frame of reference, the human being, and another, the tool, operating simultaneously. The characters-as-parts are

²⁴ Again, the volumes undertaken by André Tissier have already begun this process, as did the discussion of the plays in Faivre’s handy anthology of farce summaries. See Bernard Faivre, *Répertoire de farces françaises des origines à Tabarin* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1993).

²⁵ Also called bisociation, this analysis has been well codified by Mulkey but also put forth by other theorists of comedy before him: Koestler, Fry, Douglas, Suls, Paulos, Raskin. See Michael Mulkey, *On Humour: Its Nature and Place in Modern Society* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1988), pp. 26-27, pp. 29-34.

²⁶ Mulkey, p. 34.

²⁷ Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, ‘IV: The Comic Element in Movements’. Trans. C. Brereton and F. Rothwell. In *Comedy*, ed. by Wylie Sypher (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), p. 79.

²⁸ Bergson, *Laughter*, in *Comedy*, p. 80.

hilariously conflated, truncated versions of humanity,²⁹ distanced from reality but still recognizable.³⁰ Male and female figures emerge paradoxically as less than human (being reduced to objects or job roles),³¹ and more, being presented to their audiences at once as onstage character, sexual symbol, and emblem of masculinity or femininity. Sex is front and center in these plays, both in a suggestive, titillating way evocative of real (if often illicit) human contact, and in an abstract, non-realistic way—as a mere function of tools or appliances—that only serves to further emphasize its presence and significance.³² This should come as no surprise: as Mulkey notes, comedy has long granted license to speak of sexual taboos and other topics not easily dealt with in a serious mode.³³ The embodied metaphors of this subgenre provided an excellent comic vehicle for engaging the subject, addressing the human desire for sexual congress—heteronormative sexual congress,

²⁹ Fragmented bodies that were yet whole was certainly not a new concept in the Middle Ages, as Caroline Walker Bynum has noted (vis-à-vis the cult of saints and their disassembled body parts that still presented an intact body): “In thirteenth- and fourteenth-century saints’ lives, synecdoche is more than a figure of speech; metonymy becomes miracle.” See Caroline Walker Bynum, “Continuity, Survival, and Resurrection” in *Fragmentation and Redemption* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), p. 285.

³⁰ The simultaneous distancing and pulling together would seem to be in keeping with Paul Ricoeur’s “tensionnel” view of the functioning of metaphor: “Le ‘est’ métaphorique signifie à la fois ‘n’est pas’ et ‘est comme’.” Paul Ricoeur, *La Métaphore Vive* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975), p. 11.

³¹ Since both men and women characters are reduced to functional male and female parts, this would seem to restore some degree of (imbalanced) balance to the sexes during this period. In Judith Butler’s reading of Plato’s cosmogony in the *Timaeus* (in response to Luce Irigaray), it is only the feminine that is a receptacle, a “shapeless non-thing”: “And as nurse, mother, womb, the feminine is synecdochally collapsed into a set of figural functions.” Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 53.

³² Again, the process seems complex: “[...] the Metaphor, though shorter than the Simile, usually makes the mind do *more work*; on the other hand, the mind is rendered *more able to do work* [...] because it is *stimulated* to exertion.” Arnold Tomkins, quoted in Dale Pesmen, “Reasonable and Unreasonable Worlds: Some Expectations of Coherence in Culture Implied by the Prohibition of Mixed Metaphor,” in *Beyond Metaphor: The Theory of Tropes in Anthropology*, ed. by James Fernandez (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 234.

³³ Mulkey, pp. 120-121. Other theoreticians of comedy also note that sexual humor more serves the end of religion and morality than the utter banishment of all carnal references from social discourse. See T. G. A. Nelson, *Comedy: The Theory of Comedy in Literature, Drama, and Cinema* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1990), p. 14.

admittedly—as an issue of utility, an everyday household necessity. It is a mode that has pop-culture parallels to this day.³⁴

Probably the best known play within this subgenre is Pierre Gringoire's 1512 Mardi Gras play *Raoullet Ployart*.³⁵ Performed at Les Halles in Paris along with three other of his short works,³⁶ this farce shows how a master comedic writer approached the subgenre of extended titillating metaphor. In this play the ostensible first layer subject is the practice (or lack thereof) of viticulture. Rowley the husband is elderly and evidently impotent, by his own gardening-metaphor-laden admission:

Et par mon âme, quant je y houe
Une journée, à motz exprès,
Les rains m'en font trois jour après /
Tant de mal, Doublette, ma femme! (l. 24-27)

But when I hoe just once, and ply
My tool, it bends, my kidneys ache,
For three days my back's like to break!
It's too much effort, by my soul!³⁷

³⁴ The recent sex advice book *Lube Jobs: A Woman's Guide to Great Maintenance Sex* (2007) is a non-theatrical example of the way these metaphors continue to play out in Western culture.

³⁵ Tissier, in his edition of this play, acknowledges that it remains untitled in the original. He opted to assign the title to the name of the lead character, who in fact begins the play. See *Raoullet Ployart*, in Tissier, *Recueil* II, pp. 235-41.

³⁶ Charles Oulmont notes that Gringoire's occasional entertainment *Le jeu du prince des sots* (which he deems Gringoire's most famous, and possibly best, work) was comprised of "...un Cry, ...une Sotie, ...une Moralité, et ...une Farce." Concluding a performance of wildly satirical and audaciously political plays, the farce presented its own two-pronged elaboration of audacious wit, though Oulmont, with typical early 20th-century critical squeamishness, does not tease out the two levels of interpretation (agriculture, sex). Instead he emphasized the text's cleverly embodied rhetoric (Faire and Dire) and the play's ostensible moral: "Cheat nature (and natural desires) at your peril." See Oulmont, *Pierre Gringoire* (Paris: H. Champion, 1911), pp. 39-40, 271-97. For a more recent discussion of Gringoire's most celebrated entertainment, see the Tissier edition (in *Recueil* II), and Alan Hindley, "Pierre Gringoire, Satire and Carnival," in *Court and Humour in the French Renaissance: Essays in honour of Professor Pauline Smith* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 183-98.

³⁷ All translated verse quotations of Gringoire's play are from my own original, unpublished translation, titled *Rowley Plowbender*, copyright 2011, Sharon Diane King.

The neglected and complaining wife Doublette³⁸ is in like manner assimilated with her untended vineyard, which if the inactivity continues will remain fruitless--and frustrated. Confronting her husband, she sums up her predicament: “Par ma foy, ma vigne se gaste / Par deffaulte de labourage” [l. 14-15] (“My vineyard’s lying there in waste / And needs the tilling you won’t give”). The accused defends himself as best he can by reminding her of his former dutiful care: “Je y ay besongné de courage / Autresfois” [l. 16-17] (“Now dear wife, truly, as I live / I’ve tilled it well in days of yore!”). Doublette is blunt, however, in assessing the current state of affairs with his labor: “Vous n’en pavez plus” [l. 16] (“Well, you don’t till it any more!”). She requests the intervention of other workers to take up the slack:

En effect ma terre est en bruit.
Il ne fault que trouver ouvriers
Qui y besongnent volentiers
Et qui aient des besches friandes (l. 78-81).

In sooth, my field’s about to flower
Let’s find some fellow with manpower,
Who’s willing, and is not afraid
To work his firm and frisky spade!

Her cheeky *badin*-character servant Tattletail (Mausecret) corroborates her evident need but presents one immediate obstacle to her desire by offering his own services: “Je feroye raige” [l. 31] (“I’d work miracles”) he boasts. Doublette refuses by insinuating he too suffers from a lack of sexual prowess—a bent spade wouldn’t scratch the surface of a dry vineyard.³⁹ An outraged Rowley provides the other block to Doublette’s objective by protesting a task that by rights should belong to him alone: “Qu’il besongnast à mon

³⁸ The name carries overtones of double-faced, double-tongued, duplicitous (hinting at her adulterous liaisons), like the character Duessa in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* but more overtly licentious. See *Recueil* II, 242. It also indicates, as Alan Hindley has briefly noted in his study of Gringoire’s Carnival performance, the wife’s tendency towards excess—i.e. wanting two rounds of sexual intercourse in rapid succession. See Hindley, “Gringoire,” in *Court and Humour*, p. 194.

³⁹ “Quant la terre est seiche / Et on n’a point de bonne besche / On ne la fait que esgratiner” (l. 35-37).

ouvrage, / Jamais je ne l'endureroye" [l. 32-33] ("What? Give up furrowing my field? / [...] I should yield / To someone else? Not me! Not now / or ever!").

Thus ignoring both saucy suggestions and indignant howls, Doublette enlists the help of a pair of laborers, Mr. Words and Mr. Deeds, who conveniently turn up *au moment juste* to offer their services.⁴⁰ Doublette readily agrees to their assistance, though she delicately specifies that both cannot work her field at the same time.⁴¹ Tattletail, never the one to miss a bawdy bet, proposes that while one works the vineyard the other ready his spade⁴² while he, the faithful servant, keeps an eye out for Rowley. Mr. Words, first in line, has the patter about his carnal knowledge down pat, but alas for Doublette, it proves only theoretical. Despite Doublette's frantic urging, even begging—"Sus! Besongnez" [l. 150] ("Hurry! Get down to work!"), and later again "Monstrez comment / Vous besongnez; despeschez-vous" [l. 154-55] ("So show me how you work, and quick!")—she finds him, as his moniker would indicate, all palaver, and useless for the task at hand.⁴³ His companion then steps in, and one might correctly observe that Mr. Deeds...goes to town. Tattletail is impressed: "Comment il y va asprement! / Il se congnoist en tel affaire" [l. 180-81] ("How rough he is! How fierce the fight! / The chap knows what to do, all right!") he murmurs, obviously studying them as he makes his

⁴⁰ Faire and Dire, respectively. The pair of workmen have a short scene occurring just over midway through the household dispute, in which they discuss the weather: the melting snow, rising water, vines in jeopardy from exposure, etc.. But they also refer to their "engin," their tool with its decidedly sexual connotation, and their need to find a place to labor with all their might ("labourer de bon courage," l. 97). See Tissier, *Recueil* II, pp. 264-65.

⁴¹ "Il me semble / Que n'y povez tous deux ensemble / Labourer" (l. 125-27). This might refer to anal / vaginal, oral / vaginal sexual activity, or simply to a real technical difficulty of two men sexually vying for the same orifice. In any case, the raising of the issue while simultaneously forbidding it would have had its desired effect on audiences then (and now), both conjuring up and comically quashing the notion.

⁴² "Tandis que l'ung labourera, / L'autre preparera sa besche" (l. 129-30). The baldfaced admission to this masturbatory, private-moment "waiting for his turn" behaviour adds much to the comedy of the scene.

⁴³ The bit could be said to anticipate (though in a much more overt way) the song "Show Me" in the musical *My Fair Lady*. Doublette is ruthless in her final assessment: "Dire ne sert rien en tel cas" (l. 169).

aside to the audience.⁴⁴ Mr. Deeds the go-getter finishes his task, causing Doublette to thrice declare (a stock comedic technique in medieval farce) that she prefers Mr. Deeds to Mr. Words. The language they use is very specific, suggesting that onstage she is holding him around the neck and hugging his nether parts.⁴⁵ Thus entwined with the laborer, Doublette urges him to set about his yard work stoutly, and turn up the earth.⁴⁶ They presumably feign having sexual relations, plowing a vineyard before the audience, or some combination of the two, adding to the inherent comedy of the doubly-nuanced performance.⁴⁷

At this compromising juncture a scandalized Rowley arrives, sputtering “Qu’esse-là, bon gré saint Remy? / Ce jeu pas trop beau ne me semble” [l. 208-09] (“What’s that there? I don’t like to see / That kind of game, by Saint Remy!”)—but the pair are so hard at a third go they barely pause for breath until the deed—and Mr. Deeds—are quite done. While the workman takes to his heels, a reinvigorated Doublette sweet-talks her offended husband, trying to mollify him: “Raoullet Ployart, / Mon amy, mon plaisant dorlot / Acollez moy” [l. 226-28] (“Dear Rowley, my love-lock, my heart, / Come hold me close!”). Rowley will have none of it: “Ne me dy mot” [l. 228] (“Don’t even start”) he

⁴⁴ The figure of the *voyeur* has, perhaps not surprisingly, a long history in French literature. One way of staging this (I didn’t use it as it would have required additional props) would be to have Tattletail take notes of the duo’s activities for pointers on technique.

⁴⁵ “J’acollerez” (l. 198); “Je serre les bourjons ensemble,” (l. 205). See the discussion in the note to line 205, *Recueil* II, pp. 275-76).

⁴⁶ “Mais houex ferme, entendez-vous? / Renversez c’en dessus dessoubz / La terre.” (l. 199-200). My verse translation of the second line: “You’ve turned the earth that way, now try / It upside down!”

⁴⁷ Again, there are no indications about how this was staged in the original. As a director, I suggest one way is to make a “wheelbarrow” or plow with the woman’s hands on the floor and her legs held parallel to the man’s hips (used but hard to see in our videorecording). It is also useful to recall that more often than not in this period women’s roles were played by men, which would probably have contributed even more to the performative level of comedy.

snarls. Hauling her before the stand-in for the local magistrate, Lord Balletreu

(Plughole),⁴⁸ Rowley angrily sets before him the bald-faced case of his wife's guilt:

Il est vray que je suis venu
En ma vigne pour prouvigner.
Doublette y faisoit besongner
Des autres. Ayez y regard. (l. 266-69)

The truth is, I went in to tend
My vineyard, and I found my friend
And wife Doublette—without a care--
Letting another till it! There!

Having been mounted, Doublette in turn mounts her best defense:

[...] Raoullet Ployart
Tousjours tence, riotte, ou grongne,
Et est si lasche à la besongne,
Monseigneur de Balletreu, qu'il laisse
Ma vigne en frische. (l. 270-74)

[...] My lord, you must know
He always grumbles, growls and grumps;
He won't stand to the task—he slumps!
All Rowley's quarrels, rages, groans,
Don't get the job done. He bemoans
The plowing of a fallow field!

Tattletail corroborates that the others were just taking up Rowley's slack. Balletreu's response is intriguingly sly. Since the wife claims her husband is so lax in the matter, Balletreu opines, he should have the work done—indeed, he should have the land worked vigorously—but he does not specify who is to do such work, which, after all is said and

⁴⁸ Although the text specifies that the disputing couple goes to see the Prince des Sotz (l. 249), a character from the preceding *sottie* (fools' play), it also makes clear that the Prince is out (l. 252) and that someone is filling in (so to speak) for him, namely Balletreu. See *Recueil II*, pp. 240-41, 281. The name Balletreu has proved a bit contentious for critics, but Plughole would render an appropriate phallic connotation. See *Recueil II*, pp. 242-243. See also Halina Lewicka, *La langue et le style du théâtre comique français des XVe et XVIe siècles* (Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1968), p. 178, and Hindley, "Gringoire," p. 195. This comic technique of sex-related naming is very much still in use in modern theatre and film, such as the characters Rod and Mrs. Thistlewat in the Broadway play *Avenue Q*, and the character of Goldmember in the third *Austin Powers* film.

done, is really only play.⁴⁹ The ambiguity inspires Doublette's gratitude, though her response to his lordship is also a *double-sens*, indicating her submission to the male member, for whom he is a stand-in.⁵⁰ Balletreu's pronouncement also draws the ire of Rowley, who protests that he will appeal the sentence that seemingly condemns him to cuckoldry, even if his wife and vineyard would thus flourish.⁵¹ Both the wife's statements and Balletreu's command serve to emphasize a main point of this analysis: humans have an overwhelming human need for sexual activity for regenerative purposes, in every sense of the term. A wife's vineyard is a terrible thing to waste.

Whereas *Rowley Plowbender* used metaphors of plowing a vineyard farrow in order to make it fruitful, the anonymous farce *Les femmes qui font écurer leurs chauldrons* (*The Wives Who Have their Cauldrons Scoured*) employed metaphors that revolve around reparations and proper care of cookware,⁵² emphasizing the sanitary and hygienic aspect of sexual activity through the concave / convex model of normative heterosexual behavior. The women of the farce are more or less walking wombèd, their sexual frustration articulated (eventually) by means of depictions of cauldrons getting rusty from disuse, needing a good cleaning and tempering for them to be at rights with the world. At the start, however, there are no references to kitchen implements. The audience simply sees one wife commiserating with another over her pitiful state: she has

⁴⁹ "Que y facez besongner en tasche" (l. 282); "Faictes labourer vostre terre / Hardiment, car ce n'est que jeu" (l. 292-93).

⁵⁰ "Certes, monseigneur de Balletreu, / Je coignois que à vous suis subgette" (l. 294-95).

⁵¹ "Monseigneur de Balletreu, j'en jecte / Ung appel" (l. 296-97).

⁵² Anonymous, *Les femmes qui font écurer leurs chauldrons*, in *Recueil IX*, (1995), pp. 197-240. The original complete title was *Les femmes qui font écurer leurs chauldrons et défendent qu'on ne mette la pièce auprès du trou*. Petit de Julleville shied away from this risqué title, renaming it *Les femmes et le chauldronnier*, then in his edition of the British Museum manuscript truncating it to *Les femmes qui font écurer leurs chaulderons*. For the sake of easier identification (and in keeping with the Tissier edition), I maintain this title, with Tissier's spelling. The comedy of this farce was no doubt enhanced by the 'double-play' of woman being assimilated to a cooking pot, traditionally an object squarely in women's sphere, both domestically and mystically.

no *soulas*, that is, she is not being tended to or cared for sexually by her husband,⁵³ even though, as she declares, pleasure is a right, a duty, a work of nature, and of the God that created nature.⁵⁴ It is a requisite to life, which Wife One vows not to do without henceforth.⁵⁵ The second wife, evidently having had experience in extra-domestic adventures, encourages her in this new resolve, reminding her that such behavior is tit for tat for straying husbands.⁵⁶ At this propitious moment, an itinerant tinker wanders into the neighborhood, a worker who will prove to be just the man to get to the bottom of their problem. To his standard cry, “A’ vous que faire de maignen?” [l. 78] (“Have you any work for a tinker?”) the two *commères* hasten to invite him in, telling that they indeed have business for him to perform.⁵⁷ For his part, this workman insists he longs to pleasure them in being at their service.⁵⁸ The Maignen, whose job was to solder and otherwise mend household appliances, begins with what amounts to foreplay: he demands to see the place that needs the work.⁵⁹ While the tinker inspects the job put literally before him, Wife One assures him that it won’t be difficult for him set it to rights. Wife Two, at this point serving as the play’s onlooker, suggests the tinker make sure his tool is hard and

⁵³ “J n’aye mie, / Ma commere [...] / [...] / Heure ne demye / De soulas” (l. 3-4, 5-6). She is literally fed up when she sees him, she relates: it feels to her “Que j’ay souppé” (l. 11).

⁵⁴ “Dieu l’a permis. / Pourquoi nous a-il icy mis, / Ce n’est pour oeuvre de nature? / Et puis c’est la loy de droicture, / Faire plaisir les uns aux autres” (l. 66-70).

⁵⁵ “Et si fault, puis qu’on se demente, / Mettre le marteau en la vente / En despit de luy, ma commere” (l. 52-54).

⁵⁶ “Et pourquoi ne le feron-nous / Aussi bien comme eulx?” (l. 57-58) The first wife agrees, citing the quintessentially farcical proverb “A trompeur trompeur et demy” (l. 61).

⁵⁷ “Venez, car nous avons affaire / Un peu de vous” (l. 89-90).

⁵⁸ “Vrayement je me vueil asservir / Vous faire plaisir et service” (l. 93-94). This bears similarities to the pun, classically rendered by comedian Joan Rivers, about her OB/GYN announcing to his patient he was “at her cervix.”

⁵⁹ “Mais premier faudroit que je visse / L’oeuvre où voulez que besongne” (l. 95-96). The term “besongner,” of course, was loaded, meaning both to work and to have sexual relations. Although there are, as usual, no stage directions for this bit, one imagines that much could be done with a strategically shifted full skirt and/ or a prop cauldron.

ready, so that it won't veer off from the task.⁶⁰ The tinker disavows any previous problems with rectitude and proudly displays his tool with its pointed tip.⁶¹

So far the Maignen's discourse has merely been suggestive, in the manner of the "Tool Man" repartee of some of the racier episodes of *Home Improvement*. But this text strays beyond that level when Wife One expresses her desire that he not remove the tool and let it slip in somewhere outside the hole⁶²—a process later alluded to in the text as commonplace: "Comme maignens ont de coustume" [l. 148] ("Something" that tinkers are wont to do"). This evident allusion to anal sex is followed by the first direct mention of a cauldron in the text of the play,⁶³ with Wife One candidly admitting that her cauldron gets all wet at the bottom when it is hot and needs him to put a good big piece into it, and Wife Two specifying he is not to use a small nail that won't fill it up.⁶⁴ After doing his best at the task (and being praised by Wife One as a master known for his perfect labor),⁶⁵ the Maignen moves on in service of Wife Two. She, more venturous than the first, entreats him not to be overly gentle with her cauldron: "Frappez fort, rivez fermement" [l. 150] ("Strike hard, nail firmly"). Thus urged on (and further encouraged by now-voyeuse Wife One), he sweats and toils twice through his task and, out of breath, brags that no one will ever accuse him of shoddy labor.⁶⁶ In an evocation of a sexual afterglow (and in keeping with other scenes of pre-and postcoital merrymaking in late medieval farces), a cloth is put on the table and the three dine and toast each other, the

⁶⁰ "Faictes vostre broche endurcir, / Que ne rebourse en nostre ouvrage" (l. 99-100).

⁶¹ "Car par le bout est achierée. / Monstrez ça" (l. 103-104).

⁶² "N'allez pas mettre / Icy la piece auprès du trou" (l. 105-06)

⁶³ We do not know how, or even if, the titles of the farces were made known before most performances.

⁶⁴ "Mon chaulderon fait de l'eau / Auprès du cul, quand il est chault. / Et pour cause, maignen, il fault / Que y mettez une bonne piece, / Affin que plus ne se depiece" (l. 111-15). Wife Two: "N'y mettez point clou si petit / Que le trou n'en soit estouppé" (l. 121-22).

⁶⁵ "Vous estes un ouvrier parfait. / Un maistre, on le cognoist par fait / A son ouvrage" (l. 126-28).

⁶⁶ "Regardez moy comme je sues; / [...] / J'en suis quasi tout hors d'alaine" (l. 169, 171); "Je ne crains pas en avoir hongne / Ne reproche devant tout homme" (l. 177-78).

two wives cajoling him back for more repair work, as there is always some hole that needs plugging.⁶⁷ As they take their leave, the wives reiterate the central metaphors of this play: their parts were getting old and rusty,⁶⁸ and Le Maignen was a splendid workman, perfect for the job.⁶⁹ To be set to rights, the women's cauldrons just needed some tinkering.

In its variation on this comic theme, the early 16th-century farce *Le ramonneur de cheminées* (*The Chimneysweep*), turned a then-popular cliché on its head.⁷⁰ The image of the professional sweep roaming about plying his trade was a recurring metaphor for extramarital heterosexual contact in the literature of medieval France. Besides this play, there were numerous explorations of this character, including a good-sized *sermon joyeux* on the subject and a reference to chimneysweeps as an insult indicating hanky-panky in at least one other farce.⁷¹ There was also a popular song published in 1543, in which a woman implored the workman to come sweep her chimney out, high and low.⁷² Like the others in this analysis, this farce turns on the sustained *double sens*, with the synecdoches of a stout broom (or brush) and a lonely chimney full of dust and cobwebs, waiting to be brushed out, freshened up, and restored to good use, standing in for ordinary sexual relations between man and woman. The recurring verb *housser* contained the double

⁶⁷ “Maignen, souviene vous de nous; / Mais n’oubliez pas vostre broche. / Tousjours avons un fer qui loche / Ou quelque trou à restoupper” (l. 229-32).

⁶⁸ “Nous avons de vous grand mestier / Pour esclarcir nostre mesnage. / Ce n’estoit plus que vieil bagage; / Il estoit tou mengé de rouil” (l. 259-62).

⁶⁹ “Vela un ouvrier parfait” (l. 275).

⁷⁰ Anonymous, *Le ramonneur de cheminées*, in *Recueil IV* (1989), pp. 113-66.

⁷¹ Anonymous, *Sermon joyeux d’un Ramonneur de cheminées*, quoted in *Recueil IV*, 121-23. In *Martin de Cambrai*, the husband accuses his wife, whom he suspects of *liaisons dangereuses*, “Ton pere houssoit les cheminés!” [l. 40] (“Your father was a chimneysweep!”)—insinuating that she takes after her licentious forebear. See *Martin de Cambrai*, *Recueil XII* (1998), p. 166.

⁷² “Ramonnez moy ma cheminée, / Ramonnez la moy hault et bas. / Une dame, la matinée, / Disoit, de chaleur forcenée, / ‘Mon amy, prenon noz esbas; / Ramonnez moy ma cheminée, / Ramonnez la moy hault et bas.” Quoted in the introduction to *Le ramonneur*, *Recueil IV*, p. 123.

meaning of cleaning out a chimney as well as making love,⁷³ while ‘sweeping high and low’ also used the term *bas* (to be more fully exploited in the last play of this study), meaning “low” but also bottom, or women’s private parts. In this play, however, the central figure of the sweep is pitiable as well as laughable. As chimneysweeps are wont to do, he plies his trade by going about the streets of the town crying out for women—specifically young ones—to have their chimneys cleaned out by him.⁷⁴ The young servant who accompanies him ostensibly also looks for work but in fact undermines him by constantly poking fun at this gigolo-rigolo of a master, once peerless at his trade but now fallen on hard times.⁷⁵ The sweep readily, if mournfully, admits his powers have diminished because nature has determined it so.⁷⁶ But he fondly remembers his glory days when he was a marvel and everyone hired him.⁷⁷ As the Varlet teases him about his current impotence, the Sweep reminds him of his former prowess: “De housser en une journée / Seize foyz une cheminée / Qui estoit bien grande et bien haulte” [l. 214-16] (“Of sweeping out a chimney / A big, tall, imposing one / Sixteen times in a single day”). Even worse for the poor fallen sweep, the field is now crowded with young rivals,⁷⁸ who, even though they are not the masters at their trade that he once was, at least do not have to worry about their broom bending when faced with the task.⁷⁹

⁷³ See *Le ramonneur*, *Recueil* IV, p. 125.

⁷⁴ “Ramonnex voz cheminées, / Jeunes femmes, ramonnez!” (l. 1-2); “En nous payant noz journées, / Retenez nous, retenez!” (l. 5-6).

⁷⁵ “Chascun vous mettoit en ouvraige,” (l. 21) says the Varlet of days gone by; then, to the audience, lets slip this glimpse of the master in his heyday: “Il eust alors plus faict d’ouvraige / En ung jour qu’il ne faict en dix” (l. 23-24).

⁷⁶ “Je sçay que c’est: tout ce passe / Ce que nature a compassé” (l. 43-44). The Sweep waxes even sadly eloquent about his (and his fortune’s) most unfortunate fall: “Corps bien compassé! / Je suis ja cassé, / Faulcé, / Lassé, / Et tout mon bien se trespasse, / De l’or que j’ay amassé” (l. 48-53).

⁷⁷ “Je faisoye raige,” the sweep says, proudly, if wistfully (l. 25).

⁷⁸ “Par ma foy ilz sont plus de mille, / Tous nouveaulx et jeunes housseurs” (l. 92-93).

⁷⁹ “Ma gaulle ploye / Si tost que l’ouvraige regarde” (l. 332-33).

The sweep goes home dejected, but finds no respite from scorn; not only does his wife scold him because of his drinking and lack of income,⁸⁰ but also because her own chimney is suffering. Whereas once her husband used to sweep it five or six times a day, she tells her goody, who has come to share her friend's woes, now it has gone untouched for three months.⁸¹ He has sadly ceased his housekeeping task in his own domestic sphere: "Il ne ramonne plus. / Non plus qu'ung enfant nouveau-né" [l. 304-05] ("He sweeps no more / No more than a newborn babe").⁸² The forlorn Chimneysweep delivers his parting advice to the men in the audience not to neglect those chimneys that need sweeping.⁸³ Sex is a salubrious necessity: Don't make a home without it.

The hygienic argument for sexual activity also appears as the second level of meaning for the wickedly transgressive anonymous farce *Les chambrières qui vont à la messe de cinq heures pour avoir de l'eau bénite* (*The Chambermaids Who Go to Mass at 5 A.M. to Receive Holy Water*).⁸⁴ The subtextual focus of this play is less on *being* clean (despite the terms "sprinkling" and "washing") than on the joyous *process* of cleansing, an end unto itself. The farce exposes the licentious desires of women—two chambermaids and a nurse—who have risen early, not unlike the Maries on Easter morn, ostensibly to attend mass, but with decidedly other passions in mind. The maids are both

⁸⁰ What the Wife suspects, the servant cheerfully corroborates: "Il a menty parmy ses dentz: / Il ne luy vient que de trop boyre" (l. 199-200). Her complaints pile higher than his earnings: "J'ameroye mieulx quatre solz / En ma bourse, de bon acquest, / Que son regard ne son caquet" (l. 133-35).

⁸¹ "Je le sçay par ma cheminée, / Qui souloit estre ramonnée / Tous les jours bien cinq ou six foys; / Mais il y a bien troys moys, / Voysine, qu'il n'y voulut penser" (l. 315-19).

⁸² The age-old problem is redressed in new techno-metaphors in Gene Weingarten's postmodern ditty: "Bill's laptop was on the old side / ('It's got floppies!' his wife said, and sighed) / But the marriage would thrive-- / An external hard drive / Left the missus, and bill, satisfied." Quoted in "Poem's that byte: Gene Weingarten's thoughts on data entry-level versification," *The Washington Post* 04/11/2010. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/02/AR2010040202554_3.html

⁸³ "Pour Dieu, messieurs, prenez garde, / Qui vous meslez de ramonner, / Qu'à ramonner point on ne tarde / Les cheminées qui on mestier" (l. 334-37).

⁸⁴ Anonymous, *Les chambrières qui vont à la messe de cinq heures pour avoir de l'eau bénite*, in *Ancien Théâtre Français*, II, ed. by M. Viollot le Duc (Paris: P. Jannet, 1854), pp. 435-47. As this early edition has no line enumerations, I am able to include only page numbers in references to this text.

single, thus not in danger of breaking any marriage vows in their quest for lustful fire,⁸⁵ but are singularly focused in imagining and pursuing it. Their names reveal this obsession: audacious Trousetaqueue (“Tuck-up-your-tail”) and lascivious “saucy wench” Saupiquet.⁸⁶ Saucy indeed is their gossip about the households in which they serve: Trousetaqueue regales her companion with stories of her coy mistress refusing on occasion to sleep with her husband (thus keeping a vow to “Saint Nytouche”),⁸⁷ who threatens to turn to her maid for solace.⁸⁸ Saupiquet, who deems such ticklish behavior a game, confides that while she lies in bed, stifling her laughter by biting her sheets,⁸⁹ she overhears the exact opposite drama taking place in her household. The wife is only too willing, the husband just as reluctant, except on rare occasions, such as when the moon is right.⁹⁰ The Nurse joins them, adding her own salty account of a clerical notary making lusty sport with her employer, the wife of an innkeeper.

This piquantly suggestive chatter now gets down to the bottom of the matter, the realm of embodied metaphors. In this play they revolve around the trio’s attendance at

⁸⁵ The nurse that accompanies them on their unmaidenly quest is presumably married (thus producing children and milk for hire), but makes no reference to a husband and seems to have had no sexual congress for some time: “Si a-il longtemps que ne fis / Bonne chère entre deulx tresteaux” (438).

⁸⁶ Saupiquet was a spicy, hot, vinegar-, wine-, and/or verjuice-based sauce. See the *Viandier de Taillevent*, ed. by Terence Scully (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1988), p. 93, p. 359. According to the *OED*, the term “saucy” shows up in early 16th century England (1530) to refer to an impertinent person; at the end of the century it also was used to indicate someone wanton or lascivious. The names are ancestors of comic names denoting female sexual excess in modern Western theatrical media, such as the characters Alotta Fagina and Ivana Humpalot in *Austin Powers* films.

⁸⁷ In Book One of Rabelais’s *Gargantua et Pantagruel*, this fictitious saint (“Saint Touch-Me-Not” or “Saint Hands-Off”) is one called upon by monks at Seuilly who are having their abbey pillaged. In the farce, the practice of abstaining on certain days may have also been an attempt (of sorts) at birth control; the wife says she does it on account of her womb, “pour l’amour de son amarry” (436).

⁸⁸ The husband does seem to have been more attentive to marital duties than other straying husbands in farce, pointedly asking his wife “Viendrez-vous pas / Coucher tost en vostre lieu?” (436) Trousetaqueue indicates her willingness to accept his proposition in future, as it would make her effectively mistress of the house: “Se il fust venu / Que mon maistre m’eust accolée, / J’estois maitresse” (437).

⁸⁹ “Quant elle se trouve à l’escart / Par ma foy, elle entend bien jeu” (436); “[...]Que de force de rire / Je suis contrainte [...], / Mordre mes draps à belles dents” (438).

⁹⁰ “Monsieur et madame j’escoute / Aulcunes fois quant sont couchez: / Ma maistresse dit: Approchez, / [...] / Et mon maistre respond tousjours: / M’amy, nous sommes en decours / Attendre fault la plaine lune / Et le croissant” (437).

early mass, where they will be sprinkled with holy water.⁹¹ Having discussed their various options for services,⁹² the three women settle on the church of Saint-Severin, where Domine Johannes (Father John) is renowned for the “noblesse,” the refinement, with which he sprinkles the female servants who come to him.⁹³ The priest opens with the purificatory words of the Latin mass,⁹⁴ but with telling omissions of key portions of the text: “Sprinkle me, oh Lord, with hyssop” is traditionally followed by “and I shall be cleansed”; “Wash me” should be followed by “and I shall be whiter than snow,” before the final “Have mercy on me, Oh God.” The women’s words (“asperges,” “lavabis”) echo these significant lacunae, which emphasize that the end product (forgiveness, salvation) is less important than the cleansing process happening in the moment. The priest then pointedly asks who would like to receive his blessing by saying “I want it.”⁹⁵ Trousettaqueue responds they wished to be first in line to receive the holy water he provides, the Nurse specifying that they hoped to have a more private service than most.⁹⁶ Saupiquet first asks him to throw hard, seeing that his holy water runs down and does her good.⁹⁷ Over the priest’s feeble protests, Trousettaqueue also demands (in comically

⁹¹ The sprinkling with holy water of the celebrants of mass traditionally came before the service of Communion; for their purposes, the communing would occur simultaneously.

⁹² In one, the vicar is said to have abused and falsely accused his servant: “[...] Après que le vicaire / Eut fait tout ce qu’il vouloit faire / De sa chambrière, il luy met jus / Qu’elle a désrobé ses escus” (441); in another, according to Trousettaqueue, the holy water is reputed to be... unsanitary in the extreme: “J’ay entendu qu’on mist du jus / D’un clistère au moine, se dit-on” (442).

⁹³ “[...] C’est noblesse / L’asperges à ses chamberières” (442-43).

⁹⁴ “Asperges me, Domine, / Ysopo, et lavabis me. / Miserere mei Deus” (443). It is a reference to Psalm 50:9.

⁹⁵ “Approchez-vous. Qui dit: j’en veult” (443).

⁹⁶ “Nous sommes venus bien à point / Pour l’eau béniste recevoir / Des premières” (443). The Nurse wanted to avoid the crowds: “J’en veulx avoir / Devant qu’il y ayt plus grant foule” (443).

⁹⁷ “Vostre eau béniste bien me coule, / Domine Johannes; jetez fort” (443). This may refer to an alternative sexual practice such as *bukkake*: it is not clear if the sexual activity implied here was actual sprinkling or throwing (being thus mainly, but not altogether, masturbatory) or is indicative of a more internal ‘watering’ that is pleasing to her. A later portion of the text definitely points to the latter. Perhaps both methods were implied. Again, we have no solid information as to how this would have been staged.

ungrammatical Latin) that he boldly undertake the salubrious ritual.⁹⁸ The Nurse, fearing she will be left out, elbows her way into the proceedings. The priest assures them that each one shall have their portion, but that, (like Doublette in the first play) he cannot serve them all at once.⁹⁹ He sprinkles twice, affirming it by repeating the first word of the Latin rite “asperges,”¹⁰⁰ and insisting that he never runs out of holy water.¹⁰¹

As the women crowd around, clamoring for more; the priest, working to satisfy their desires, becomes more and more assimilated with his religious tool for sprinkling, the aspergillum.¹⁰² And at this point the scene becomes quite comically chaotic. Trousettaqueue demands he throw harder, since his “asperges” are too short; he sheepishly entreats her to come closer, claiming his sprinkles doesn’t extend that far.¹⁰³ Saupiquet threatens to take it (and him) in hand if he doesn’t perform his duty, and nearly comes to blows with Trousettaqueue, who denounces Saupiquet as crazy and insists she is trying to claim all of the liquid for herself.¹⁰⁴ Saupiquet, fearing his instrument is getting womanhandled, admonishes them to touch it gently, lest they break it.¹⁰⁵ The sidelined Nurse now warns the priest she will collar him if she doesn’t get her share,

⁹⁸ “Tu lavabis me hardiement” (444).

⁹⁹ “Attendez, chascun en aura; / Mais je ne puis tout faire ensemble” (444). Again, this mention of what he can (or will) NOT do would only raise the notion of an ecclesial orgy in the imagination of audiences.

¹⁰⁰ “Asperges me” actually means “you will sprinkle me,” but the sprinkling sought by the women goes in the opposite direction.

¹⁰¹ “Je croy qu’il vous semble / Que mon eaue fault; non fait jamais” (444).

¹⁰² In this play, the object that stands for the priest (and his nether part) is, appropriately, not a mundane household appliance but an instrument of religious significance, intended for ritual spiritual purification. The generally phallic shape of this tool (which could be either a brush or a tube with a pierced bulb at the end) has not changed much from the Middle Ages to the present. Compare the holy water sprinklers advertised on a religious supplies website (<http://www.stpatricksguild.com/browse.cfm/2,743.html>) with the illustration of the aspergillum in Margaret English Fraser’s article “Medieval Church Treasures,” in *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, New Series, vol. 43, no. 3 (New York, NY: Metropolitan Museum of Art, Winter 1985-86), pp. 18-19. It is also of note that a popular euphemism for the male member in French continues to be “l’asperge.”

¹⁰³ “Approchez-vous [un peu plus] près; / Mon coup ne s’estend pas si loing” (444).

¹⁰⁴ “Ceste folle vault tout avoir” (444).

¹⁰⁵ “Au moins maniez-le tout doux; / Vous y allez moult rudement. / Si vous romp[i]ez l’instrument / De messire Jehan, quel dommage / Se seroit!” (445).

while Trousettaqueue accuses the Nurse of nearly breaking his “vipillon,” or foxtail.¹⁰⁶

Saupiquet observes that if Trousettaqueue had the aspergillum lodged inside her own “benoistier”—the flask holding the holy water, presumably corresponding to her inner flask-like private parts—she would rather die than take it out, even if it rotted there.¹⁰⁷

The harried priest now admits that in dealing with all three, he is indeed starting to run out of holy water.¹⁰⁸ The Nurse, a comically sage character who refers to herself in the third person, reassures him that whatever he has is enough: “La nourrisse en a bon mestier / De si petit qu’il y en a” [445]. (“The nurse can make good use / Of whatever little there is left”). The priest begs them to leave but to return on Sunday, when he will once again be able to provide for them.¹⁰⁹ The Nurse acknowledges her admiration for the priest’s salutary fleshly contact: “Quelle viande ce seroit / Pour bien renouveler le laïc / Des nourisses!” [446] (“What a fine [piece of] meat it would be / to renew a Nurse’s milk!”) The ostensible quest for spiritual purification is unashamedly twinned with the pursuit of pure pleasure (they “want it” and it “does them good”), as well as the potential for procreation (the nurse’s future fecundity). The near-riot that occurs because the women all “Gotta Have It”—at the same time--provides quite potent testimony that sexual activity is considered a pressing need, a requisite for living, so basic that one would rather die than do without it.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ “Vous rompez / Son vipillon” (445). The word “vipillon” is (and was) apparently a variant form of the slang term “goupillon,” which means both foxtail and aspergillum. See the entry for “goupillon” in the online French dictionary of slang, www.fr.ghettodriveby.com. See also the lexical research site <http://circe.atilf.fr/definition/ducange/vipillon>

¹⁰⁷ “S’elle l’avoit en son benoistier, / Elle aymeroit plus cher mourir / Que l’oster, (et) y deust-il pourrir” (445). This would seem to indicate that the sexual activity Trousettaqueue desires is normative male-female relations.

¹⁰⁸ “Par ma foy, je ne sçaurois / Ainsi fournir à toutes trois; / Plus n’ay d’eau à mon benoistier” (445).

¹⁰⁹ “Et je y fourniray” (446).

¹¹⁰ The (once) ubiquitous email spam that trumpeted new aphrodisiacs, surgical enhancements, and other such (pu)addenda make it clear that this phenomenon is hardly a thing of the past. One such ad, the subject line of which read “Your partner will worship you for it,” makes the thrust of this play relevant indeed.

The physical distress caused by the dearth of sex is equally the driving force behind *Les femmes qui font renbourer leur bas* (*The Wives who have their stockings stuffed*).¹¹¹ This farce opens with the title-role duo in dire discomfort from their lack of *esbats*, sexual pleasure or frolics.¹¹² In this play, the word *bas*—meaning both stocking and a woman’s bottom—is used in both senses simultaneously; the one belonging to the First Wife is said to be actually wounding her, while the Second Wife moans hers is pricking her with its heat.¹¹³ As the farce opens, the two endeavor to top each other with complaints about the relative misery of their neglected¹¹⁴ parts that are both stocking and hole.¹¹⁵ These two Desperate Huswives concur that the remedy is to have their stockings stuffed.¹¹⁶ They insist, however, that the job should not be assigned off to “ung homme / Vieil, qui ne le sçaroit fourrer” [l. 19-20] (“some / old dodderer not up to the task”), such as their husbands are. To increase their chances, they primp for prospective gentleman callers, all the while making sure that their *bas* (the cloth ones) are along for the ride.¹¹⁷ When the wives spy two middle-aged gallants, bearing the intriguing names of Espoir and De Mieulx—Hope and For Better¹¹⁸—they greet them with delight, informing the

¹¹¹ Anonymous, *Farce nouvelle des femmes qui font renbourer leur bas*, in Cohen, *Recueil de farces françaises inédites*, pp. 283-87. The term can also mean “padded.”

¹¹² The term *esbatement* is used in the same way.

¹¹³ “Par mon âme, mon bas me blesse!” (l. 14); “Par mon âme, le mien me point / Merveilleusement, tant est chault” (l. 15-16).

¹¹⁴ Terms such as tattered, threadbare (in the one direction), and unkempt or derelict (in the other) would also be suitable in this case.

¹¹⁵ “Le mien me tue!” (l. 17) ; “Mon mal vous ne sçavez en somme” (l. 18).

¹¹⁶ This play offers numerous parallels to the song “Doctor Long John Blues,” a concert favorite performed by master comedian Bette Midler, about the dentist who assesses the woman’s pain as her having a “cavity that needs a little fillin’,” who takes out “his trusty drill” and fills her “whole inside,” leaving her “never the same again.” See <http://www.metrolyrics.com/long-john-blues-lyrics-bette-midler.html#ixzz1TSO4TqGJ>

¹¹⁷ The first checks to make sure she looks tidy, adjusts her headpiece, and reminds her companion, who has served as her mirror, to smile and look pretty. (l. 26-30) As regards the *bas*, the First Wife addresses her goody: “Prenez le vostre, j’ay le mien” (l. 22), to which the Second Wife replies “Aussi ai-je dessoubz mon bras” (l. 23).

¹¹⁸ Henceforth referred to with honorifics (i.e. Mr. Hope), as I did with *Raoullet Ployart*.

men that they are in quest of a saddler to do some stuffing for them “down in front” (with the double meaning of “in their stockings”).¹¹⁹

Mr. Hope responds with some braggadocio, saying that they are just what the women need¹²⁰ and insisting, with no preliminaries, on being shown the work then and there: “Monstrez-les-nous!” [l. 53] (“Show them to us!”). This demand might have been intended as a salient ribald comic bit for staging, as both women immediately seem to remonstrate: “Ne vous desplaise!” [l. 53] (“Excuse me?”). It doesn’t take long to get down to the nitty-gritty of the work, which is couched in terms that evoke the specifics of leatherworking and saddlery.¹²¹ The First Wife informs Mr. Hope that her leather stocking has very tender skin and should be measured first, to make sure it will not be stretched too much.¹²² She also pleads that it be stuffed well, no matter what the cost.¹²³ The Second Wife, in this play also the more overtly sexual of the pair, laments that hers hasn’t been padded since last year at Pentecost.¹²⁴ She adds that she doesn’t care if it is done sideways or even endways as long as something gets in there, and lets slip that her husband was rather distressed to note that her opening was quite a tight fit.¹²⁵ The gallants, hard at their toils, natter on about introducing the wand and moving the bat,

¹¹⁹ “Nous allons serché un sellier / Pour embourer nos bas devant” (l. 47-48).

¹²⁰ “[...] Nous sommes ce qu’il vous fault” (l. 50).

¹²¹ This required some (admittedly very preliminary) research on saddlery methods and tools. These may not have changed much, but there is so little written on medieval techniques that at this stage I can only conjecture that these remain substantively the same. Materials, tools, and techniques referred to directly in the text include cow hide (“la peau”), a stitching awl (“couldre,” i.e. “sewing” or “stitching”), and padding. The most intriguing tool I discovered for this latter operation is currently called a “smasher.” Made of wood, brass (and now aluminum), the smasher has a large mushroom-shaped head and is used by saddlers to smooth down stuffed areas of a saddle. This might be the “bat” or “wand” referred to in the text, though it seems to be rather exaggerated in shape. The most useful information I gleaned came from a website for modern saddlery products and tools:

(http://www.abbeyssaddlery.co.uk/product_listing.cfm?type=search_list&range_id=0&cat_id=WORK0001&sub_cat_id=OTHE0001)

¹²² “Mon seigneur, le cuir est bien tendre / Boutez-y le baston de mesure” (l. 55-56).

¹²³ “Embourrez-le bien, quoy qu’il couste” (l. 58).

¹²⁴ “Ung an est à la Penthecouste / Que la mienne fut rembouraye” (l. 59-60).

¹²⁵ “Mais qu’il entre de croc ou de hanche / Il soufist, mais qu’il soit dedans” (l. 75-76); “[...] Mon mary y estoit / Qui me tenoit bien à destroit / Pour dire: ‘le trou est estroit!’” (l. 63-65).

which is pointed on the end but thick in the middle.¹²⁶ The stuffing material they propose is revealingly scatological: “ung estronc moysi” [l. 90] (“a moist turd”).¹²⁷ This suggestion, however, is laughed off, and the First Wife suggests they try something a bit more gentle: rabbit fur, with its overt reference to female anatomy.¹²⁸ Mr. Hope boldly offers to stretch the skin with the teeth to make the opening bigger,¹²⁹ evidently an allusion to oral sex. They labor on, the intemperate women begging for still more. Mr. Hope goes so far as to offer to stitch up the slit, a request which is refused.¹³⁰ Mr. For Better notes that his own task is nearing completion, the tool only needing to go in a few more times.¹³¹ The farce ends with many parting kisses and caresses, as the women pay the lads handsomely, though it remains unspecified as to precisely what coin they use.¹³² Mr. For Better hints at future services whenever they are needed.¹³³ The First Wife lauds the fine style of the work and the laborer’s diligent, tireless efforts, plus the pains that were taken not to do damage or hurt;¹³⁴ though she marvels “hers” (both stocking and bottom) has become much wider.¹³⁵ The Second Wife also pleased: her “bas” has been

¹²⁶ “La mort bieu! J’y mectroy la verge!” (l. 66) Mr. Hope exclaims; Mr. For Better notes that “Il est bien pointu par devant / Mais il est gros enprez le manche” (l. 73-74), referring to the *baston*, the same term used by the Wives.

¹²⁷ “Il ne reste qu’à l’embourer; / Quel bourre y voulez fourrer?” (l. 82-83) Mr. Hope enquires. His proposal is shocking, even in this most suggestive play; I assume that the alternative practice of “brown showers” is being referred to here, though I am somewhat at a loss to explain precisely how the stuffing process would operate. See the online Urban Dictionary definition of “brown showers” (# 18) at www.urbandictionary.com.

¹²⁸ “Mais de la bourre d’ung conillart / Il n’y a rien plus advenant” (l. 94-95).

¹²⁹ “Il faut tirer ce cuir aux dens / Pour le faire ung petit croistre” (l. 77-78).

¹³⁰ “Fault-il point couldre ceste fente?” (l. 106) he asks, to which the First Wife responds, “Il est tresbien, je m’en contente” (l. 107).

¹³¹ “L’œuvre sera tost achevée, / Il ne fault que ung peu bouter” (l. 110-11).

¹³² “Tenez, velà que je vous donne! / Estes-vous bien de moy content?” (l. 116-17) coyly asks the First Wife, while the second is a bit more abrupt: “Or tenez, velà vostre compte” (l. 132).

¹³³ “Quant vous plaira tout accomant” (l. 125).

¹³⁴ “Ce mignon là sçait bien le stille, / Il besongne bien sans cesser” (l. 147-48), she comments, adding “Le mien n’a garde de me blesser” (l. 150).

¹³⁵ “Ma foy, il est bien eslargy” (l. 151). Presumably at this juncture the “bas” now fits more comfortably.

rendered “oultre mesure” [l. 150] (“beyond measure”) and the workman truly has performed a useful deed.¹³⁶ It is evident that the wives’ Hope For Better was not in vain.

The concept of the ultimate utility of sex is key to a fundamental aspect of this subgenre. These plays with their metaphorical abstractions continually emphasize the human desire for sex as a kind of household or everyday necessity. The working cauldron is needed in order to cook or heat water for laundry and baths; the swept chimney is necessary so that the house will be warm and not catch fire; the vineyard must be tended so there will be wine (and thus more vineyard tilling); the stockings should be padded to keep one’s body insulated, warm, and healthy. When, in the last play of this study, the Second Wife swears by the God that caused us to be born (not insignificantly at the precise moment when she is engaged in the carnal act)¹³⁷—she directs our attention to natural processes, the divinity’s presumed role in making humans the way they are, and one very possible result of copulation. In like manner, spiritual cleansing (assumed in this era to be at least a standard weekly occurrence, if not more) is meant to lead to a joyful renewal of earthly life. This subgenre saw both male and female characters eloquently, comically, express in their reduced yet expanded roles the ultimate basis of human society: sexual activity.¹³⁸ When for whatever reason this need is thwarted, it jeopardizes the foundations for balance, harmony, peace, a cessation of tension, and of course procreation. It is not for nothing that the two gallants in the latter play are named *Espoir* and *De Mieux*. The wives who seek their company cling to the hope of their sexual lot in

¹³⁶ “L’autre m’a fait chose utile” (l. 149).

¹³⁷ “Par celui Dieu qui nous fist naistre / Vous le met[ez] trop coup à coup” (l. 79-80). Stereotypically insatiable, she is actually complaining here that he is “going too fast,” yet in the next breath (and line) demands more: “Encore un coup!” (l. 81).

¹³⁸ In his essay “Evocation...” (p. 526), published in the SITM’s *Atti del Colloquio IV*, Tissier noted also that medieval farces emphasized heteronormative sexual congress as an “oeuvre de chair,” a natural appetite that is not to be blocked.

life—including the degree of their pleasure—improving, as the male characters reiterate at the end in a typical admonition to the audience.¹³⁹ The multiple levels of meaning in these once-disdained yet jubilantly comic *jeux*—at once staged performance, teasing game, and sexual sport, which featured utilitarian objects signifying human parts that stood for the whole person—are dazzling. Yet the underlying message remains clear: Let's get on with the job. It'll do us good.

Part III: Faking It

For well over a decade, I'd read, studied, discussed, but never performed this gloriously bawdy subgenre of plays. I was, I suppose, a bit intimidated by the in-your-face intimacy that seemed requisite for proper staging. True, translation that involves plays on words comes second nature to me. And I can almost always find actors willing to do damn near anything. But what would be my venue? Would an audience enjoy such plays, or find them too over-the-top? Two years ago, however, I saw a call for the annual ACMRS conference, the theme of which was "The Erotic and Eroticism in the Middle Ages and Renaissance." It seemed the perfect opportunity to do what every good actor must do: take a risk. Throwing hesitation to the winds, I decided to boldly go where man and woman have gone many, many times before (and thank mercy, or we wouldn't be here now). I made the conference a proposal: to stage *Rowley Plowbender*, my translation of Gringoire's *likerous* 1512 carnival play *Raoullet Ployart*, in celebration of the 500th anniversary of the original entertainment done at Les Halles in Paris.¹⁴⁰

And they accepted it.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ "Encore elles ont espoir / De mieulx en mieulx y proceder" (l. 181-82).

¹⁴⁰ I found this play the funniest and thought it the least likely to offend.

¹⁴¹ It didn't hurt that I had a good track record with ACMRS, having provided several plays to suit the theme of their conferences....

I was committed. We had to get down and dirty, at least onstage.¹⁴²

The process of staging these on-the-road, seat-of-the-pants plays always means juggling priorities for me. Every prop must count, since we have to pack the car (we try to drive as much as possible; loading props onto a plane is just not cost-effective). These props included a straw basket for Doublette, just come from the market (which doubles as a way of keeping her distance from her husband) and a cloth to cover up the jangling modernity of a conference chair. Costumes are always problematic: I'd love to have new outfits every time, but my troupe works very bare bones, usually for little or no money. This often means making do with the medieval / Renaissance clothes we have on hand. We used what we could from our closets: the lower-middle-class wife and husband, Doublette and Rowley, were garbed in blues and browns, him in a (slightly oversize) light blue doublet and slops, and her in a simple chemise, blue skirt and brown leather bodice.¹⁴³ For the rest, I was fortunate to be able to turn to an expert costumer, Tao Will, whose handiwork on the Herring costume was so well received at the 2010 SITM. I decided to use vibrant colors that would be visually riveting and carry medieval associations. Thus over his simple chemise, the *badin* servant Tattletail was dressed in a tunic in the fool's shade of yellow.¹⁴⁴ Similarly, the two workmen, Words and Deeds, were respectively attired in tunics of red (ironically denoting boldness and courage) and green (appropriately evoking both disorder and illicit love).¹⁴⁵ I decided to equip the two

¹⁴² They even gave us a stage. The troupe considered this a luxury....

¹⁴³ These were fortuitously ironic in their symbolism, blue (at least in some readings of use of the color in the late Middle Ages) being associated with loyalty and faithfulness, especially in love. See Michel Pastoreau, *Figures et couleurs: étude sur la symbolique et la sensibilité médiévales* (Paris: Le léopard d'or, 1986), pp. 38-40.

¹⁴⁴ Pastoreau, pp. 27-42.

¹⁴⁵ Pastoreau, p. 40.

rustic workers with medieval-style straw hats; Mr. Deeds used his to great comic effect, giving off a Western “howdy’ma’am” vibe as he salutes Doublette.

Rehearsals for *Rowley* were both problematic and amazingly fruitful.¹⁴⁶ As the conference was to be held in another state (Arizona), I was working (as I had several times before) with actors both imported and native. With all of my actors, I had detailed email discussions about character and suggested some funny “bits” to explore on their own. We did limited rehearsals with the actors in town (blocking with two missing actors was all but impossible). I used Skype to run lines and hear character voices with the others. Limited as they were, the rehearsals proved their worth. I am fortunate to work often with veteran actors who are not afraid to play with their characters as they rehearse. Early on, our man Rowley suggested he could hear Doublette speaking with a Southern-belle lilt (he actually referenced Scarlett O’Hara), and begged to try his own character with a Brooklynese accent. We explored this; it proved so funny that I decided to make the choices permanent. I asked the other actors to come up with similarly incongruous accents. Our Tattletail offered a silly Scottish brogue; Deeds came up with a Western twang, and his doppelganger Lord Plughole had an ironic “outrageous faux-French accent.”¹⁴⁷ We actually requested that Mr. Words speak in a normal, non-region-specific American accent, as a baseline. Since he hadn’t worked with us before, he was quite relieved....

Once we got to the performance site, I had less than a day and half to bring it all together. My choices in props and blocking, for good or ill, had to work, and work fast. Some of these were veritable—if not vegetable--no-brainers. The motif was

¹⁴⁶ Pun intended.

¹⁴⁷ Ironic since the original text was of course French, and the performance in English....

agricultural.¹⁴⁸ I used produce, obtained a few days before from the farmer's market.¹⁴⁹

An apple in the hands of a sexually unsatisfied woman, i.e. Doublette just back from the marketplace, evokes both Eve's temptation and the wife's frustration over her unplowed "field," as she chides her husband, "You don't till it any more!" A bunch of wilting carrots (I chose my market day very carefully), wielded strategically, became the ultimate emblem of marital impotence:



¹⁴⁸ More specifically, viticulture, and in a future staging I would consider using bunches of grapes, some perhaps tucked lasciviously into the mouth during the scene with Doublette and Deeds. Due to my limited rehearsal time, and to our uncertainty over the surface we would be performing on, I declined to use them for fear a squished grape might, like a banana peel, cause safety issues as well as unintentional hilarity....

¹⁴⁹ It is worthwhile to note that agricultural products, as well as other farmyard euphemisms, were used to describe sexual characteristics both primary and secondary in the anonymous Old French fabliau *La damoiselle qui ne pooit oir parler de foutre*: the cock was...a cock, testicles were barley sacks, breasts were fruits.... See *Nouveau recueil complet des fabliaux*, ed. Willem Noomen & Nico van den Boogaard (Assen/Maastricht, Pays-Bas: Van Gorcum / NRCF, 1988), IV, pp. 59-89. Strategically placed fruit was also used to comic effect (covering up otherwise exposed body parts at *le moment juste*) during the honeymoon scene in *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*, though the farming motif was absent.

I used the leafy end of a spring onion to tickle and titillate parts of Doublette's body, drawing attention to it but one step away from actual human touch, serving as a kind of earthy sex toy.¹⁵⁰ Two phallic white parsnips, which Rowley triumphantly brings to his wife (presumably to be used as dildos....) just as he discovers her flagrant infidelity, fall into the wrong hands—those of the meddling servant Tattletail. They become emblems of Rowley's fate:



Besides our produce, we had recourse to at least one agrarian implement. Mr. Deeds' hoe, which very nearly didn't get to...perform,¹⁵¹ was polished in a very suggestive way, to

¹⁵⁰ Thinking about it, a bulb of fennel might have worked even better. Another opening, another show....

¹⁵¹ It was left behind at the rehearsal location, and retrieved by our intrepid servant Tattletail at the eleventh hour. It was worth it.

offer Doublette a vision of how Deeds spends his free time (and how she might be spending hers soon):



Some of the best bits of comic staging emerged on that one real day of full rehearsal. We finally saw our performance space, so we decided the field hands should come strolling in through the back of the lecture hall towards the stage. On their way, they literally “worked the crowd,” directing their farming-metaphor-laden commentary to various members of the audience.¹⁵² We got great reactions.¹⁵³ When Doublette attempts to get down to business with the first of her prospective gentlemen callers, Mr. Words, Tattletail keeps butting in with comments and suggestions, in what becomes a running gag, very typical of Feydeauvian bedroom farce, of *precoitus interruptus*. In the scene immediately following, Mr. Words’ reluctance to do anything more than brag about his sexual prowess morphs into a delightful primer on one way to stage “performance anxiety”: he dodges her overtures with his words and uses his book (hand-bound using

¹⁵² These were people in the med/Ren community that we’ve known for years and had some idea they could be counted on to be good sports. They were not told about it beforehand, however.

¹⁵³ If not interactions: after Deeds delivered a line that hinted one woman spectator was of an “old vintage,” she gave him the finger, to roaring approval.

medieval techniques) to block her advances. Throwing seductive discretion to the winds, the wife simply chases him around the chair that was our one set piece:¹⁵⁴



Of course, Words proves either unable or unwilling, to the wife's utter disgust. After Doublette has thrown in the towel and dismissed him (Tattletail all but pulling him out by the ear), she is presented with Mr. Deeds. Skeptical at first, she lets herself be drawn in by Deeds' hoe-polishing, then by his proudly-displayed physique. As we know, he says little, but their passionate embrace (a bit of delightfully exhibitionistic necking, with a bit of groping thrown in) gives her even greater confidence that she will finally get some satisfaction:

¹⁵⁴ Those familiar with Disneyland's *Pirates of the Caribbean* ride might find special resonance....



The actual Doing of the Deed ended up a bit more conservatively staged than I'd originally envisioned. As much as I wanted it to be shocking, even more did I want to elicit laughter, and I felt the comedy would be enhanced by leaving a little to the imagination.¹⁵⁵ And finally, I didn't want to risk the vice police showing up.¹⁵⁶ So I had Tattletail and Mr. Words drape a cloth (fortuitously the same color as the wallpaper of the conference room) and had the fornicating pair slip behind it, so that only heads (with a bit of shoulder, perforce) would be seen bobbing about merrily during the first two encounters:

¹⁵⁵ It did what I intended; the audience loved it. Still, in hindsight I could have pushed it further, and if given the chance to restage it more daringly, I would. Possibilities include altering the text a little so as to interpolate more gestures, utilizing more produce, and using more farming implements—like a real plow!

¹⁵⁶ This was, after all, staged in Arizona, where all kinds of odd things were (and are) being outlawed, including the teaching of *The Tempest* (in Tucson). <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2087667/Shakespeares-The-Tempest-banned-Arizona-schools-law-bans-ethnic-studies.html>





Permitting only parts of bodies to show, to be sure, only threw emphasis on what was lacking, thus evoking, à la Derrida, the power of the presence of absence. But of course we WANTED people to pay attention to the Man --and Woman--Behind The Curtain.¹⁵⁷ For the third and final sexual encounter, which involved making some delightfully energetic (though hardly romantic) sounds of lovemaking, we gave the audience first a glimpse of torso and arms and then shook a leg (well, two). We employed fake legs, Hallowe'en props in fact, which we could raise and wave above the drape without fear of falling over or pulling a back muscle. The legs were appropriately dressed, one in a white stocking (signifying Doublette's delicate limb) and then other in a red one (Mr. Deeds' scarlet hosen).

¹⁵⁷ I refer to the quintessentially American film, *The Wizard of Oz*.



All three “rounds” were done with as much haste as passion, emphasizing the natural need, the itch that has just been scratched. Thus concluded the sexual details of the coupling scene.

Rowley, of course, walks in on the pair so delectably *in delicto* and, once Deeds escapes, hauls the now-much-less-stressed Doublette off before the magistrate. To add to the comedy, Lord Plughole appears in a resplendent full Burgundian outfit...which is not yet quite fully on. The humor here is dual, involving the issue of his obviously doubled character with Deeds in the play—we used the same actor, my husband--and the stereotypical hilarity of getting dressed quickly and frenziedly following an illicit liaison.¹⁵⁸ As it turned out, this comic bit was easily rendered, since the actor had a devil of a time getting into his costume and back onstage in time. Lord Plughole makes his

¹⁵⁸ A modern equivalent is the opening scene in Bernard Slade’s play *Same Time Next Year*.

final pronouncement that the vineyard must be tilled. But it's not as if he didn't have a little direct motivation from Doublette, as she pleads for mercy directly to his codpiece:



We made sure said codpiece was extra-well padded with old socks, to ensure the scene was a... package deal.

Overall, the performance was a great success. In just under 20 minutes, we had tied in with the conference theme, entertained our audience, and staged a play that had been neglected since its triumphant debut 500 years before.¹⁵⁹ My exploration of this romp of a farce had yielded fruitful results, just the way nature intended. But I've only really begun to explore the performative possibilities of this subgenre, and I hope to have future opportunities to stage this and other of these plays. I look forward to sharing my research and results among colleagues who, like me, find this venerable period of theatrical culture endlessly revealing about the ever-shifting, everlasting human spirit.

¹⁵⁹ I have no knowledge of it being staged since, in the original or in translation, but it's certainly possible others have undertaken some production; I will continue to scour Youtube....We lifted a glass to the honored memory of Pierre Gringoire at the ACMRS banquet following the performance.