
Martin Montanus as Entertainer and Social Critic

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Sixteenth-century scholarship has predominantly focused on the profound impact of the Protestant Reformation and the subsequent Counter-Reformation, both movements leading to a flood of broadsheets, hymns, religious plays, treatises, prayers, didactic poems, translations of the Bible, fables, and even tracts on the devil and his workings.¹ Recent investigations, however, have alerted us to the surprising fallacy of this impression because most people continued to lead their normal lives, making money, pursuing politics, traveling, and raising families. Indeed, we might say that the shrill tones of the religious discourse during that century have occasionally been overemphasized in critical studies of the social conditions and the literature of that time (see, for instance, Hsia). The other side of the coin proves to be that the public obviously enjoyed satirical, facetious literature to a large extent, perhaps more than ever before and perhaps as much-needed compensation for the serious religious dissensions and tensions tearing early modern Europe apart. George Huppert reaches the insightful conclusion that “the mass of the [sixteenth-century] population kept resisting indoctrination. This was true of Lutheran Saxony as well as of Catholic Bavaria—and it was true in the cities as well as in the countryside” (145). He adds the important observation that “Attitudes toward authority, work, women, commerce, or celibacy, for instance, provide test cases of this conflict between an ancient culture, preserved in the museum of clerical tradition, and a newer one, born of the experience of the medieval commune” (148).²

Already Boccaccio had initiated a new secular orientation with his famous *Decameron* (ca. 1350). He was followed by a large number of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century writers of short verse or prose narratives that often hinge on specific criticism against individuals, human behavior, and social groups, and are regularly explicitly predicated on sexual themes and allusions. Poggio Bracciolini (1385-1459) created enormous interest, but also protest, all over Europe with his witty, but often rather embarrassingly prurient *facetiae*, and he was subsequently followed by numerous other authors exploring and exposing human weakness, failings, stupidity, and ignorance.³

Despite, but perhaps just because of, the unabashed treatment of sexuality and the functions of the human body, this vast genre of satirical and didactic literature enjoyed considerable popularity in Germany far into the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, whether we think of the anonymous collection of tales *Till Eulenspiegel* (also *Dyl Ulenspiegel*), Philipp Frankfurter's *Pfarrer vom Kalenberg*, Michael Lindener's *Rastbüchlein* and *Katzipori*, Achilles Widmann's *History Peter Lewen des andern Kalenbergers*, or Wolf Büttner's *Claus Narr* (Röcke, "Schwanksammlung"; Dieckow).

A closer examination of early modern literature reveals an enormous interest in the comic, the satirical, the absurd, and even the grotesque, as expressed by numerous examples of surprisingly transgressive narratives, poems, and dramas. In fact, we can observe a profound sense of embarking toward new shores in human experiences, and the natural reaction globally seems to have been to break out in laughter. Likewise, poets and writers have regularly provided the relevant textual basis to make people laugh about the contradictory, often unexplainable if not abstruse nature of things, whether we think of *Till Eulenspiegel* or Rabelais' *Gargantua* (Classen, "Der vertrackte," "Transgression and Laughter"). This does not mean, as some German scholars have argued, placing a bit too much emphasis on the global implications of their hypotheses, that laughter opened the floodgates for evil incarnate to enter the world. Klaus Grubmüller suggests, for instance, that the didactic entertaining verse narratives by Heinrich Kaufringer (early fifteenth century) reflect a loss of balance in the social structure, the disappearance of generally accepted authorities, the lack of an overarching legal system, hence the development of an "arbitrary and evil world" (*Novellistik* 1013).⁴ We will have to see, however, whether the association of laughter with evil and chaos can truly withstand the critical reading.

Laughter has always represented an intriguing phenomenon, based on discrepancies, surprise, shock, comic relief of tension and fear, and the conflict of mutually contradictory aspects or performances. People laugh about the unexpected and ridiculous, which trigger this reaction because they do not fit into the expected norms and yet claim to be part of the normative world. Those who tell jokes help the audience to form a community at the cost of ostracizing the other/s, and those who laugh rob those who claim false authority of their pompous mask and expose them in their shallowness, stupidity, and evilness (Classen, "Laughter").⁵ Although hardly any sixteenth-century author of humorous tales pursues a religious argument either pro or con the Protestant Reformation, the laughter that their narratives create seems to target both sides of the theological divide and bring back the human creature as the central concern for all, irrespective of the many ideological arguments and struggles.

Drawing on Nietzsche's *Gay Science*, Jean Duvignaud offers the following rumination in *Le Propre de l'homme*: "laughter [is a phenomenon] that for a fleeting moment pitches humans before an infinite freedom, eluding constraints and rules, drawing them away from the irremediable nature of their condition to discover unforeseeable connections, and suggesting a common existence where the imaginary and real life will be reconciled" (qtd. in Reiss 224f). We would also have to consider that laughter, comedy, and satire live from community, performance, public reception, and mutual understanding. In other words, those who laugh normally express that they feel comfortable, secure, and powerful within their social group—unless we also consider the very opposite phenomenon of embarrassed, fearful, and insecure laughter, though this would, *e negativo*, likewise confirm the basic definition of laughter in epistemological, or critical-instructional, terms as a medium of enlightenment since it sheds new and unexpected light on people and conditions and surreptitiously illuminates their hilarious, often ridiculous presumptuousness or false claims.⁶

To shed more light on this highly complex, entangled phenomenon, particularly with regard to its extensive cultural-historical significance (Bergson), we explore a selection of short prose narratives in two major collections by the sixteenth-century writer Martin Montanus whose works promise to be of exemplary nature in social-historical terms. Let us first gain a more solid grasp of comic literature in the early modern age, a time when the bitter religious conflicts seemed to have prevented the flowering of such a genre in the first place. This reflects upon a curious phenomenon in the study of sixteenth-century German literature that has been studied for far too long through a too narrow lens. Jörg Wickram's famous *Rollwagenbüchlein* from 1555, for instance—in a way quite similar to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, though without the specific narrative framework—could serve well as an example of how much didactic and satirical interests intertwined and determined early-modern literate culture, based on the most human experience of laughter (Classen, "Witz, Humor, Satire"). Nevertheless, many of these humorous, yet also didactic short prose narratives have not attracted much attention by modern scholarship.⁷

Investigating what people laughed about at a specific time allows us to gain a deeper understanding of the mental history (Dinzelbacher, esp. xv-xxxvii) and the fundamental cultural conditions prevalent in the sixteenth century, or other centuries, for that matter (Sanders; Janik).⁸ This gains particular validity when we consider how authorities such as the Catholic Church regularly intervened and tried to ban or control comedy, laughter, and jokes at certain times. There were detractors and supporters and, as Ernst Robert Curtius has already alerted us, many theologians expatiated on this issue because Christ was never said to have laughed. If man is created in the image of God, would we then have to imagine that God

might be filled with gaiety since we laugh? There is no doubt that laughter occurs throughout the Middle Ages and beyond, and “in fact we find in the Middle Ages *ludicra* within domains and genres which, to our modern taste, schooled by classicistic aesthetics, absolutely exclude any such mixtures” (424). Max Wehrli added the significant observation, “The *Risibilitas* signifies a humanism not only in a secular sense; it is also, both with respect to the good and the dubious, a characteristic of man’s historical nature” (181).

Johannes Bolte suggested that with the establishment of the Augsburg Peace Treaty in 1555, settling for the time the bitter conflicts between the Catholics and the Protestants, public attention quickly turned away from the theological questions toward secular themes and topics, as reflected by the sudden flood of jest literature that drew intensively from medieval and humanistic texts, focusing, above all, on Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, then on popular ballads and songs (Bolte vii-viii).⁸ However, if we consider collections such as *Till Eulenspiegel*, Johannes Pauli’s *Schimpf und Ernst*, or Philipp Frankfurter’s *Der Pfaffe vom Kalenberg*, we detect a continuous tradition already since the days when book printing really began to take off, that is circa 1470 to 1500, though the largest bulk of jest books and similar anthologies of facetious tales appeared not until the 1550s (Gotzkowsky 457-586). Book printers and book sellers quickly realized the considerable success with this entertaining literature and so contributed energetically to the vast dissemination of these texts that allowed people throughout the century and beyond to find entertainment, to laugh about foolish neighbors, pompous sycophants, ridiculous administrators, members of minority groups, such as Jews, and other disliked individuals high and low on the social scale.

Can these theoretical reflections be applied to the entertaining yet also didactic and political short narratives composed in the sixteenth century as well, which make up a vast corpus of heretofore mostly untapped literary creations, mostly still lingering in outdated editions? Let us turn now to Martin Montanus, who published his *Schwankbücher* [*Jest Books*] between 1557 (first appearance of *Wegkürzer*) and 1566 (*Gartengesellschaft*, 1560; shorter texts later), and who promises to be an excellent test case for our investigation of the mental-historical significance of laughter because he drew from such a wide range of literary sources and apparently appealed considerably to his audience.

We do not know much about Montanus, but we can be certain that he originated from Strasbourg and Latinized his original name, perhaps Bergmann or Amberg, to present himself as a member of the learned, humanistic movement. Judging from various autobiographical references in his work, he seems to have been born around 1537. In 1557 he went to Ulm, then transferred to Dillingen where he might have

attended the recently established university (1549, closed in 1802), though the records do not contain his name. Here Montanus began to publish his first text, the *Wegkürzer* [*Shortening of the Travel*]; but in 1558 he became a victim of hostilities against his own patron, the former mayor of Augsburg, Herbrot, when an anonymous writer published a pasquinade against him (Bolte 457-475). To avoid the conflict, he left the town soon thereafter, traveling widely through southern Germany and Italy. He later settled in Strasbourg where he continued to publish his works, such as the so-called second part of his *Gartengesellschaft* [*Garden Company*], several plays, individual short stories, and translations from Boccaccio's *Decameron*. We can assume that he died around 1560, but again no certain information is available.

A number of indirect references in his works indicate that he belonged to the lower social class but that he had received some education that even included Latin. He espoused a rather critical attitude toward the Catholic Church, but we cannot be sure whether he was a Protestant for that reason alone. For inspiration, Montanus drew mostly from Latin jest literature, Johannes Pauli's *Schimpf und Ernst* (1522), Hans Sachs' "Meisterlieder" ["Songs by a Master"], contemporary broadsheets, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Poggio's *Facetiae*, Burkard Waldis' *Esopus* (1548), some chronicles, and the oral tradition. His *Wegkürzer* appeared in twelve different editions, making it one of the more popular collations of sixteenth-century jest tales, selections of which were also translated into Low German and Latin. Montanus' *Gartengesellschaft*, on the other hand, seems to have been printed only once, around 1560 (Gotzkowsky 529-535).

He might not have been one of the most sophisticated authors of his time, if we follow the opinion generally formulated by modern scholarship,⁹ but he certainly appealed to his contemporary audience and addressed common concerns and themes that were of larger significance in an intriguingly facetious manner.¹⁰ In this regard it is truly amazing that Montanus has not received the critical attention that he deserves (Diecke 41-42), here disregarding some tentative attempts by Elisabeth Wåghäll Nivre to analyze his strongly misogynistic attitudes (57-76), and by Michael Waltenberger to investigate the discursive nature of sixteenth-century books of jests more broadly (though without consultation of Montanus' work).¹¹

Many of Montanus' tales contain graphic allusions to sex and are characterized by an open discussion of genitalia, intercourse, and the enjoyment of the body as a sexual object. But the laughter, which the narratives are commonly geared to evoke, does not necessarily hinge on male fantasy only; instead we can discover a much more complex set of operations that trigger the comic and hence imply quite different social-critical functions. Montanus actually proves to be a noteworthy satirical author insofar as he addresses a wide range of themes, draws from an impressive

spectrum of sources, deals with a highly diverse panorama of protagonists from all kinds of social, intellectual, and economic backgrounds, and he also demonstrates a considerable skill in profiling people's shortcomings, misunderstandings, and ignorance in a most facetious manner, expressing himself in a compact, concise, and surprisingly effective style.

A good example proves to be a tale in *Wegkürzer*, "Ein fraw erzeygt sich allweg gegen irem mann freüntlich" (no. 41), where a husband distrusts his wife's regular demonstration of her love for him. He cannot believe that a woman would be honestly sympathizing with a man, both in good and bad conditions, so he decides to test her, creating an extreme situation. He plucks almost all the feathers of a rooster, and only leaves those on his head and his rear, making him look like a devilish creature. Then he pretends to be mortally sick and lies down on his bed. As expected, his wife immediately comes to him and expresses her great worry and fear. In fact, she goes so far as to claim that she would be happy to die for him if that could help him. At that moment, however, she suddenly notices the weird-looking rooster and believes in her foolishness that it might be death himself. Terrified, she points with her finger toward her husband and whispers, "Hie ligt er, hie ligt er" ["He is lying here, he is lying here"] (106), as if to direct death away from herself and to take her husband who seems to be on his way out anyway. As soon as the husband has realized how little he would have to believe any of her expressions of sorrow or happiness for him henceforth, he gets up and dismisses her, never trusting her again, which the epimythion then confirms, grouping her together with all other women, but so also with all haberdashers, as unreliable and foolish.

Of course, the misogynist treatment of women is undeniable and superficially proves to be the key to the entire narrative. We are supposed to laugh, and the surprising development of the plot justifies this as well. However, the facetious element would be just as much at work if the gender roles were reversed because the tale is actually predicated on people's fear of death and their absolute dread of the moment when it suddenly appears in concrete shape, like a ghost. The wife exposes her hypocrisy, as expected, and the husband proves to be justified in his rejection of her pretense of being emotionally deeply committed to her husband under any circumstances. However, the ultimate critical realization pertains to the sudden confrontation with a figure—here the oddly looking rooster—that could represent death.

The tale does not imply an absolute condemnation of the wife for trying to avert the death threat from herself, especially because her husband seems to be already on his deathbed. Not surprisingly, and actually quite logically, she tries to encourage the creature that she mistakes for death to go only for her seemingly moribund husband and to spare her from dying. Readers must have laughed because her fear of death

and her instinctual responses appear so natural and would easily find replication in any other situation similar to this one.¹² As the narrator emphasizes, “der ist warlich nicht ein weyß mann” [“he is truly not a wise man” (i.e., who would believe such false impressions”)] (106); the ultimate cause for the laughter rests in the effort to maintain one’s wisdom and to practice reason at all cost, which also involves rejecting those who cling to superstition and reach their decisions based on superficial observations without any effort to verify and control them.

The tale about a young woman’s wit and intelligence in Montanus’ *Gartengesellschaft* easily confirms this observation, particularly because here the perspective rests on a female protagonist who demonstrates that gender is not necessarily the cause of laughter, even though the poet often reveals a misogynistic attitude.¹³ In “Ein junge dochtr theylt drey ayer auss, das neun darauss wurden” (no. 14), a man has three daughters, all nubile, but he does not have enough money to marry them off at the same time and to give them the required dowry. In order to choose the one best qualified and prepared for marriage, he hands out three eggs to each of them, telling them, “und welche ihre ayer am besten anlegen kan, also das ihr am meisten daraus werden, der selbigen will ich ein mann geben; die andern muessen lenger warten” [“and the one who knows how to invest her eggs best so that she has the highest profit from it, I will give a husband; the others will have to wait longer”] (275-276).¹⁴

The oldest daughter takes the three eggs and boils them well. Once she is done, she hands over one of them to her father and says that with this one egg in his possession he has altogether three, explicitly referring to his two testicles. The second egg she gives her mother and says that with this one egg she will soon have three when she will sleep with her husband at night who will give her two “eggs,” again a reference to the testicles. The third egg she intends to keep for herself because if her father were to marry her to a man, and if she then were to sleep with him, she would also receive two eggs from him—i.e., his testicles, so she would then also have three eggs: in total, therefore, nine eggs.

In the conclusion the narrator comments that neither of the two other sisters knew to calculate so well and make nine eggs out of three. Hence the oldest wins the competition and is the first one to get married: “Also behielt sie das veld, und muest ihr der vatter ein mann geben” [“thus she won the field, and her father had to give her a husband”] (276). The short narrative proves to be brilliant in its poignant treatment of sexuality, marriage, desire, and the conflict among sisters because their father is not wealthy enough to provide them with a dowry. The laughter, however, is predicated on the oldest daughter’s intelligence in playing on the symbolism of the egg in its clearly sexual context, utilizing a smart mathematical strategy that

underscores the sexual allusions even further, and, above all, on her display of energy and determination to win this competition because she wants to marry as soon as possible. Moreover, she seems to be the only one who clearly perceives the sexual symbolism of the eggs and knows how to assess male sexuality just as much as her own, thereby clearly indicating her readiness for marital life. Otherwise she would not have referred so openly to the sexuality enjoyed by her parents and to the erotic pleasures that she expects to receive from her future husband.

In “Ein mann sagt, er het noch ein kleins zipffelin” (no. 36), the comedy of the story again draws on the sexual theme, as is rather common in Montanus’ and other contemporary authors’ works.¹⁵ But both here and in most other instances, the actual focus does not rest on the prurient interest—though this was certainly not excluded, on the contrary—and it would be erroneous to claim that this and many other literary examples represent nothing but pornographic elements. After all, sixteenth-century public discourse centered heavily on sexual themes that were obviously enjoyed openly both by the male and the female audience mostly because the resulting laughter revealed other dimensions and had epistemological functions, shedding important light on people’s foolishness, wit, morality, ethics, virtues and vices.¹⁶ In other words, the surprisingly frank treatment of sexuality is not the ultimate intention, which would be pornography; instead it serves as the springboard for further, more important issues relevant to the well-being of society at large. The discourse on sexuality, at any rate, does not exhaust itself in purely pornographic interests, if that is the correct term in the first place. It remains even doubtful whether that discourse accurately reflects sexual practices at early-modern courts, with the princes regularly enjoying, as some scholars have claimed, a kind of harem for their personal pleasure.¹⁷

Here, the conflict results from a wife’s pretense to dislike sexuality, regularly objecting to her husband’s demands to let him sleep with her. In fact, she repeatedly states that she would prefer him to be castrated, which would finally give her the desired peace. But the husband does not trust her claim and tests her in a rather gruesome, though also facetious manner. He secures a fake penis, that is, an animal’s intestine filled with blood, which the narrator identifies as “gemachtes wüerstlin” [“a little sausage prepared for him”] (289), a hilarious pun on the similarity in the shape of the fake object and his actual organ. One day, while chopping some wood, he suddenly pretends to have hit himself and so having lost his penis through this accident. To enhance the satirical tone of this scene, the husband refers to his “bupenhan” (289), a hilarious term for the penis that defies translation because it serves only as a linguistic substitute for the real word (perhaps: a boy’s rooster?). To prove the veracity of his words, he holds up the bloody cut-up sausage, whereupon she

immediately decries him as a worthless creature who does not deserve to be married any more. Now, in an abrupt turn-around of the entire narrative, she argues that a man without a penis is no longer good for anything, so she packs her stuff and is about to leave him because she wants to find an intact man who has not lost his penis.¹⁸ Having realized her hypocrisy, he calms her down by claiming that he still has a little extra penis, “ein kleins stimplin” [“a little stump”] (290), which she accepts as a compensation for the real loss because “weger ein zipffelin weder gar nichts” [“better a little tail than nothing”] (290).

The intended laughter is directed at her ignorance and the duplicity in her pretense that she truly rejects male sexuality and would like him to leave her alone and not bother her with his physical desires. Of course, in this case Montanus surely addresses primarily his male audience and allows it to laugh about foolish women who do not know how to appreciate fully the joys of sexuality in marriage. However, the humor is also predicated on the criticism of such sycophants who say one thing and mean something else and thereby claim to be holier than everyone else. The narrator insists on the positive value of sex, at least within marriage, and ridicules those who want to abstain from it for foolish reasons. To assume that women would have less interest in sex becomes the object of the intended laughter, which establishes a new sense of community where the representatives of both genders accept each other in their basic desires and needs, satirizing those who believe that they can, and even want to, lead a life without sex.¹⁹

In another story Montanus combines the epistemological with the scatological, which results in rather grotesque laughter, but this in turn reveals a fundamental truth about human language. In “Ein fraw fragt ihren man, wie lieb er sie hett” (no. 54) the wife of a nobleman tortures him day and night with the question how much he is in love with her. Finally, when he has gotten tired of her incessant badgering, he replies that he loves her as much as a “guot oder haimlich scheysen” [“a good or secret emptying of the bowels”] (304). For her, of course, entirely baffled by this strange comment, this amounts to a severe insult, and she feels deeply saddened and also angry with him. One day, however, while they are spending time together exchanging tenderness despite her feeling of rejection, she needs to go to the bathroom, which he tries to prevent. He holds her back for such a long time that she finally protests and breaks out in anger: “Ey lieber, lasst mich doch gehn! Ich muoss (mit gunst zuomelden) scheysen” [“Now, my dear, let me go, I have (with your permission) to shit”] (304).²⁰ This is exactly the situation that he had been looking for in order to explain to her what he meant by his original comment. He points out to her that the use of the bathroom is an existential need of all people. In analogy, and this must have been the moment when the audience broke out in

laughter, he cannot live without her just like he cannot live without emptying his bowels—both fundamental conditions for him, hence also for her: “als lieb dir solches ist, als lieb hab ich dich” [“as much as you love it, so much do I love you”] (304). In the epimythion we are then told that this simile opened her eyes, and from then on she loved him as much as he loved her.

The humor is obviously based on some scatological elements, but the difference from *Till Eulenspiegel* with its extraordinary focus on feces in a plethora of ever-changing contexts and situations cannot be overlooked. In contrast, Montanus refers to the basic needs in human life without exploiting the possibility of transgressing social and ethical norms by way of scatology. However, insofar as the audience would have immediately understood what imagery he has the husband play on in order to explain his mysterious statement, they can all join in the laughter because it goes hand in hand with an epistemological illumination: “Da erkant die fraw erst...” [“Only then did the woman realize...”] (304). The narrative does not imply any clear strategy to satirize or to ridicule the woman because of her gender. On the contrary, the couple enjoys a happy, love-filled marriage in which both respect and cherish each other, except that she is excessively concerned with getting explicit confirmation of his love for her, perhaps because of her own insecurity, but certainly because she does not understand how to trust his words.

Although he finally describes his love for her in scatological terms, he truly loves her, as she grasps only at the end, which specifically points us into the direction of language in its problematic nature, so easily subject to misunderstanding. The minor marital conflict finds its lasting solution at the end once both have discovered ways to communicate with each other in a more complex manner, no longer needing to explain every little detail or aspect of their emotions. The laughter supports, of course, the witty husband and his sophisticated though somewhat scatological language, but the wife is not necessarily a victim; instead the laughter also evokes sympathy and support for a good marriage where the mutual understanding is so strong that further inquiries are no longer necessary.

In an interesting parallel narrative, the following “Ein fraw hett ihren buolen bey ir” (no. 55), which is directly based on Boccaccio’s second tale of the seventh day in his *Decameron*, the table is turned, and this time the quick-witted wife makes a fool of her husband by manipulating him most skillfully into believing her words with which she quickly hides the fact of her having committed adultery.²¹ But whereas in Boccaccio the young woman is described as an honorable, charming, and respect-demanding young lady, despite her poverty, Montanus changes her description entirely, transforming her into a lusty woman who passionately enjoys sex: “den pfluog bas zuo beth fueren kunt dann kaine ihrer nachbeuren” [“she knew better

how to lead the plow in bed than all her neighbors”] (305). In his narrative, then, she harbors no noteworthy inhibitions to break her marriage vow.²²

She develops an adulterous relationship with a young man but is caught by surprise one day when her husband returns home early because he had not realized that it was a saint's day and all work had ceased. He hopes nevertheless to make some money by selling a big old barrel to someone who has accompanied him to his house. Unfortunately for the woman, she had sent her lover into the barrel as a hiding place, which now puts her in danger of being found out as an adulteress.

The narrator characterizes her as “listig” [“clever, tricky”] (307), a key word for all those who operate secretly, in a sophisticated manner, deceptively, who plan ahead, and understand their world and language better than others (Semmler; Schwarz). In the history of German medieval and early-modern literature, some of the most outstanding masters of a discourse based on *list* were Hagen (*Nibelungenlied*), Tristan (Gottfried von Straßburg's *Tristan*), Pfaffe Amis (The Stricker's *Pfaffe Amis*), Till Eulenspiegel (in the anonymous collection of tales), and many characters in the late-medieval *mæren* (short verse narratives). The lady in our tale proves to be a worthy representative of *list* operators, manipulating her world by means of her powerful use of language. In the face of the new dilemma that her lover is hiding in the barrel which another man is interested in buying from her husband, she changes the conditions with the barrel immediately, alerting her lover inside about her new plan by speaking up loudly that she has already found an interested buyer who has offered even more money. Although the text does not say anything about the pitch of her voice, it is clear that she signals to her lover what she intends to do because she laments and curses her husband: “du unheusslicher mann” [“you ‘un-housely’ man: i.e., one who does not care about the house”] (307). When the latter enters the room where the barrel is located the young man quickly adapts to the role assigned to him by his mistress, jumps out of the barrel, asking for the wife as his negotiation partner, and then accepts the husband as the replacement. He complains about the dirt inside, and insists that it be cleaned before he buys it, which the husband happily agrees to do.

The hilarious situation then enters an almost grotesque stage, because while the husband works inside of the barrel, his wife places herself at the entrance, giving him instructions where to apply his tool, and the still not satisfied and daredevil lover has sex with her from behind. The narrator emphasizes that the cleaning was completed at the same time as the young man finished his “labor” (308), and the paralleling of both activities must have evoked the desired laughter among the audience: “Der mann im fass und der jung mit der frawen yeglicher sein arbeit verbracht hette, das fass sauber ward, und er sich von der frawen zuoruck zoge” [“The man in the

barrel did his work and the young man did the same with the woman. When the barrel was clean, he pulled away from the woman”] (308).

In the epimythion the narrator comments that the woman preserved her honor, whereas her husband remained a cuckolded fool for the rest of his life. Of course, the misogynist in Montanus comes forward as well when he concludes with four verses on the untrustworthiness of ice upon which one should not build a house, then of Jews, and finally of women. Whoever would be willing to rely on any of them would demonstrate that he has lost his mind (308). Nevertheless, the framework and outcome demonstrate that women could also be in charge and manipulate their world by means of intelligent use of their words and objects at hand, which ultimately detracts from the probably intended swipe at adulterous women.

But the laughter aims deeper, especially because the sexual act carries a double meaning insofar as metaphorically the young man has sex both with the wife and her husband, except that the latter is stuck in the barrel and working on cleaning it, while the lover is stuck in the woman’s vagina and “scrapes it”—pornographically speaking—in his own way. Of course, she emerges as condemnable in the narrowly moral sense since she cuckolds her husband, even in his own presence, though hidden from view in the barrel. But that criticism does not carry very far because she really impresses the audience with her intelligence and wit with which she rescues both her lover and herself, maintaining honor where there should be none. Moreover, as we may conclude, she has basically emasculated him when she requests him to enter the barrel and clean it because he drops, as the text states, “sein werckzeug” [“his tools”] (308) and takes a scraper used in the preparation of “brodtscharren” [“bread-dough”], thereby signaling the reversal of the gender roles, whereas she stands at the entrance and shouts commands at him. Although the text seems to indicate that now the young man is in charge and abuses the woman from behind, in reality she has positioned herself so that her husband cannot see what is happening outside and she can be available for the young man’s sexual desires, which are obviously her own as well.

The laughter is directed at the poor husband and his utter ignorance, who is utterly fooled by his wife and metaphorically “screwed” by the young man, and it is triggered by the wife who knows so well how to operate in her own space successfully to deceive the simple mason and to enjoy sex to the fullest extent outside of the bonds of marriage. Despite the obvious negative evaluation of her behavior, the laughter reveals how much the woman’s ruse could meet general approval because she has operated so intelligently that she can preserve her honor and enjoy sex with her lover at the same time without her husband noticing anything, entirely occupied with his concern to sell the barrel. In fact, the comic dominates so strongly that any

moral or religious concerns fall by the wayside, especially since the audience has to realize that everything is manipulable and contingent, depending on rhetorical skills, argumentative abilities, and adaptability in difficult situations.

In “Zuo Dillingen werffen die edelleut eine über den schlitten ab” (no. 71), which Montanus either made up himself or based it on some oral account,²³ we hear of a group of young noblemen who have convinced a prostitute to participate in a sled ride through town. We can only surmise her profession as a prostitute, but the allusion to her dubious behavior seems explicit enough: “die etwann auff holtzschuehen in druckenem wetter gangen ist” [“who once walked in wooden shoes during dry weather”] (330), implying that she has transgressed some norms or role expectations because such wooden shoes would be used only to protect the shoes from the mud and filth on the street after a rainfall, not in dry weather. At any rate, shoes commonly carry an erotic connotation, and wooden shoes reflect erotic aberration even further (Steele 98-99).²⁴ Not surprisingly, the outcome of the sled party with her falling off into the snow and shouting out to the bishop a vulgar comment confirms this impression.

When she is thrown off the sled, her clothes slip upwards, exposing her naked body to the bishop’s view. However, she does not care about the embarrassing situation; on the contrary, she remains lying there, with her genitals uncovered, and she calls out to him, “Luog, bischoff, ob das loch gebrent oder gebort sey!” [“Look, Bishop, whether the hole was burned or drilled!”] (330). Not only are we invited to laugh about this dirty joke, but the male company in the story laughs as well because they have achieved their goal of ridiculing the bishop, so we face an internal and an external laughter, and each appeals to a community of those who understand how to translate the words and to analyze quickly the facetious, transgressive situation.

The woman does not simply fall off the sled; instead the men make the sled turn over and so force her to land in the snow. Moreover, they must have known that she does not wear anything underneath her dress because they were looking for an opportune moment to embarrass the bishop who was observing the entire scene from high above. After all, the young woman is satirically identified as “ein guote dochter” [“good daughter”] at the beginning, then as a “frumb dochter” [“virtuous daughter”] at the end. The bishop is the butt of the joke—no pun implied—insofar as the company of noblemen intends to provoke him in his expected, required celibacy and to stimulate his erotic imagination by exposing the young woman’s vaginal area to his gaze.

Similarly as in the previous narratives, the prostitute—or simply a loose woman—knows how to utilize her words to outsmart the male opponent, here the bishop, by deliberately playing on her sexualized body as a painful reminder to the

onlooker that he is not allowed to enjoy sex with her, or with any other woman. Significantly, she is a most willing participant in the game organized by the young men who obviously target the bishop as a representative of the clergy, but the development of the facetious scene entirely depends on her ability to utilize the actually embarrassing, shameful situation to make everyone laugh. We laugh with them because the silenced, entirely passive bishop who is leaning out of the window has no defense available and is probably made to feel uncomfortable because he has been suddenly and unexpectedly exposed to the spectacle of a naked female body. Whereas this probably implied unwelcome sexual arousal for him—the setting is specifically arranged this way to force the bishop to get a good look at the woman’s genitals—the woman laughs at him and makes us laugh with her because she feels nothing for the church dignitary and simply utilizes her body as an instrument of public seduction of a person of high religious authority. Moreover, the narrative works so well because it is predicated on the gaze first by the bishop onto the scene, hence on the woman’s nakedness, then by the woman who looks up and faces his gaze in a satirical, mocking manner, utterly defying the man in him by referring to her vagina as an object that a craftsman—not God, as the traditional theological discourse would label it—might have made, specifically undermining the sexual connotation, hence trying to make a fool out of the bishop.

Despite the brevity of the narrative, the comical function reveals more than one level of meaning, one of which proves to be sexual, the other operating with the consequences of the gaze, and another regarding the power of the human language if used in the proper context and with the right selection of words. It is situational comedy, and we as the audience are entitled to approach it as voyeurs who can quickly switch our perspectives from the group down below in the snow up to the bishop who is forced to witness the display in front of his eyes, while being subjected to sexual seduction, and also rejected as a potential wooer of the prostitute. The laughter that also involves us proves to be a powerful instrument to open up the complex messages contained in this short tale. It might not excel through any particular literary quality, but in its comic function that leads to considerable epistemological depth, illuminating the underlying learning processes, it proves to be rather remarkable as a representative of sixteenth-century comic literature.

Another, final, example might help us to confirm this observation, whereas the total number of tales included in Montanus’ *Wegkürzer* or *Gartengesellschaft* prohibits the exhaustive discussion of what laughter means in this early-modern context. In “Ein rebknecht beschlafft seins meisters weib” (no. 73) a wine grower tells his farm hand at lunch time to go to see his wife and ask her to fry him some eggs as a meal, while he will be waiting for him outside in the vineyard.²⁵ The farm hand follows the

order, but requests from the wife that she sleep with him, which she finds shocking, if not abhorrent, disbelieving that her husband could have even suggested that to the young man. So she runs out to the vineyard and asks him herself, but without explaining the details of her confusion, questioning only, “Mann, soll ichs thun?” [“Husband, shall I do it?”] (331). Irritated by her presumed silliness that she would ask for his explicit approval to prepare a meal for the servant, he sends her home, sternly warning her to return and to obey his order. The narrator, aware of possible confusion on the side of his audience, clarifies here what the farmer really has in mind (fried eggs), but he also emphasizes that the wife does not inquire any further and simply turns to the farm hand, confirming that his original wish will be fulfilled, that is, they have sex. When the husband returns home later, the farm hand complains that the wife had not given him enough fried eggs—or does he mean that the eggs had not been fried enough?—which irritates his master again, who admonishes his wife do better the next time: “die ayer ein ander mal bass bachen” [“to fry the eggs better the next time”] (331). Both the servant and the wife consider this satisfactory for themselves, and they happily embark on an affair behind the husband’s back: “und darnach offtermals solche ayer buochen und mit einander assen” [“and thereafter they fried such eggs often and ate them together”] (331).

The facetious character of this tale is self-evident, but the point of criticism remains unclear at first. The allusion to the eggs with their explicitly erotic connotation does not need any further explanation—see also the example of the young woman who explains how she will multiply boiled eggs through handing out one to her father, one to her mother, and keeping one for herself (no. 14). Once again the narrative implies that the husband, more or less voluntarily, emasculates himself by sending the farm hand to his wife who is supposed to feed him eggs, perhaps in a reversal of traditional gender roles. Most important, however, the adulterous couple finds the situation quite to their liking, especially because the husband has encouraged, nay, ordered his wife to treat the servant properly, though he meant only in terms of food, whereas the young man interpreted it in a sexual manner.²⁶

As is almost always the case, the author wants his audience to laugh about the fool in this story: this time, once again, the husband who does not understand the true meaning of his own words and even repeats his command to his wife “die ayer ein ander mal bass bachen” [“to fry the eggs better the next time”] (331). In a way, this man adds injury to insult for himself because he is the only one who directs everyone else according to his plan, but all his words carry quite a different meaning than he can imagine. The laughter results from the far-reaching realization of how this miscommunication leads to the wife enjoying an uninterrupted

and joyful sexual affair with the farm hand, who also experiences a pleasant life because he gets all his wishes fulfilled.

Once he has been told to get fed by the wife, he has truly tasted the “eggs,” but he wants more, hence his complaint to the farmer who does not even grasp the symbolic language at this late stage and supports the worker in his request to receive even more sex from the wife. The satire relies on the hollow claims of patriarchy which does not even achieve the establishment of a stable marriage because the husband foolishly “eggs on” his wife to treat the farm hand much more friendly than he would have liked her to do so in reality. Our laughter actually covers more ground than that insofar as we laugh about the farmer, and we laugh with the wife and her new lover because they have received “official” permission to cuckold the husband. But ultimately, it is actually not the sexual transgression that carries the comic here; instead we are delighted because of the linguistic transgression, or the outrageous miscommunication on a very mundane level which implies, however, at least for the farmer, catastrophic consequences without his knowing about them.

Montanus mostly draws his themes from the world of farmers, merchants, and craftsmen, but he also includes accounts of noblemen and noblewomen because no one seems to be perfect irrespective of the social class and educational background, and everyone tends to make mistakes, to misunderstand words, to fall prey to self-illusion, and to reveal an evil or simply weak character. The laughter obviously targets more women than men, but it would be erroneous to assume that the author harbored strictly patriarchal ideas and used his literary enterprise to pursue traditional misogyny. The variety of points of criticism is considerable, but the common denominator seems to be human frailty, both in physical and spiritual terms, as “Ein neue braut lasst ein junckfrawen fuortzlin in dem beth” (no. 43) nicely illustrates. We are not told anything about the social class of the freshly married couple; we know only that on their first wedding night she happens to break a little wind. Embarrassed, and hoping that he might not have noticed, she softly lifts the blankets to air the bed out. He has noticed it, however, and subsequently farts loudly: “ein grossen starcken bomber her faren lies” [“he allowed a strong bomb come out”] (295). He tells her that since she has assumed the role of a doorkeeper, she should let his own fart leave the bed as well. This makes her feel so ashamed that she never allows again any wind to break.

Obviously scatological, the narrative however is utilizing primarily laughter to shed light on people’s attempts to hide the lack of control of their own bodily functions, which in other narratives very much involves sexual desire. The humor rests on the discrepancy between her failed attempt to cover up and his robust ripping

that mask apart, farting much louder than her and thereby making her into the object of laughter.²⁷

The parading of characters in Montanus' collection of facetious tales continues, and hardly anyone is spared because laughter dominates and makes all people equal insofar as they emerge as fools, as ignoramuses, as sycophants, and simply as incompetent to handle the sophistication of human language; hence it exposes their failure in operating within all kinds of social structures, including marriage. But the tales offer significant compensation for the audience because they do not necessarily imply that they are equally to be blamed for comparable shortcomings. Instead, the narratives invite laughter, and this laughter reminds everyone of the mutually shared human weaknesses and yet also the ability to overcome them through wit, intelligence, considerateness, mutual respect, and tolerance.

It seems that this concluding observation invites us to consider both Martin Montanus' work and sixteenth-century *Schwankliteratur* at large much more seriously than previous scholarship has tended to do. Despite, or rather perhaps of, the laughter, the tales reveal the true dimension of human existence, both tragic and comic at the same time. Because of that laughter life continues, and none of the moral, ethical, religious, and philosophical ideals prove to be so absolutely serious that the victims of the laughter would have to despair. In fact, almost all of these short facetious narratives provide rather blunt teaching and pursue, in other words, epistemological purposes, providing knowledge about human frailties, shortcomings, basic needs, and attitudes. Undeniably, the author revealed some misogynistic attitudes, but his real interests rest in making his audience laugh about people's foolishness and lack of understanding—the classical intention of most comic literature. His triumphant characters are men and women, and they triumph because they know how to utilize their intelligence to defy their opponents, proving that reality is different than what the sycophants and ignoramuses assume it to be. ✱

Notes

¹Walz offers an excellent overview, though he focuses primarily on religious literature and related texts.

²For further discriminations and critical perspectives regarding the role of the Reformation in early-modern culture, see Johnston (545-560).

³For German text examples, see my translation of *Erotic Tales of Medieval Germany*.

⁴Specifically, "willkürliche[] und böse[] Welt." In *Die Ordnung*, Grubmüller expands on this concept, claiming that the representatives of this genre increasingly reflect the development of deception, cynical subversion, isolation of the bodies, reification of the individual, eruption of evil and aggression, and explosion of fear because the world proves to be entirely contingent.

He goes so far as to talk of the “Lust am Gemeinen” [“evil enjoyment of the vulgar”] (213). Though he does not cite him, Grubmüller apparently draws his inspiration for this rather problematic hypothesis from Röcke, *Die Freude am Bösen*.

⁵For more theoretical investigations of laughter, carnival, and their social implications, see the by now classic investigations by Bakhtin (196).

⁶Röcke argues that the joke has also to be understood in regards to its performance, institutionalization, and aggressive corporeality (“Lizenzen des Witzes” 85)—all rather problematic and elusive terms.

⁷Reinhart, in his edition of *Early Modern German Literature: 1350-1700*, does not even include the name of Montanus; Hans-Wilhelm Kirchhoff is mentioned once in passing; and Michael Lindener’s name is missing altogether. Wickram’s *Rollwagenbüchlein* is briefly considered (237-238), but not discussed critically.

⁸For the reception of Boccaccio in Germany, see Kocher; for the history of popular songs, see Classen, *Deutsche Liederbücher*.

⁹The only comprehensive studies dedicated primarily to Montanus so far seem to be by Vrablik, “Komik, Ironie und Humor,” and Hanisch, “Das Obszöne.”

¹⁰The *VD 16* (a bibliography of all books printed in Germany in the sixteenth century) lists 23 titles by Montanus, including reprints, editions, etc. See the online version at: bvba2.bib-bvb.de/V/NP6SLYH6LRHKMQL8I9RMHSHE1QCSTGRP3HK6QU9AYUDUY787P-23900?func=history-short&set_number=175271. To do the relevant search, click on “Suche weltweit.”

¹¹In fact, the MLA bibliography erroneously refers the searcher to this article as a study that allegedly concerns Montanus. In reality, the author discusses mostly Jakob Frey’s identically labeled *Gartengesellschaft*.

¹²For a comprehensive study of the responses to death in the Middle Ages and beyond, see Ariès; see also the contributions to Bassett’s *Death in Towns*.

¹³Wäghäll Nivre overemphasizes the gender-battle in Montanus’ and his contemporaries’ narratives: “Gender roles are established in and by discourse, through the position ‘man’ takes within marriage and the family, but also in the sex act.” This conclusion does not take into account numerous counter-examples and reads the tales rather superficially. There are numerous cases where men prove to be the losers and fail to maintain their role as the head of a household, so it would not be correct to claim: “unless he belongs to the clergy he does not have to really [sic] fear his position at the top of the gender hierarchy” (76).

¹⁴Here, as in most other cases, the basic plot can be traced back to older sources, such as Poggio Bracciolini’s *Fascetiae*, “De quinque ovia aequali numero dividendis,” and others (see Bolte 595). Since this study is not intended to question Montanus’ literary originality, I will not repeat Bolte’s highly impressive research in unearthing the various sources. For recent research on Poggio and the reception of his *facetiae*, see Waltenberger (276-277, notes 24 and 25).

¹⁵For a psychological reading of these late-medieval/early-modern narratives, see Wolfgang Beutin, *Sexualität und Obszönität* (329-448). His discussion, however, suffers from a lack of a chronological structure.

¹⁶Cf. Nolte; Hurwich (180-192). In her analysis of the *Zimmern Chronicle*, Hurwich observes an interesting distinction between adultery committed by non-noble women, which is treated with laughter if not approval, and adultery by noblewomen, which meets harsh criticism. See also the introduction and contributions to Classen, ed., *History of Sexuality*.

¹⁷See, for example, Moraw, whereas Nolte rather convincingly notes the discursive, literary, hence entertaining nature of those explicit sexual and obscene references in the ducal correspondence of Elector Albrecht Achilles of Brandenburg-Ansbach (d. 1486).

¹⁸Cf. Tuchel (276-287); she rightly concludes that in sixteenth-century literature castration no longer served the purpose of punishment. Instead it simply became an exceptional event that pointed to tensions within society regarding religion, law, manners, and economy. But she does not really tell what this all would mean when she finally emphasizes, resorting to rather esoteric language: “Den Taten, den Tätern und den Opfern wird nunmehr eine Aufmerksamkeit zuteil, die eine zunehmende Individuierung der Lebensvollzüge dokumentiert” [“An attention is now given to the deeds, the perpetrator, and the victims that documents the individuation of the actions of life”] (287).

¹⁹For a parallel but now really brutal case involving actual castration and subsequently the woman’s loss of her tongue, see Montanus’ tale (no. 106) “Ein pfaff verleurt sein buppenhan” (*Gartengesellschaft* 408-411). Perfetti offers significant perspectives on this approach in light of Old French *fabliaux*, ridiculing the “clichés about feminine lasciviousness” and suggesting that many of those texts “take far more delight in the ludic than in the lewd” (28).

²⁰For the wider cultural-historical context, see Schmidt and Simon (113-114).

²¹Bolte erred in his note to this tale, identifying the fourth tale of the seventh day in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* as Montanus’ source (605). For an edition, see Boccaccio, *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*.

²²For related erotic imagery, as employed already in twelfth- and thirteenth-century courtly love poetry, see Zeyen (104-113).

²³Bolte knows of no source for it (611), and the reference to Dillingen where Montanus lived for some time supports the claim that this is an original account.

²⁴See also, despite being intended for a juvenile audience, Lawlor’s *Where Will this Shoe Take You?*; cf. Pendergast et al.

²⁵Again this seems to be a highly original tale for which Bolte otherwise always offering, even if at times perhaps a little speculatively, highly detailed information, does not cite any possible source (611).

²⁶Though addressing much earlier literary examples, Crist’s study “Gastrographie et pornographie,” still provides us with the in-depth explanation of the erotic humor underlying Montanus’ tale.

²⁷Waltenberger surprisingly limits his own observations regarding parallel jest tales to a simple discourse-oriented interpretation [“narrative Wissensform”] (287), missing a considerable opportunity to approach the hermeneutic crux of this genre at large.

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