1 Lochrie, Lees, and Overing, "Feminism Within And Without The Academy," *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* no.22 (Fall, 1996), 31.

2 Ibid, 27.

3 "Studying the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: What Difference Does Gender Make?" held at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, October 27-29, 1995.

## MOTHERS AND FATHERS IN THE EARLY FRENCH FARCE

Generally speaking, the farce's mothers and fathers are a breath of fresh, loving air in a dramatic corpus better known for its vindictively self-serving characters. Rather than focusing exclusively on their own needs and desires, as do most of the characters in this play type, farce parents tend to put their children first. They help them out of difficult situations not only because doing so will protect their own financial security, good name, and peace of mind, but also because it is in their child's best interest. In fact, most farce parents worry incessantly about the well-being of their *rejetons*, showering them with love, attention, and approval even when the object of their affection is an undeserving fool. And, fortunately for their offspring, the farce's mothers and fathers are usually resourceful and determined individuals who are more than willing to lend a hand in times of need. However, while parents of both sexes help their progeny and show them affection, mothers and fathers in general relate to their children and defend their interests in vastly different, gender-specific ways. Accordingly, this (necessarily brief) essay will provide a rough sketch of the temperament, modus operandi, and inter-familial bonds which farce playwrights normally attributed to each of these parental character types.

Mothers and fathers appear with their children in slightly less than two dozen[1] of the approximately two hundred farces which have come down to us, most of which date from the mid-fourteenth to the mid-fifteenth centuries. The majority of these plays include only one parent, usually a mother, in their cast of characters: less than a quarter of all parent/child farces involve a father.[2] Although mothers and fathers appear together only rarely on the early farce stage, when they do so their relationship is usually an amicable and cooperative one—a marked contrast to that of the typical (i.e., childless) farce husband and wife. What is more, in farces which include both parents of a third character, the two are usually married to each other and their child is therefore legitimate: only in *Jenin, fils de rien* does a child appear on stage with a mother and father who are not husband and wife (Jenin's putative father is the local priest).

Although farce playwrights indiscriminately paired their fathers with a child of either sex, their mothers usually appear with a *son* in tow: of the sixteen parent/child farces in which a mother appears, twelve portray a mother and her son[3]

while only four involve a mother and her daughter.[4] Farce scenarios involving parents and their children are highly formulaic, returning time and again to the same motivations and character types. While problems related to a son's education usually motivate parent/*son* farces, conflicts arising from a daughter's expression of her sexuality typically drive parent/*daughter* farces. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule: in *Le Cuvier* a mother and daughter are primarily concerned with ensuring the younger woman's dominance over her husband, while a mother's attempts to keep her loquacious son from telling the local priest that she is sleeping with his assistant drives the plot of *Messire Jean*.

While all farce mothers are indisputably the actual, biological parent of their child, men's claims of paternity are frequently open to dispute. In the aforementioned *Jenin, fils de rien*, for example, the title character's mother steadfastly denies the local priest's claim to have fathered her son, even though the man has expressed a wish to pay for Jenin's clerical studies. In *Joliot*, although the title character has no doubt that *he* has fathered the child his wife is about to bring into this world, it would have been absolutely impossible for him to have done so: Joliot and his wife, who have been married for only about a month, didn't even know each other until shortly before the wedding.

Whenever both parents appear together on the farce stage, it is always the mother who is the more aggressively proactive of the two. If a child is in trouble, the mother usually takes charge of the situation without being asked to do so, while the father typically remains in the background and helps only when called upon. In *Maître Mimin étudiant*, for example, after Mimin's tutor fills his head with dog Latin and causes him to lose his French, it is the boy's mother who devises a plan to make her son remember his native tongue; Mimin's father does nothing more than passively agree to act as his wife sees fit. Not all fathers have so little to do with the resolution of their offspring's problems, however. In *Joliot*, for example, a quick-thinking *pater familias* acts alone to save his daughter from shame and dishonor when his new son-in-law announces his intention to repudiate her. The clever father mollifies him by promising to take financial responsibility for any child born less than seven months after the last . . . if Joliot will agree to take responsibility for this first baby, born only a few weeks after he first made his bride's acquaintance.

The farce's parents love their daughters, but they *idolize* their sons. Mothers in particular take every one of their son's gestures as a sign of his precocious intelligence. They hang on their son's every word, extolling his virtues to all who will listen. Parents' attitude toward their daughter and their ambitions for her are, by contrast, much more realistic. Neither parent ever takes a daughter to be more intelligent or in any way better than she really is. And, while the farce's parents almost always destine a son for religious studies, their aspirations for a

daughter are also far more *pied à terre*: they wish her to make as honorable and as happy a marriage as her circumstances will permit. Such ambitions are often the sole motivation for parents' actions in these dramas. Things never go as smoothly as planned, however: either their unmarried daughter allows herself to be seduced or her new husband doesn't fully understand how he ought to perform his marital role, or else their son is a complete idiot who is entirely unsuited for intellectual pursuits. But whenever things go awry for their hapless offspring, the farce's parents usually do their best to make everything better.

The farce's mothers and fathers are by no means entirely selfless, however. Parents, and especially mothers, push their sons to become clerics not only because it is usually what their child wishes to do: they also do so in order to ensure that they will be able to provide for them in their old age, and to enjoy the prestige of having a son in the Lord's service. Mothers and fathers safeguard their daughter's present or future marriage not only because it will afford her the best possible chance for a happy life: they also do so in order to preserve the family honor from the scandal of sexual deviance.

In short, the farcical depiction of the parent/child bond calls into question the argument that medieval parents did not love their children as strongly as modern parents love theirs. In my opinion, early farce playwrights depicted affectionately supportive parents as often as they did, mocking those who took the expression of their love to extremes, because this was a fairly common situation in their own time. It is generally recognized that popular dramas (such as the farce) reflect the practices, beliefs, and concerns of their target audience: to argue that the farcical construction of parenthood had no basis in reality would go against the findings of media sociologists, anthropologists, and literary specialists alike. The early farce's humorous depictions of mothers fawning over their idiot sons also cast doubt on the notion that obsessive mother love is a modern invention, as argued by Elizabeth Badinter in *L'Amour en plus*.[5] The farce's aggressively protective, endlessly doting maternal character types prove that mother tigers (and mother hens) existed well before Rousseau informed women that they should dedicate their lives to serving their husbands and children. How else is one to interpret the only entirely complimentary remark ever made about women by the early farce—"il n'est vrai amour que de mère"[6]—except as a reference to a pre-existing conception of motherly love as stronger, more loyal, and more obsessive than any other? If parental love is indeed an artificial construction, the early parent/child farce stands as proof that this concept was familiar to, and assimilated by, northern French society long before the Age of Enlightenment.

*Deborah Hovland*
*Department of Foreign Languages*

*SUNY College at Buffalo*
*1300 Elmwood Avenue*
*Buffalo NY 14222*
*E-mail: HOVLANDL@buffalostate.edu*

1 *L'Official; Messire Jean; Le Mariage Robin Mouton; Mahuet qui donne ses œufs au Prix du Marché; Mahuet Badin; La Bouteille; La mère et son fils qui veut être prêtre; Le Maître d'école; Pernet qui va à l'école; Un qui se fait examiner; Mimin étudiant; Mimin qui va à la guerre; Jenin, fils de rien; Le Nouveau marié; Le Cuvier; Celui qui se confesse à sa voisine* (the daughter plays a key role in the outcome of this play, although she is not a member of the cast of characters).

2 *Joliot; Le Nouveau Marié; Maître Mimin étudiant; Jenin, fils de rien; Mimin qui va à la guerre* (in this play Raoullet, the father of Mimin, is alluded to by Mimin but does not appear).

3 *Messire Jean; Le Mariage Robin Mouton; Mahuet qui donne ses œufs au Prix du Marché; Mahuet Badin; La Bouteille; La Mère et son fils qui veut être prêtre; Le Maître d'école; Un qui se fait examiner; Mimin étudiant; Mimin qui va à la guerre; Jenin, fils de rien.*

4 *L'Official; Le Nouveau Marié; Le Cuvier; Celui qui se confesse à sa voisine.*

5 Cf. Elizabeth Badinter, *L'Amour en plus: histoire de l'amour maternel* (XVIIe - XVIIIe siècle) (Paris: Flammarion, 1980).

6 "The only true love is a mother's love" (*Maître Mimin qui va à la guerre*).

## MOTHERHOOD: THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE

Much of what has been written about the theme of motherhood in *The Book of Margery Kempe* has concentrated on Margery's traumatic early experience of motherhood and her apparent abandonment of that role after the birth of thirteen more children, as well as her apparent failure to represent them in her text. This representational absence has proved troublesome to some readers and, to more acerbic critics, further evidence to reinforce the accusations of neurosis and hysteria levelled against Margery. It is still presumed that as a woman whose active experience of physical mothering covered nearly twenty years, more if we take into account Margery's repeated attempts to rescue an adult son from a life of secular hedonism which she recounts to us at the beginning of Book Two, Margery as a writer would have been expected to draw heavily on these experiences in recounting her life before her embarkation on the spiritual path to perfection. It is also presumed that the physical absence of Margery's children in her account, except for isolated allusions, represents an abandonment and rejection of her own maternalism in favour of pursuing the spiritual life.

Margery was living and writing at a time when perfect motherhood had become an impossible ideal. The cult of the Virgin, so powerful in East Anglia where she was living and writing, had helped to reshape contemporary attitudes towards motherhood, making it on the one hand the highest ideal for a woman, but on