

# **“HAVING TO ‘BEAR THE YOKE’”: WOMEN AND JEST-BOOKS OF THE EARLY SEVENTEENTH CENTURY<sup>1</sup>**

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The aim of this paper is to analyse the representation of women in English jest-books of the early seventeenth century. This period of time is particularly interesting because of the large amount of jest-books that were brought out then, because the formal controversy about women was at its height, and because it was the age when more and more English female writers started to publish. Criticism has generally neglected the study of jest-books, most likely due to their deficient literary quality and apparent frivolity. Yet, they are cultural products of unquestionable interest to probe attitudes and anxieties of the society that has created them. The representation of women in these texts tends to reflect the misogyny prevailing at the time, insisting on clichés such as women as lustful, shrewish and gossiping. Many of these jests are devised to laugh at women who are (ab)used as sexual objects or the victims of men’s violence. Male and female antimisogynists of the time complained about this use of humour to degrade women. And, as one of the jests hints, there were unruly women who could not “endure to bear the yoke.”

At the end of Book II of *The Book of the Courtier* (1528), first translated into English by Thomas Hoby in 1561, Baldesar Castiglione includes an interesting discussion on laughter and joking which eventually turns into a controversy about women. Bernardo is aware of the power of jokes, for he sees humour as a form of attack. A courtier should not laugh at anyone without regarding the consequences this may have. For instance, some “do not hesitate to impugn a lady’s honour, which is a very evil thing to do and which deserves severe punishment, since in this respect women are to be counted among the defenceless and do not deserve such treatment, having no weapons with which to protect themselves” (Bull 1967:187). Bernardo knows of the double standard ruling the morals of the time and argues, exerting a sort of *positive discrimination*, that women may question a man’s virtue more freely: “And this is because we ourselves, as men, have made it a rule that a dissolute way of life is not to be thought evil or blameworthy or disgraceful, whereas in women it

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leads to such complete opprobrium and shame that once a woman has been spoken ill of, whether the accusation be true or false, she is utterly disgraced for ever." Contrary to this attitude, Ottaviano Fregoso justifies misogynist humour because "women are very imperfect creatures," and so it is "necessary, through shame and disgrace, to place on them a restraint which might foster some good qualities" (195). Bernardo wonders why the ladies present at the discussion remain so quiet "bearing the wrongs... so patiently." Then the women stand up laughing and run towards Gaspare, the main spokesman of misogyny in the debate, as if to beat him, saying "Now you shall see whether we care whether evil things are said about us" (200). However, criticised for the use of violence, these ladies end up appointing a man to defend them.

I think this episode is a good illustration of the manner in which humour was conceived in the sixteenth century and, particularly, how it was used in patriarchal society for the ideological subjection of women. Humour was mainly satirical, i.e. aggressive and corrective, exposing and attempting to discourage other people's flaws. As Hobbes stated in the mid-seventeenth century, laughter arises from "some sudden *conception* of some *eminency* in ourselves, by *comparison* with the *infirmity* of others, or with our own formerly," and it may bring dishonour. "It is no wonder therefore that men take heinously to be laughed at or derided, that is, triumphed over" (McMillin 1973: 343). Ottaviano's words quoted above demonstrate that men laugh at women in order to remind them of their alleged imperfection and their need to comply with patriarchal ideology. The ladies' reaction shows that women actually rejected this insistent humiliation, but did not dare to denounce it in public, ironically depending on men for their defence. This situation was slightly different in early-seventeenth-century England. This paper attempts to analyse how women were represented in the jest-books of the time and how they reacted to them.

Criticism has generally neglected the study of jest-books, probably because they seem deficient in literary quality, frivolous, and often uncouth, rejoicing in churlish hoax, sex, violence, and scatology. Jest-books have traditionally been considered part of "popular culture." Yet, as Sullivan and Woodbridge (2000: 273-81) have recently argued, jest-books were originally produced, collected, and promoted by humanists as part of the education of courtiers and plebeians (see also Brewer 1997: 91-101). Jests were deemed useful to orators, essential to a courtier's conversation, and advisable in sermons to the uncultured laity in order to maintain their attention. But in the seventeenth century, the elite gave up producing jest-books, and imputed the jests' vulgarity to the lower classes that read them in the attempt to distinguish between a "popular culture" and a "high culture." What seems evident, then, is that jest-books were enjoyed by the

aristocracy and bourgeoisie alike, and thus they were to some extent “an index of what is... thought to be funny.” According to Brewer:

The nature of a jest is to promote the humour and harmony of the group who share it and its implicit assumptions. All groups by their very existence imply and may deliberately exclude outsiders, and virtually all traditional jests are at the expense... of a victim who either is, or becomes, an outsider... Traditionally jests tend to endorse popular prejudice, as with the universally practised ethnic joke, or almost equally universal anti-feminism in many forms, or mockery of physical handicaps. (1997: 90)

In the Early Modern period, jests were mostly told by men to a male audience, although women were sometimes present. The content of jokes was often too scatological and sexually explicit for the modesty a virtuous lady should have. Conduct books insisted on it. For instance, in *The book of matrimony* (1564) Thomas Becon prescribes that an honest wife must “provide that her words be utterly estranged from all wantonness, jesting, filth speaking, and whatsoever may offend chaste eares,” and quotes St Paul’s advice to the Ephesians (Eph. 5) (Aughterson 1995: 112). Likewise, Castiglione considers indecent jokes inappropriate in the presence of virtuous women (Bull 1967: 175-6). This restriction is ironically present in Robert Armin’s jest-book entitled *A Nest of Ninnies* (1608), which is the third edition of *Foole Upon Foole* (1600) with the addition of a framing dialogue between a philosopher called Sotto and the World, represented as a wanton girl. After some of the pranks he tells her, the narrator says:

The World laughing a-good at these jests, though to say sooth she could hardly afford it, for fear of writhing her sweet savor, yet straining courtesy in this kind, did as our wantons do at a feast —spare for manners in company, but alone, cram most greedily. So she, forgetting modesty, gaped out a laughter and, like women hardly won, cried, “More, more!” (Zall 1970: 46).

A similar situation is shown later, when a gentlewoman refrains from laughing at a stutter “because she would not seem too immodest with laughing... so she straining herself, though inwardly she laughed heartily, gave out such an earnest of her modesty that all the Table rung of it” (53), then she blushes, and everybody guffaws.

So there seems to have been a constraint to women’s production and reception of humour at the time. Yet, if women were not supposed to hear jests, the corrective aim of misogynist humour was doubtful. Often male jokes were directed to an exclusively male audience, and in this case, sexist humour must be interpreted as a tool for asserting and maintaining superiority, a manner of fantasising about gaining domination, a kind of therapy to relieve men’s fears and anxieties. As Freud (1969: 118) posited, in hostile jokes the audience

become supporters of the hatred and contempt of the speaker. Humour is assertive, gregarious, and empowering, a useful conveyor of ideology. Focusing on England in the Jacobean period, Woodbridge (1986: 80-1) has noted that there was an enhanced sense of the power of jests to shape the lives and attitudes of people. For instance, in *An Apology for Women* (1620), Christopher Newstead complains about the pernicious effect of sexist humour, as it creates negative habits of mind.

The representation of women in English jest-books of the early seventeenth-century tends to reflect the misogyny prevailing at the time, insisting on clichés such as women being lustful, shrewish, and gossiping. Starting with the question of lewdness, women were considered morally too weak to avoid temptation, seductive by nature or easy to be seduced, and then insatiable. Foyster (1999: 169) mentions a satirical pamphlet published in the 1640s which argued that women should have at least two husbands because monogamy often left them sexually dissatisfied. As happens in comedies, ballads, and *novelle*, cuckolding is a stock resource to produce laughter in jest-books, because it questions the authority and sexual ability of the husband. For instance, the Cobbler's and the Smith's tales in *The Tincker of Turvey* (1630) are about pranks that entail cuckolding, and between them there is a list of what the title page announces as "The Eight Severall Orders of Cuckold, marching here likewise in theyr Horned Rankes" (Mish 1963: 115). In his collection *Wit and Mirth* (1629), John Taylor includes several jokes about female adultery, such as number 53: "A Man going with his Wife by a deep river's side began to talk of Cuckolds, and withal he wished that every Cuckold were cast into the river—to whom his wife replies, 'Husband, I pray you learn to swim'" (Zall ed. 1970: 134). Such frankness in the woman's retort suggests that she expects no retaliation from a man she seems to dominate. Otherwise, she would risk being insulted, beaten, abandoned, or sued, as happens in joke number 37, which wittily features heraldry jargon:

A Whore Rampant made her husband a Cuckold Dormant, with a front Crescent, surprised by the watch Guardant, brought to the Justice Passant, with her playfellow Pendant, after a course Couchant. The Justice told her that her offense was heinous, breaking the bonds of matrimony in that adulterate manner, and that she should consider that her husband was her Head.

"Good sir," quoth she, "I did ever acknowledge him so. And I hope it is no such a great fault in me, for I was but trimming, dressing, or adorning my Head." (131-2)

Women represented sensuality, carnality, as opposed and inferior to the sense, the rationality, epitomised by men. Again following St Paul's words: "Wives submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the

husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body” (Eph. 5: 22-23), male writers of conduct books, such as William Gouge in *Of domestical duties* (1622) (see Aughterson 1995: 89-95) insisted on this image when urging on wives’ subjection to their husbands. This insistence seems to imply that many wives, like that of the Cuckold Dormant, did not submit to that supposed / imposed authority or, at least, that this was one of men’s everlasting preoccupations. As Shaw (2000: 258) rightly observes, marital discord has often been exploited for humorous ends in literature, the blame for such conflict being generally laid on wives for being quarrelsome and domineering. The reversal of roles, topsy-turvydom and, I dare add, the humiliation of the henpecked husband account for the comicality of this situation. It was a dishonour for a married man not to be the actual head of the household.

Jest-books are full of scolds. In T.D. (Thomas Dekker) and George Wilkins’s *Jests to Make You Merry* (1607), a water-bearer complains before a judge about his wife’s abusing and overmastering him (Zall 1970: 85). In number 74 of his *Conceits, Clinches, Flashes, and Whimzies* (1639), Robert Chamberlain says ladies called their husbands “Master such-a-one” instead of their right titles, as Sir William or Sir Thomas, because “it was fit their wives should master them” (Zall 1970: 155). John Taylor tells us a joke (no. 105) in which a man who used to be scolded by his wife thought of making her believe he would drown himself in the river, but the witty woman advises him to choose a deeper place so that he may die sooner (Zall 1970: 147). Taylor also relates another (no. 88) in which a poor working man “was so batterfanged and belabored with tongue-mettle that he was weary of his life”. Some female neighbours asked the scold why she ill-treated her husband so, and she said she thought he did not love her. They advised her to pretend death in order to see his reaction. Then,

When the poor man came home, he hearing the matter, being much oppressed with grief, ran under the table bemoaning the happy loss of his most kind vexation, and making as though he would kiss her, with a most loving embrace (to make all sure) he broke her neck. (143)

In fact, male aggression to women is commonly found in jest-books. In number 6 of *A Banquet of Jests* (1633), “One that had a notorious shrew to his wife, in a great jangling that did happen between them could not contain himself, but, taking up a flagon pot which stood near him, gave her a very deep wound in the head, which cost his purse soundly.” As she boasted among her friends that her husband would never beat her again, he called the apothecary and the surgeon, and in her presence he gave them money “in earnest of the next cure” (Zall 1970: 161-2). Another example can be seen in *Tarlton’s Jests* (1611). Once the jester was on a ship, and suddenly a heavy storm began. The

captain asked the passengers to throw into the sea the heaviest thing they could spare. Tarlton offered to throw his wife (Zall 1970: 100). Foyster (1999: 193-4) reports that husbands' use of violence against their partners was common in popular literature of the Early Modern period. There was a market for stories about men who gained control by being aggressive to women. As she put it, "Men may have fantasised about gaining domination in this way, but in reality it was widely acknowledged that such methods were unacceptable, and could jeopardise rather than gain claims to reputable manhood" (193), because it actually meant losing self-control.

Besides this physical violence there is plenty of male verbal aggression to women in jest-books. The most common insult is "whore," which is applied to any woman who does not fit into the ideals of patriarchal honour. Thus the term does not refer only to lewdness but it may also allude to shrewishness and gossip, because the concept of female modesty comprises sexuality, conduct, and speech. We have already seen that men's anxieties and prejudices lead to deal with adulterous and domineering women in jokes. An example of female gossip is number 16 of *Scogin's Jestes* (1626), in which the jester tells his wife that he has vomited a crow, and shortly later the priest asks the parishioners to pray for Scogin, who has vomited twenty-one crows. The moral is "Here a man may see that it is hard to trust a Woman with a man's Secrets" (Zall 1970: 117). Another example is Chamberlain's joke number 247: "One questioned which were the greatest wonders in the world. 'Twas answered, women's and Lawyer's tongues, for that they did always lie yet never lay still" (Zall 1970: 158). Female gossip could affect male reputation, because it usually meant talking against men. Thus the preoccupation with female tattle is again related to men's obsession about maintaining power (see Foyster 1999: 58-61).

The sexist humour of all these jest-books published in the early seventeenth century no doubt reflects and contributes to the rising misogynist sentiment of the time, which culminates in Joseph Swetnam's *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women* (1617) (see Travitsky 1984: 266). The close relationship between jesting and the anti-feminist side of the woman debate has generally been acknowledged (see Travitsky 1984, Woodbridge 1986, and Jones 1990). Swetnam, as other misogynists, presents himself as a jester, and retails contemporary jokes that illustrate his arguments. But, contrary to what happened in the episode of *The Book of the Courtier* mentioned at the beginning, some women who read Swetnam's tract did not stay quiet, "bearing the wrongs... patiently," and did not appoint a man to counterattack for them. Rachel Speght, Ester Sowernam, and Constantia Munda dared answer back in public. Sowernam noticed "it hath ever beene a common custome amongst Idle and humerous Poets, Pamphleteers, and Rimers, out of passionate discontents, or having little otherwise to imploy themselves about, to

write some bitter Satire-Pamphlet, or Rime, against women” (Trill, Chedgzoy & Osborne 1997: 95). Munda addressed herself to Swetnam saying, “we will baite thee at thine owne stake, and beate thee at thine owne game” (quoted by Jones 1990: 58). Actually the replies of these women and others who followed them featured wit, mockery, and good humour (see Travitsky 1984). Later female writers, such as Cavendish and Behn, continued this use of comicality to challenge patriarchal ideals and practices. Consequently we may state that by the seventeenth century many women had grown tired of patiently bearing the jokes.

In his sermon *A preparative to marriage* (1591), the Puritan preacher Henry Smith posited that “a wife is called a *yoke-fellow* to show that she should help her husband to bear his yoke,... she must submit her neck to bear it patiently with him, or else she is not his yoke-fellow but his yoke” (Aughterson 1995: 82). The jests that we have seen before show that women were often unruly and used their wit to escape from the yoke, either through adultery, scolding, or gossip. Or at least such appear to have been the anxieties of seventeenth-century Englishmen, who realised that their power was more fragile than it may seem, since it depended too much on the concept of honour, and this in turn depended too much on women’s conduct. Jest, as other cultural products, reflected these worries and attempted to reinforce patriarchal ideology. They served both to humiliate and insult women, and to laugh at cuckolds and henpecked husbands whose manhood was questioned. Men had to dominate the women of the household, but this was not as easy as prose romance and some other literary genres suggest. Women in jests, ballads, and popular fiction were not passive and helpless but active, resourceful, and often unruly. Robert Chamberlain indicates this in his joke number 145: “One asked what the reason was that few women loved to eat eggs. It was answered, ‘Because they cannot endure to bear the yoke’” (Zall 1970: 157). Considering their reaction to misogynist humour, it seems they were not willing to bear the joke either.

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