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[Andrea Estrada](#)

UCSB Scholar Translates a Dozen Medieval -- and Bawdy -- French Farces

They were the sitcoms of their time -- lowbrow comedies that lampooned every serious topic, from sex and relationships to politics and religion. In her new book, " 'The Farce of the Fart' and Other Ribaldries -- Twelve Medieval French Plays in Modern English" (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), Jody Enders, a professor of French at UC Santa Barbara, translates a dozen of these theatrical gems and brings them into the 21st century.

More than a study in literary criticism, for entertainment value and a peek into 15th- and 16th-century life and wit, " 'The Farce of the Fart' and Other Ribaldries, " is unequalled. Enders captures the colorful characters, coarse humor, and outrageous plot lines of medieval dramas that have, for the most part, been inaccessible to contemporary readers and theater audiences. "Except for about a dozen from the hundreds that have survived over the centuries, none have been translated into English," Enders said. "And many of them haven't been translated into modern French, or any modern vernacular. So they're kind of untouched."

Enders, a theater historian with four books of literary criticism under her belt, decided to work on the translations "because they're just really funny," she said. "Comedy is formula, and at least that part hasn't changed. This stuff is bawdy and irreverent and satirical -- everything we still find funny today."

For centuries, the scripts for these outrageous, anonymously written shows were available only in French editions collected from miscellaneous print and manuscript sources. With " 'The Farce of the Fart' and Other Ribaldries," Enders provides not only translations of the plays themselves, but also a wealth of information about their history, plots, character development, sets, staging, costumes, and props.

"I've really become interested in bringing these things to life, especially in the undergraduate classroom," said Enders, a longtime scholar of medieval drama. "They're a living art form." She added that medieval French farce is not often taught in colleges and universities, and she hopes her set of translations will remedy that. "There are a lot of reasons people don't teach medieval French farce, not the least of which is that Middle French -- the language of 14th- and 15th-century France -- is hard to read," she said.

"We don't read farces because we don't understand them; and one of the reasons we don't understand them is because there's so much room in them for performance. So you have to use your imagination."

As Enders writes in the preface, "Predating the standard comic structures that we have come to know and love in Shakespeare, the commedia dell'arte, Molière, and beyond, the medieval French farce offers up a literal song and dance about what unites and divides us. From politics and religion, to learning and litigiousness, to marriage and social class, to theology and sexuality, each play satirizes social life through that most present literary media, the theater."

Among the plays Enders has included -- in addition to "The Farce of the Fart" --are "Confession Lessons"; "The Farce of the Student Who Failed His Priest Exam Because He Didn't Know Who Was Buried in Grant's Tomb"; "Playing Doctor"; and "Getting Off on the Wrong Foot."

One of Enders's greatest challenges in completing the translations was fitting them into the modern English vernacular that best suits the characters. "The hard thing is the dialect," she said. "I put hillbillies in there a lot. And I think that's how they would translate into the American vernacular -- like a country bumpkin. It's a common theme in the farces -- the hick who thinks he's going to make something of himself. Sometimes I did exaggerate for characterization."

Enders's other books include "Murder by Accident -- Medieval Theater, Modern Media, Critical Intentions" (University of Chicago Press, 2009); "Death by Drama and

Other Medieval Urban Legends" (University of Chicago Press, 2002); "The Medieval Theater of Cruelty: Rhetoric, Memory, Violence" (Cornell University Press; 2002); and "Rhetoric and the Origins of Medieval Drama" (Cornell University Press, 1992).

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