

Sexual Pantomime in *Von dem Ritter mit den Nützen*

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My aim in this paper is to recuperate elements of bodily performance, particularly the acting out of copulation, in the medieval *Schwank*- or *fabliau*-tales. There is much closer mimetic similarity than is usually recognized between these tales and their dramatic reworking in later farces, such as the *Fastnachtspiele*. While the key element in the generic shift from tale to farce is generally considered to be the difference between “telling” and “showing”, I aim to illustrate through the example of the *Ritter mit den Nützen* and related tales in other languages that even without the added dimension of the stage and live actors, numerous dialogued *Schwank*-tales are full of theatrical manifestations.¹ In particular, obscene gestures serve to mime both the sex act and the sexual impotence of duped husbands.

In the *Ritter mit den Nützen* (von der Hagen 277-82), an anonymous thirteenth-century tale, a sudden rainstorm forces a knight to return home unexpectedly from a hunting trip. His wife is dallying with her lover, whom she then brazenly hides in the conjugal bed, while with a typical show of *Weiberlist* she loudly berates her husband for having neglected her by going hunting. He tries to placate her by countering that he has brought her a present of some hazelnuts collected in his hat, which had fallen in the rainstorm. He proceeds to shake the nuts into her lap, from where the couple crack and eat them, while the lover overhears them from behind the bedcurtains: *Da sassen si un bissen/ Der nüsse uz der vrouwen schoss*. I aim to show that the cracking and eating nuts from the lady’s lap serve to mime for the audience both the wife’s adultery and the duped husband’s impotence and humiliation.

Given that in the Middle Ages narrative works depended for their circulation on miming and dramatic recitation by jongleurs, generic divisions become very difficult to make between “para-theatrical” and true theatrical forms. These range from the *Schwank* -or *fabliau*-tale, the jongleur’s monolog, and the “monologue dialogue,” where the jongleur splitting himself into multiple characters mimed various voices, to the true dialogue, and, finally, to the farce. As Rabenalt pointed out: “Der Weg vom dialogisierten Schwank zum Fastnachtspiel ist näher als man gemeinlich glaubt (64).” As an example, Jean Frappier in his *Le théâtre profane au moyen âge* (5) concluded of

¹ See Bebermeyer, who defines *Schwank* as a “scherzhafte, lustige Erzählung [...]; im Ton häufig derb, gern ins Obszöne gleitend, von oft lehrhafter Tendenz” (208ff.). Hufeland, who reviews this and other definitions, concludes that *Schwank* is completely imprecise as a formal or generic term (13). Perhaps more useful is Dronke’s succinct definition of *fabliau* taken in its extended meaning as any “amusing stories of deception and outwitting, especially of a sexual kind” (276). Obscenity is inherent to the *Schwank*, although this is not always recognizable today because many stories lived only in an oral “underground tradition,” seldom committed to writing. Others that were written down were later often censored out of existence (Dronke 289, Frank 212). On the structure of *fabliau*-tales in general, see Schenk; for German, see Jonas (54, 74).

a French tale, the *Dit de dame Jouenney*, that since 292 of its 316 verses were in dialogue form, it was really a mime that could well have been presented on stage as a farce. Similarly, Grace Frank (213) proposed that narratives could easily have been staged as dramas *par personnages* by having their dialogue spoken by a group of jongleurs or by members of a guild or other society, each impersonating a character, while descriptive portions could be replaced by mimetic action. In fact, the transformation was just as likely often in the opposite direction, from orally-based agonistic representation to narrative form appropriate for recitation by a jongleur. As Michel Rousse has demonstrated in his reexamination of the French *Dit de dame Jouenne* earlier studied by Frappier, not only the minimal number of narrative passages in the work but the fact that the four manuscripts in which it is found do not agree on the placement of the interpolation of narrative transitions shows that it, as well as a number of other early French text, testify to the existence of theatrical activity in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, i.e., predating the textualized farces of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.²

It is not merely the high percentage of dialogue that can efface the borders between *fabliau* and farce but the equivalence of word and comic gesture. Some pieces are little more than the acting out of a series of popular proverbs or clichés, where the game is based on the dupe's limited or false comprehension of language, i.e., taking figurative expressions literally, particularly when they involve transparent sexual metaphors. As Barbara Bowen (1983, 50; cf. Lewicka 67-9) has pointed out, what is characteristic of the farces is the inability of the dupe or fool to understand figurative or idiomatic expressions. Intelligence appears to consist essentially in the knowledge that language has both a literal and figurative level. In such farces, visual gestures are accompanied by the verbal technique of erotic relexicalization, in which characters are allowed to act out the unrepresentable through the eroticization of stock semantic fields. A particularly clear illustrative example is the French "Farce nouvelle... des femmes qui font escurer leurs chaulderons" ('New Farce... of the ladies who have their cauldrons scrubbed out'), where a virile young itinerant tinker offers his services and his superior "tool" to ladies whose "cooking pots" need mending and de-rusting. The hard-working tradesman spends a lot of time getting hot and sweaty on stage by "banging" the leaky holes in their pots with his hammer and nails, while the women urge him on to *frapper plus fort* and not to use a nail so small that their holes will not be stopped up.³ The actor playing the role might have added his sexualized props various established sight gags guaranteed to elicit laughter from his audience.⁴

² Such early works include the thirteenth-century *Garçon et l'Aveugle*, commonly recognized as the oldest surviving French farce, and *Robin et Marion*, a work whose theatrical aspect has been effaced by the fact that it was meant to be sung. On the relation *fabliau* and farce, see also Pinet (101) and Payen (13).

³ Viollet le Du, II, 90-104. The Ger. *Pfannenflicker* is centered on the same verbal game, where the girl calls out to the young itinerant tinker that she has *was zum flicken* and she gives him *ein Pfannelein/ das war bedeckt mit Russ/ DARinnen war ein Lochlein so gross wie eine Nuss*. She tells him to make sure she doesn't make the hole bigger and gives him a silver coin for his services; a few months later *die*

If we similarly examine the *Ritter mit den Nüzzen* for percentage of direct discourse versus narrative, we find that about 2/3 of its 195 verses are in dialogue. The tale begins and ends with brief narrative passages, with six verses of prologue telling the audience to expect an exemplum of how a knight was deceived by a typical *listiges Weib*, while the concluding pseudo-moral of the tale warns in more explicitly sexual terms to beware of wives who *können mausen*. *Mausen* of course connotes both the wife's deceptive "toying" with her husband, as that of a cat with a mouse, and her adulterous *mausen* with her lover, where her husband is, as we shall see, reduced to the proverbial *alter Kater [who] kann...auch nicht mehr mausen, so liegt er doch gem vorm Loch* 'old impotent cat who can no longer catch mice but still gladly sits by the hole'.⁵

The wife's sexual and, more importantly, verbal deception of her husband is reflected in the dialogue, where she outtalks him both by her more frequent turn-taking and by her 84 verses of talking to his meager 29, all of which, as he shall see, he uses only to make himself more ridiculous. When she gets caught in the act, the wife's line of defense is not to fabricate a preposterous excuse, as is common in such situations, but to "tell the truth" to her husband's face but in such a mocking tone so that he will not believe her. His role in the dialogue is reduced to a few one- and two-line questions which serve only as a set-up for her outrageous answers, and for his two speeches in which he vehemently refuses to believe the wife's assertion that she has a lover hiding in the bed or to go and check the bed himself because he is convinced that she is just trying to trick him into making a fool of himself so that she can then mock his credulity in front of her friends.

The plot of the *Ritter mit den Nüzzen* belongs to the family of many medieval tales where the husband is "made temporarily blind" by his wife's ruse. Here, however, the husband becomes, in addition, willfully deaf as well as blind to his dishonor. After he proves himself "deaf" to his wife's confession of her infidelity, the "temporary blinding" trick follows as well, when his wife proceeds to assure him that, she was, after all, just making a joke, but that, nevertheless, had she really been hiding her lover in bed she could have let him get away by the simple ruse of grasping her husband close to her body and covering his head with her skirt. Naturally, as she loudly says this, she simultaneously acts it all out, allowing her lover to escape while the husband is temporarily blindfolded. The whole scene is a grotesque mime of the sex act, with

Pfanne spring entzwei/ Da schaut ein blonder Lochenkopf/ wohl in die Welt hinein (Jungbauer I, #240). Note that, for example, Ger. *Nagel*, Fr. *clou* Sp. *clavo*, and similar terms in other languages, connote 'penis'. For more detailed documentation on the erotic relexicalization of tools and nails and its gestural acting out in representation see Vasvári 1995; on cooking pots as 'vulva' see 1991, 7-8. For an overview of medieval examples of hammer as the male member or testicles, see Wailes (10). For modern documentation on tools as terms for the male organ see Murphy.

⁴ See Gordon for a description of some stock routines, for example, the "rising dagger routine," where a dagger begins to rise between the legs of a male character.

⁵ See Röhrich (148); cf. also *Em schlechter Kater ist der, der nur vor einem Loche maust* (55). For many additional erotic cat and mouse jokes, see Vasvári, "Joseph on the Margin".

the wife “on top,” covering the husband with her skirt, which, like all feminine articles of clothing that cover the genital area, from petticoats to aprons, function as a stock sexual metonymic replacement for it. Compare an even more graphic sexual mime in a similar scene in the French *Dit dou pliçon* (Montaignon-Raynaud VI, 260), where the wife blinds her stupid husband by throwing a pliçon ‘fur’ over his head, an ever more appropriate sexual metonymy, as all kinds of furs, as well as anything hairy or bristly, can have genital connotation by analogy with the furiness of the pubic area, as in Ger. das Pelz ‘fur/whore, wench, ‘*pelzen* ‘copulate.’⁶ Compare also the German popular riddle (Wossidlo 42):

Eine rauhe habe ich
 Vor dem Bauch trag ich,
 Junggeselen fürch’t euch nicht,
 Meine rauhe beisst euch nicht

The official answer to this riddle is *Pelzmuff!* Another version of this riddle is *Ein Loch und Haare drum / Und die Weiber tragens auf dem Bauch* (Luedecke 187-89). In the eroticized syntax of the body in which skirts, like fur muffs, stand for the female organ, the husband’s “head” which the skirt can totally envelop becomes, in turn, an equally stock topsy-turvy replacement for the male organ, and sometimes more specifically for the *glans penis*, often referred to in obscene riddles, with fanciful personifications, as “the bald one,” “the [bald-headed] friar,” and specifically as “one-eyed “ or “with an eye that cannot see” (cf. *heafod* ‘head’ in this sense in Old English Riddles, in Stewart, 46).

The wife in the sexual pantomime of “covering” her husband’s head with her skirt is taking the initiative in doing what he implicitly cannot do for himself. The same joke is much more graphically developed in the central metaphor of the story, from which it gets its title: the *Ritter mit den Nützen* is precisely one who doesn’t have any sexual *nützen* and can only shake his nuts, or for that matter, put his “head” into an old hat or his wife’s lap. Sexual jokes on old hats, and, especially, laps, which have the same vaginal metonymic value as articles of clothing covering them, were very common. See, for example, the same double entendre on both “head” and “lap” in Hamlet’s series of obscene taunts to Ophelia during the play-within-the- play scene, which begins with “Lady, shall I lie in your lap?... I mean my *head* upon your *lap* (III,ii, 116-19), or in the Golden Age Spanish verse *metió el huso en su regazo* ‘put the spindle in her lap’, where it is the *huso* which has the phallic connotations (Alzieu 45).

⁶ For more detailed documentation on the eroticization of articles of women’s clothing see Vasvári 1990, a study a fourteenth-century pornographic version of the well-known Aesopic tale of the ass and the lapdog, where a lady’s fur lap wrap becomes the central metaphor. Cf. also Daniçiq (1912), who calls the apron “das weiblichste Kleidestück, das es überhpaut gibt”. For a still earlier example, see the repeated mention of *hraegel* ‘garment’ in Old English riddles, where the “lifting of a garment constitutes a prelude to the sex act” (Stewart 47).

The fertility symbolism of nuts and formally similar fruits and vegetables is universal. For example, the ancient Teutons considered the oak tree male because the acorn with its cupole looks like the glans penis with its prepuce; for the Romans the walnut tree was the tree of Jupiter, *Jovis glans* or *iuglans regia* (Aigremont 89; cf. Ger. *Fichel*, Hung. *Makk*, Sp. *bellota*, all with the same connotation). On the age-old associations of [hazel]nuts with fertility and erotic fulfillment see also the wide range of proverbs such as in Ger. *In die Haseln gehen* or Fr. *Aller aux noisettees avec un garçon* as synonymous with lovemaking. In the ancient world sterile women were beaten with hazel twigs to make them fertile and hazelnuts were given to the couple on the wedding night (Dronke 1968, 194). Compare also the widespread wedding custom of throwing nuts or grains at a newlywed couple, and in Indian wedding rites dropping a copper coin and a nut into the bridal pitcher of water, symbolizing the womb (Archer 10). There are also many songs across languages where young women dance under flowering hazelnut trees, as in the Galician-Portuguese *Bailemos nós já todas tres, ai amigas, / so aquestas avelaneiras froldas; / e quen fôr belida, como nós, belidas, se amig' amar' so aquestas avelaneiras froldas: verrá bailar*, where three young women invite other beauties who want to make love with their lovers under the hazelnut tree to join them in their dance (Frenk 63, no. 53).

Nuts and grains are often strewn into ladies' laps as among the South Slavs, who at Easter would use grains and eggs painted red and decorated with love symbol (Daničić 1913). Throughout the European languages terms for gathering, cracking, and eating nuts are sexually suggestive in oral tradition, from the most direct disphemisms, like Eng. *Nuts*, Ger. *Nüsse* to more allusive riddles, proverbs, and lyrics, e.g., Ger. *Taube Nuss und hohler Zahn, junges Weib und alter Mann* 'noiseless nut and hollow tooth, young wife and old man', or its variant, *Der muss keine Nüsse knacken, der hohle Zähne hat* 'he who has a hollow tooth should not crack nuts (Aigremont 91); Fr. *année de noisettes, année d'enfants* 'a year [produces a good crop] of hazelnuts, a year for children;' Sp. *Ay muier, y ay mujer!! Vamos a apañar bellotas/ — eso sí. Marido, sí, pero delante la boda* (Schindler 276), 'Oh, woman, oh, woman, we're going to pilfer chestnuts/— Yes, husband, yes, but first the wedding;' Sp. *Más es el ruido que las nueces*, loosely translatable as 'even hollow nuts make a lot of noise,' which echoes the "hollow tooth" of impotent husbands, above, and is also applicable to men who are hollow braggards about their sexual prowess (see further examples in Vasvári 1990). The sound of nuts is, further, specifically related to cuckoldry in the Italian saying *Le corna dei poverelli sono noci, I le corna dei ricchi sono bambagia* (Corso 62) 'a poor man's horns are like nuts, the rich man's like cotton wool'.

The erotic relexicalization of "shaking the nut tree" and "cracking nuts" can form the punchline of stories. In an oral tale collected in the nineteenth century in Picardie (Anonymous 156-62), Jean the Miller is famous for being able to perform sexually sixteen times in a row.⁷ A young wife of an old judge wants to try out Jean's skills, for

⁷ On the folkloric hypervirility of young millers, especially those called John see Vasvári 1995.

which she promises him six hundred francs. When they are about to perform the seventh turn the judge unexpectedly comes home and they have to stop. As a result, the wife refuses to pay. Jean sues her and appears before the judge telling him: “She bet me if I could knock down fourteen nuts from your nut tree in one swipe. I did but one was bad, I had only guaranteed the quantity and not the quality.” The judge asks his wife if what Jean says is true. When she admits that it is, the fair-minded judge makes her pay up and also pay the court costs. In this context, we should recall that the knight *mit den Nützen* didn’t even knock down *any* nuts from a tree on his own. The gift he shook into his wife’s lap had been blown down by the storm and then collected by some children, from whom he had bought them. Compare the French fabliau “La dame qui se venja du chevalier” (Montaignon-Raynaud VI, 24-25), where “cracking nuts” is also the central metaphor. A knight who is having sex with his mistress cannot suppress making the very vulgar comment “*Ma dame, croitriez vous noiz?* ‘My lady, would you like to crack some nuts,’ a vulgarity which so insults the aristocratic lady that she instantly withdraws her favors. While ‘to crack nuts’ can connote copulation in general, or it can suggest the loss of virginity, as in *elle a croqué sa noisette* (Segalen 37), it can also more graphically allude to the special muscular skill of some females for contracting the vaginal sphincter so as to imprison the male organ, picturesquely referred to in French as *l’art de casse-noisettes* ‘the art of nut-cracking’ (Delvau 77). Compare also the Ger. verses where it is the young bride who is to collect, in this case apple blossoms, in her lap, the weight of which is sure to rip her delicate silk apron, the whole verse a veiled allusion to the wedding night (Danckert III, 1015):

Der Apfelbaum steht voll Blüten weiss,
 Blüten weiss schimmernd.
 Der Wind blast sie all herab,
 Auch herbal, auch, die Baumpracht.
 “So geh, du junge Braut, du Braut,
 junge Braut und sammle ein sie,
 die Pracht!” Doch, wohin sie tun?
 In deine schöne Schürze fein,
 Deine Sammetschürzel,
 Die Schürze ist viel zu zart, zu fein,
 Von zarter Seide!
 Sie wird zerreißen sicherlich,
 Die Seide zart, zerreißen!
 So lass sie zerreißen und verderben.

For purposes of the sexual metaphor nuts, apple blossoms and other fruits will do equally well as can be seen in the following (Röhrich 67):

Wollt ein Weiblein Nüsse schütteln,
 Alle Buben halfen rütteln.
 Wollt ein Weiblein Himbeern pflücken,
 Hat dabei den Rock zerrissen,
 Ha nicht nur den Rock zerrissen,
 wird die Schuh auch flicken müssen.

Iconography, from high art to pornography, makes identical equivocal use of nuts and nuts in ladies' laps. Compare the *calambour* in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, where Adam is given a tiny organ, while the figures surrounding him are enveloped by glandular cornucopia (Boulet 120-3; for a more detailed analysis of the acorn pun, which plays also on the family name della Rovere of Pope Julius's II's family, see Beck; ill. 1 below).

Examples of popular nut and nut cracking puns include erotic playing cards with strategically placed acorns (Boulet 119; ill. 2, below), anthropomorphic nut crackers representing l'art de casse-noisettes (Jakovsky 116, 118; ill. 3, below), and even a sixteenth-century "mooner" in a dipthyque conserved in Liège, whose testicles in true grotesque fashion metamorphose into chesnuts (Gaignebet & Lajoux (212-13; ill. 4 below).

Particularly relevant to the tale of the *Ritter mit den Nüzzen* are three engravings in Fuchs (141, 230) of a woman with an extremely self-satisfied expression spearing a phallic-shaped potato while holding another lapful in her open lap and a basketful in reserve by her side (ill. 5 below).

In another engraving a woman with a suggestive décolleté is evaluating the size of two prune plums between her fingers, while others in her apron await her scrutiny (ill. 6 below).⁸ In contrast to the inviting laps of these younger women, in another engraving an old lady who wants to buy a young man's favor has to offer him gold coins from her lap (ill. 7 below), a joking reversal of the theme of the shower of golden coins Zeus pours into Danaë's lap.

In addition to taking into account these verbal and visual examples, we can perhaps best appreciate the level of guffaw elicited by the nut cracking scene in the *Ritter mit den Nüzzen* for its original medieval audience by comparison with some modern examples of the same level of humor, for example, the song title "Hot nuts (Get them from the Peanut Man)" (Urdang), or the following dialogue, collected in Los Angeles in 1968 (Legman 643):

Lady customer: "Do you have any figs?"
 Greengrocer: "Sorry, no figs."

⁸ Prunes, by association of their oval bluish-dark tinge and wrinkled or smooth exterior, are common slang for testicles, as in Ger. *Pflaumen* Fr. *prunes* (Aigremont 84-85). See Ger. *Meine Pflaum hat keinen Stein, wem seine Pflaum mag das whol sein?* (Borneman #504).

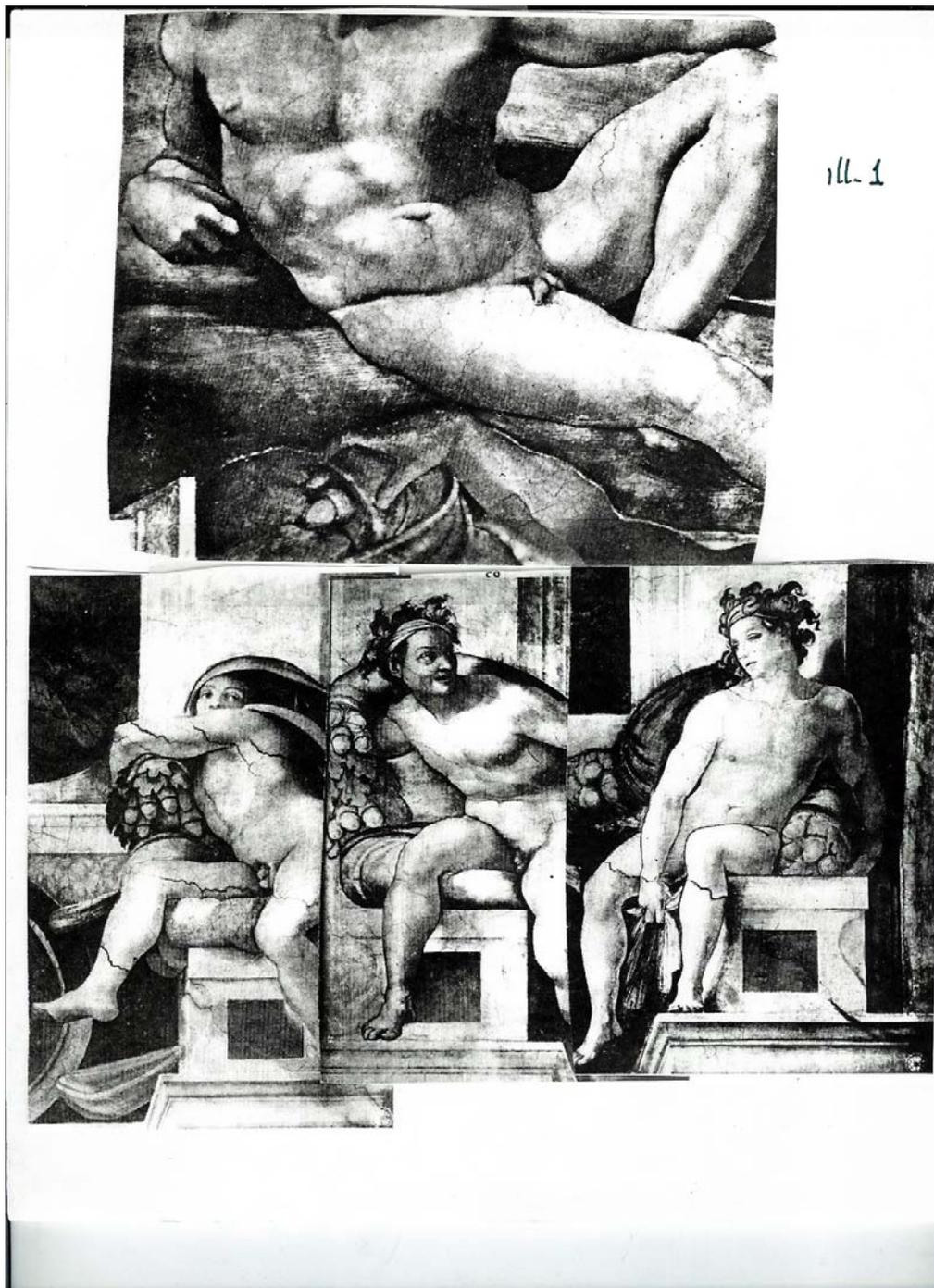
L: "Do you have any dates?"

G: "No, no dates either."

L: "Well, then do you have any nuts?"

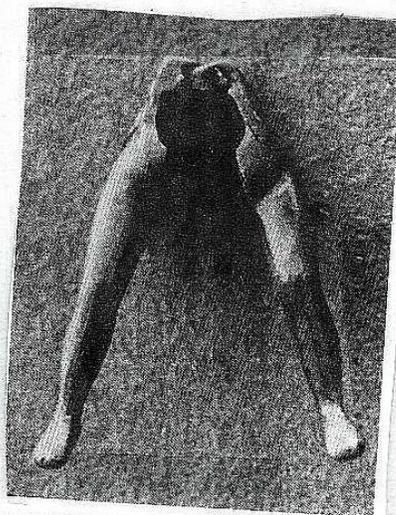
G: "Of course not, lady. If I had nuts I'd have dates."

The cumulative effect of the linguistic and mimetic play in the *Ritter mit den Nüzzzen* is to convert the tale into an extended obscene pun, where, as Howard Bloch has aptly pointed out in relation to the French fabliau (1986, 90) "pleasure derives less from the body than from a deferral in speech of speech, that substitutes for the object or act." It is precisely that deferral, that leering verbal pseudo-fig leaf that increases the comic climax for the audience. The authority of the husband is mocked not only by his physical cuckolding, but, more importantly, by his intellectual cuckolding, wherein he is too stupid to interpret the signs of his own dishonor (cf. Vasvári 2008 for another tale in the same tradition). In medieval fabliaux and farces a husband's mental deficiency always stands for his physical impotence as well. "Cracking nuts" represents all these.





ill. 2



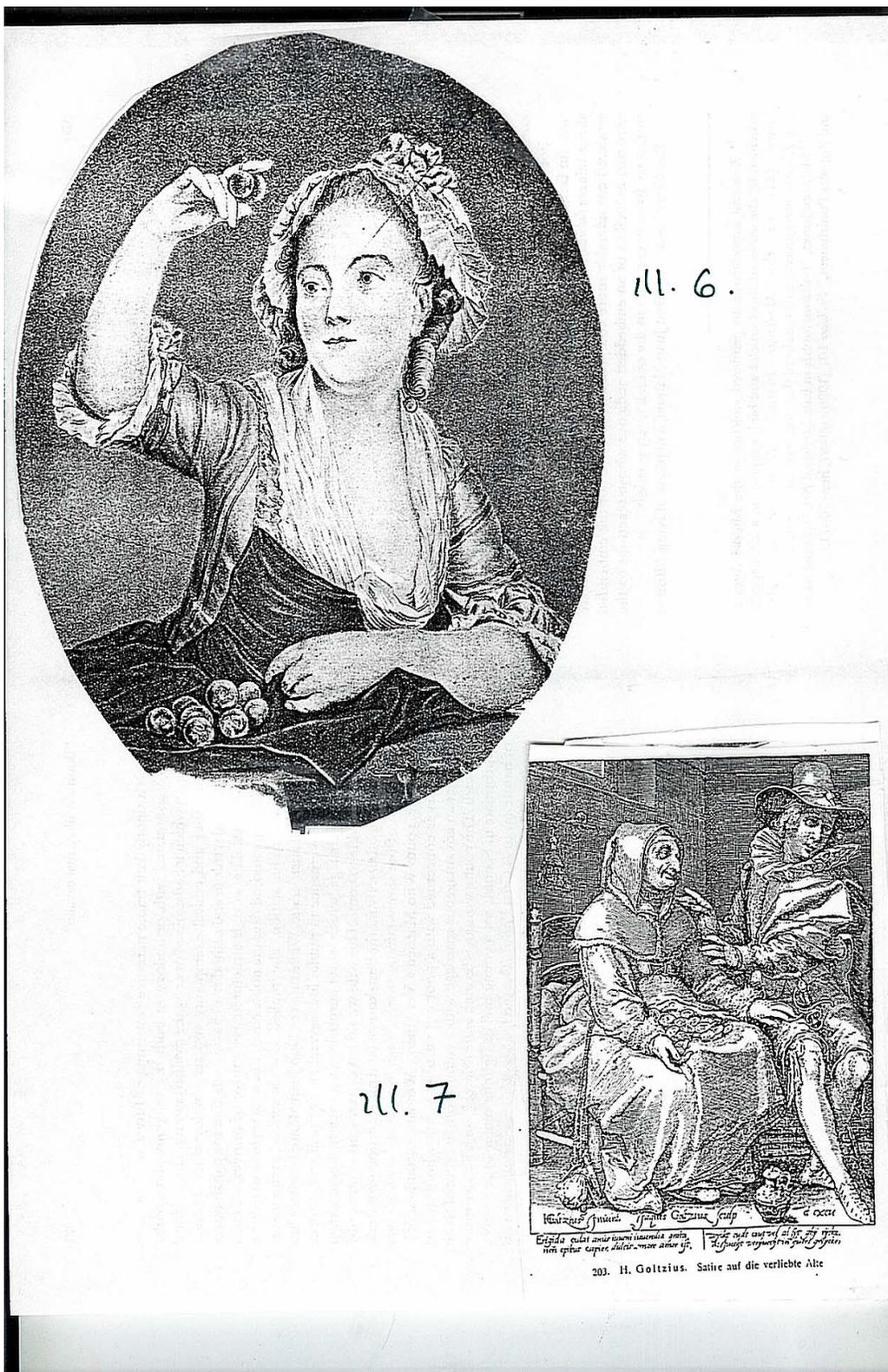
ill. 3



III. 4.



ill. 5.



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