Combat Between the Genders:
Farcical Elements in the German *Fastnachtspiel*

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Next to the eternal triangle the combat between man and woman in general and between husband and wife in particular is the most common motif in literature—and since the combat is often provoked by adultery the motifs can readily be linked together. Medieval literature all over Europe, ranging from *fabliaux*, *Schwäne* and anecdotes to farces and *Fastnachtspiele*, is densely populated with men and women, especially husbands and wives, mocking one another, quarreling and frequently resorting to reciprocal violence.

Twenty or more late-medieval *Fastnachtspiele*, most of them from Nuremberg, but also from other German towns and from Sterzing in the Tyrol deal extensively with the problems which emerge from the relations between the two genders. It is significant, in contrast, that none of the names or descriptions of the seventy-three plays on the list in the administration book of the *Zirkelgesellschaft* in Lübeck from the period 1430 to 1515 suggest that any of the plays deal with marital quarrels.

In this analysis I do not include “wooing plays” in which young peasants, fools or representatives of different social classes compete in wooing *Frau Venus*—always with the apple in her hand—or another woman. In these plays young men expose their merits, primarily in the sexual field, and display them in obscene dances in order to attract the woman’s attention. She will choose from among them her preferred lover, and so, in a symbolic way, her husband. Even if the woman mocks one or more of the wooers, the potential conflict is essentially between men, rather than between man and woman.
It is difficult to draw an exact line between plays where a man and a woman quarrel and plays where they just talk together about certain problems. In *Ein spil ein hochzeit zu machen* (Keller 7) the bride *in spe* asks the young man whom she is going to marry if he can fulfil her sexual wishes—and she gets a satisfactory answer. Sometimes the problems are handled by other people than the men and women involved. In *Ein hubsch vasnachtspil* (Keller 24) four men, whose daughters or wives have been seduced by a young man, bring their complaints before the court. In *Ein hubsch spil* (Keller 27) a man accuses his newly wedded wife in court of refusing to talk to him in a proper way. The woman does not defend herself, but leaves it to a counselor to tell the reason, i.e. she is thirsty and hungry (for sexual activity).

In *Ein vasnachtspil: die egen* (Keller 30) the problem is that some maids are not willing to marry any of the young men available so they are hitched to a plough. *Der Gerdraut einsalzen, vasnacht* (Keller 76), *Di vasnacht vom maigtum einsalzen* (Keller 77) and *Ain Einsalzen vasnacht* (Keller 91) deal with the same problem and these short plays (the first two probably fragments) show how the maids who remain unmarried during a year are to be rubbed with salt at Shrovetide to force them to marry. A similar procedure is used to pacify and tame the angry ill-natured woman in a play from northern Germany, *Ein schöne spil wo men böse vrouwens främ maken kan* (Keller 114). These examples suffice to show that the Carnival plays may deal with the problems concerning the relations between the sexes in many other ways than a direct confrontation between men and women.

On the other hand, confrontations may be part of plays in which other topics receive more attention than the marital strife. In the Danish play *Den utro hustru* one of three wooers, a peasant, is fetched by his wife who storms and rages while she beats him up and accuses him of being of no use in bed. In the Sterzing Venus-play (Bauer IV-2) a peasant woos Venus in a similar