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Laughing Matters: Farce and the Making of Absolutism in France. By Sara Beam

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BOOK REVIEWS
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Laughing Matters: Farce and the Making of Absolutism in France. By Sara Beam. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007; pp. 268. $55 cloth.
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Sara Beam's *Laughing Matters: Farce and the Making of Absolutism in France* examines the gradual waning of amateur farce in France from the mid-fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries. Beam makes a careful and nuanced argument about how the decline of a theatrical form that prided itself on its satirical bite heralds a changing political and economic infrastructure in France. Whereas we might expect the suppression of farce to be the direct result of an absolutist agenda in the seventeenth century, *Laughing Matters* shows, to the contrary, how the move away from farce began with the social and political shifts of the Reformation and Wars of Religion, which preceded absolutism and helped make it possible. In a society rocked by a seismic change in its notions of moral truth and religious value, what may have once been deemed a harmless farce risks becoming a dangerous political agenda. Beam's work adeptly traces the political domino effect caused by these fundamental crises.

The first half of the book details what Beam calls the heyday of popular farce in France from the mid-fifteenth to the mid-sixteenth centuries. Beam contends that the bawdy excesses of farce were not so much intended as a suspension or inversion of the moral strictures of the day (as Bakhtin's well-known theory of the carnivalesque might suggest), but rather as an amusing means to offer political commentary and, at the same time, reinforce ideals of both Christian morality and personal honor (18). She identifies a relationship between amateur *farceurs*, who were often destined to become government officials themselves, and local government, where the *farceurs* could critique governmental error through farce. The players used the backdrop of Christian moral teaching or notions of social honor to show how far various political authorities had strayed from that ideal. In this period, farce was a relatively safe means of communication among the various members of a body politic that recognized that the rumblings of the belly must be heard by the head (72).

The second half of the book points to three major forces at work in the waning of farce: the Wars of Religion, the professionalization of actors, and the changing nature of political authority. In the chapter on the Wars of Religion, Beam shows how the Catholic–Huguenot divide produced a kind of self-consciousness about spectacle that had not existed prior to the Reformation (117). With its authority under threat, the Catholic Church became necessarily less tolerant of the excesses of farce, even if the farce's final message actually reinforced Christian moral teaching.

Moreover, once the universal nature of that moral teaching was put into question, it could no longer productively serve as the backdrop for the farce.

In the earliest years of the seventeenth century, Beam identifies an interim period where farce might have come back into popularity, especially since Louis XIII continued to show an enthusiastic interest in it. Despite the king's own proclivities, however, farce declined further due to the increasing professionalization of actors and the need to cede to the resultant market forces. By looking specifically at the example of the Parisian theatres, Beam shows how there was a lack of popular demand for farce during this time, making a move toward the increasingly more popular classical fare an economic necessity.

Production of farces finally ends when the king's policies toward local governments began to change as well. Beam is careful to note that the king himself did not usually directly intervene to put a stop to farce. Rather, various elements in the more general efforts to centralize the king's authority—especially decreases in regional autonomy, a more highly regulated system of venality, and the development of a system of patronage—made it politically ineffective for local governments to finance farces that would risk losing the king's favor. In the final chapter of the book, Beam looks to examples of the decidedly more restrained Jesuit theatre as a subtler attempt to affect royal policy through flattery and inspiration rather than through satire and critique (211). By the time of Louis XIV, we see how the fundamental definition of a king, his subjects, and their right to criticize their ruler had changed so extensively as to make the earlier vision of farce as a means for productive communication obsolete. Despite the end of farce's use as a political tool, Beam maintains that theatre remained political, transforming itself to make its message effective once again.

Laughing Matters will have wide-ranging interdisciplinary appeal. Historians will appreciate how Beam's meticulous research culminates in a solid argument tracing the changing relationship between the proponents of popular farce and figures of political authority; she argues that farce flourishes when political authority is stable and sure of itself—in essence, when leaders feel secure enough to be able to take a joke at their expense. Theatre scholars will find her history of an understudied, popular genre to be thought-provoking in its posing of the fundamental question of exactly how influential popular theatre was (and can be) as a means of political communication. Because of its interdisciplinary eye, the book serves as an excellent general study of the period as well; Beam writes very clearly and always fleshes out historical details for those less familiar with this moment in history. With such an ambitious project, specialists in the period may be left wanting more: historians may hope for greater attention to a single region or a better sense of how certain regions differed; literary historians may want more textual examples from the farces themselves to give a better sense of what these theatrical events actually looked like. Viewed as the starting point for analysis of the relationship among popular theatre, politics, and religion at this extremely turbulent time in French history, however, Beam's book offers an exciting and far-reaching study.

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