

JOKE WORK AND SEX WORK: COURTIERS AND SOLDADEIRAS

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Abstract: The frequent jokes in the *cantigas d'escarnho e de mal dizer* about female sex workers, or *soldadeiras*, reveal courtly preoccupations concerning labor as well as gender. These repeated poetic games among men, shared within a symbolic economy of jesting (Freud's joke-work) that targets women's sexual labor, reproduce the social dispositions of masculine domination, while also concealing, through negation and comic displacement, the courtiers' own self-interest in material gain and social advancement.

Keywords: *Cantigas d'escarnho e de mal dizer*. *Soldadeiras*. Joke work. Sex work. Masculine domination. Courtesans. Gender division of labor.

Resumo: As frequentes piadas sobre *soldadeiras*, ou mulheres que trabalham sexualmente, nas *cantigas d'escarnho e de mal dizer* revelam preocupações da corte no que concerne tanto ao trabalho como ao gênero. Estes repetidos jogos poéticos entre homens, compartilhados na economia simbólica da pilhéria (o chiste freudiano) que visa o trabalho sexual das mulheres, reproduzem as disposições sociais da dominação masculina, enquanto encobrem também, por meio da negação e do deslocamento cômico, o próprio interesse dos cortesãos no ganho material e na ascensão social.

Palavras-chave: *Cantigas d'escarnho e de mal dizer*. *Soldadeiras*. Produção satírica. Trabalho Sexual. Dominação masculina. Cortesãs. Divisão de trabalho por gênero.

The Medieval Iberian *cantigas d'escarnho e de mal dizer* (CEM), songs of mockery and insult, are playful texts that record one of the pastimes of Iberian courts in the Middle Ages: a poetry of jokes that spans a gamut from highly sophisticated verbal games to outright insults and obscenities. They frequently use, to borrow a phrase from Octavio Paz, “palabras malditas, a cuya mágica ambigüedad confiamos la expresión de las más brutales y más sutiles de nuestras emociones y reacciones” (1993, p. 81)¹. Thematic studies of this corpus have long noted that a frequent target of the brutality and subtlety of these joke poems are *soldadeiras*: that is, sex-workers, courtesans or prostitutes. Graça Videira Lopes identifies at least 43 *cantigas* involving *soldadeiras* (1994, p. 213-15, p. 221-29), and Denise Filios has analyzed a number of these in terms of courtly staging, performance and play (2005, p. 33-82; 1998, p. 29-39).

Indeed, these texts, composed by courtiers for the pleasant occupation of moments of leisure at court, betray an extraordinary preoccupation, not simply with the ways of the flesh, but with the ways and means of procuring its pleasures. The economic valuation of female sex-work in these jokes reinforces social divisions along lines defined by both gender and labor. In one of these *cantigas*, on which I have written elsewhere (2004, p. 109-111; 1999, p. 64-65; FILIOS, 2005, p. 70-74), a *soldadeira* named Maior Garcia has multiple sexual and economic encounters with Muslim, Jewish, and Christian clients on a single day (CEM 189). Sex and business here come together in the equivocal language of *escarnho*, and double meanings proliferate in the semantic field of commerce: “tomar penhor”, “baratar”, “dar-vos-ei recado/ de vossos dinheiros”, “farei-vos eu pagado”, “dívida velha”, “carta sobre vos fazer”, “a carta notou sobr’ ela”, “pagou-a e leixou-lh’ o tralado”. These multiple transactions and negotiations for services involve coined money, debts, payments, written contracts (*carta*) and an equivocal *tralado*: a “copy” or “receipt” of exchange, but also an illegitimate *fijo de ganancia* (“child of gain” or “child of surplus”) of indeterminate paternity and ethnicity.

In revisiting this episode, I would like to insist particularly on the economic nature of these exchanges, and on the profit motives involved in them. If we understand the *carta* and the *tralado* in their most literal sense, why exactly does Maior Garcia and her clients require these written documents, this letter of credit, I.O.U. or receipt for her sexual services? The very hybrid and equivocal nature of the *tralado* serves to create the illusion that these transactions actually took place and were recorded in some marketplace of goods and services other than that of the ludic and masculine pastimes of courtly joke poetry. To restate the question more broadly: why, in these courtiers’ jokes about *soldadeiras* like Maior Garcia, is so much attention paid to the documentation and economic valuation of their sexual labor, of both the paperwork and the actual work of sex work?

Let me begin with a sentence from Pierre Bourdieu’s *Masculine domination [La domination masculine]*, reproduced below along with Richard Nice’s English translation:

La division sexuelle est inscrite, d'une part, dans la division des activités productives auxquelles nous associons l'idée de travail ainsi que, plus largement, dans la division du travail d'entretien du capital social et du capital

symbolique qui assigne aux hommes le monopole de toutes les activités officielles, publiques, de *représentation*, et en particulier de tous les échanges d'honneur, échanges de paroles (dans les rencontres quotidiennes et surtout à l'assemblée), échanges de dons, échanges de femmes, échanges de défis et de meurtres (dont la limite est la guerre); elle est inscrite, d'autre part, dans les dispositions (les *habitus*) des protagonistes de l'économie des biens symboliques: celles des femmes, que cette économie réduit à l'état d'*objets* d'échange (même si, sous certaines conditions, elles peuvent contribuer, au moins par procuration, à orienter et à organiser les échanges, matrimoniaux notamment); celle des hommes, à qui tout l'ordre social, et en particulier les sanctions positives ou négatives associées au fonctionnement du marché des biens symboliques, impose d'acquérir l'aptitude et la propension, constitutives du sens de l'honneur, à prendre au sérieux tous les jeux ainsi constitués comme sérieux (BOURDIER, 1998, p. 53, italics in the original).

[The sexual division is inscribed, on one hand, in the division of productive activities with which we associate the idea of work, and more generally in the division of the labour involved in maintaining social capital and symbolic capital which gives men the monopoly of all official, public activities, of *representation*, and in particular of all exchanges of honour – exchanges of words (in everyday and above all in the assembly), exchanges of gifts, exchanges of women, exchanges of challenges and murders (of which the limiting case is war). On the other hand, it is inscribed in the dispositions (the *habitus*) of the protagonists of the economy of symbolic goods – those of women, whom this economy reduces to the status of *objects* of exchange (even if, in certain conditions, they may help, at least by proxy, to orient and organize exchanges, in particular marriages); and those of men, on whom the whole social order, and in particular the positive or negative sanctions associated with the functioning of the market in symbolic goods, lays the obligation to acquire the capacity and propensity, constitutive of the sense of honour, to take seriously all the games thus constituted as serious (2001, p. 47, italics in the original).]

I submit that the CEM's jokes about *soldadeiras* are precisely one such social game (Bourdieu elsewhere uses the term *illusio*) that is constituted as both playful and yet serious, masculine, public, involving representation and the exchange of words, challenges and ripostes, and that serves to reinforce and reproduce gendered dispositions with regard to the ideas of work and leisure in both material and symbolic economies. Courtiers' interest in the sex-work performed by *soldadeiras* reveals their investment in a gendered division of labor, and simultaneously conceals their own anxieties about performance and profit in their own "work" of jesting entertainment at court.

Jacques Le Goff, in "Licit and Illicit Trades in the Medieval West", cites what he considers an extreme and somewhat illogical position taken as early as the late twelfth century by Thomas of Chobham, who defended prostitutes' labor though not their actions per se: "They hire out their bodies and supply labor. . . Whence this principle of

secular justice: she does evil in being a prostitute, but she does not do evil in receiving the price of her labor, it being admitted that she is a prostitute” (LE GOFF, 1980, p. 66-67).

Here it the sex in sex-work, not the work, that is condemned; as is the use of the body, but not the use of the body’s labor. Similarly, in the language of the *cantigas d’escarnho*, sex work is most frequently described as a trade, *mester de foder* or *arte do foder* (“craft of fucking”, CEM 37, CEM 23), requiring *sen e saber* (“understanding and knowledge”). These skills often derive from a formal apprenticeship – as indicated by the pedagogical verbs *mostrar*, *amonstrar*, *ensinar*, *aprender* (CEM 37, CEM 367) – similar to that of Celestina’s disciples Elicia and Areúsa in Fernando de Rojas’s *Tragicomedia*. With such tradecraft, the poet Pero da Ponte explains, sounding here a bit like Thomas of Chobham, the *soldadeira* “guarrá per seu lavor” (“will prosper through her own labor”, CEM 367). The word *soldadeira* derives from *soldada*, “salary”, “pay”; likewise medieval etymologies of *barragana*, “concubine”, relate that word to *ganância*, “gain”, “profit”, “surplus”. In the jokes of the *cantigas d’escarnho*, then, the *soldadeira*’s sexual labor is circumscribed within an economy of material goods as a measurable and convertible commodity, one that, like the Aristotelian *materia*, is specifically marked as feminine. One veteran *soldadeira*, Maria Leve (who complains, “São velha” [“I am old”], CEM 247), is said to have moved to a location called Moeda Velha (literally “old coin”), in what must also be intended as a reference to the much-circulated courtesan herself (CEM 244).

The sexual circulation of women between men, part of what Gayle Rubin termed the economic “traffic in women”, is even more apparent in the case, mentioned above, of Maior Garcia. In the course of a single day’s work, this *soldadeira* obtains cash from a Jewish client and a letter of credit (“carta”) from a Muslim, which he equivocally writes over her or on top of her: “a carta notou sobr’ela”, leaving here with the “tralado”, receipt or copy, and equivocally a *fiijo de ganância*, an illegitimate child of surplus. But these interfaith contracts for sex serve only to pay off a pre-existing debt (“dívida velha”), financial and sexual, owed to a Christian squire. Thus Maior Garcia’s sex work functions as a kind of transactional medium or “open market” for interfaith trading, or economic exchanges, among men, that are “written upon” the bodies of *soldadeiras*.

Another *cantiga*, involving the celebrated *soldadeira* Maria Perez Balteira (CEM 425)², is less equivocal and more brutal about the buying and selling of this woman's "cunt" (in such phrases as "cono mercado" and "de molher cono [...] vender"), which is considered simply *merchandia*, "merchandise". The question posed in this *tenço*, or poetic debate, is that if Balteira has already promised this commodity to her lover, Pero d'Ambroa, how can she then also sell it to other men as well? Luce Irigaray considers prostitution a special case of the patriarchal exchange of women, special in that what trades hands between men is not the woman per se as a bearer of exchange value, but rather the transacted sexual usage of her, "*usage that is exchanged*" (IRIGARAY, 1977, p. 186, italics in original). And precisely the paradoxical crux of this joking debate poem arises out its deliberate confusion between the exchange value between men of the *soldadeira*'s body as sex object or merchandise, to be bought and sold, for the value of her shared usage, that is to say, the labor she embodies as sex worker.

In another *cantiga* (CEM 333), Pero d'Ambroa, already mentioned above as one of Maria Perez Balteira's lovers, similarly exploits the economic conundrums of sex for pay. He describes the transaction thus: "Pedi eu o cono a ãa molher,/ e pediu-m' ela cen soldos enton"³. The symmetry of the exchange is exact, but the timing ("enton") is not. The rules of commerce require fixing the price beforehand, and the *cantiga* goes on to chronicle Pero d'Ambroa's haggling over price in the business of male sexual pleasure. Indeed, the mercantile language of this *cantiga* resembles that of Rachel and Vidas, the presumably Jewish pawnbrokers of the *Cantar de Mio Cid*, who tell Martín Antolinez that "Non se faze assí el mercado,/ sinon primero prendiendo e despues dando"⁴ (CANTAR, 1993, ll. p. 139-140). The *soldadeiras* of mens' jokes, like the Jewish pawnbrokers of Christian epic, only take part in an economy of material goods: the *soldadeiras* through the use of their bodies, the pawnbrokers through the use of their economic capital⁵.

In both of these cases of economic exchange, the *soldadeiras*' and the pawnbrokers', payment for use is demanded up front, in advance. This runs contrary to the customary feudal rituals of generous gift giving, which are characterized by the trusting and reciprocal logic of *do ut des* ("I give so that you give"), described in Marcel Mauss's *Essai sur le don (The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* [1990]). In Bourdieu's analysis of the gift in an economy of symbolic goods, antithetical

to the economy of material goods but nevertheless fully convertible with it, he advances the following propositions. The gift imposes the obligation of a reciprocal “counter-gift” on the recipient, an act of symbolic violence by means of which a material good is converted into a symbolic good (the receiver’s debt of honor). The counter-gift cannot be immediate, however, but requires a time-lag, which allows the obligation to be forgotten, or repressed, in order that the gift be considered to be freely given. Finally, that forgetfulness is necessarily collective (even if it is experienced individually, since it involves the disposition of the social *habitus*):

This collective self-deception is only possible because the *repression* from which it arises (whose phenomenological condition of possibility is indeed the lapse of time) is inscribed, as an *illusio*, at the foundation of the economy of symbolic goods, the anti-economic economy (in the restricted modern sense of “economic”) that is based on denial (*Verneinung*) of interest and calculation. . . . We might coin the term “common miscognition” to designate this game in which everyone knows – and does not want to know – that everyone knows – and does not want to know – the true nature of the exchange (BOURDIEU, 1997, p. 232).

In the context of these jokes told among courtiers about *soldadeiras*, Bourdieu’s notion of *illusio*, the game of common self-deception or miscognition, may be connected with the process of joke work posited by Freud in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Freud considers joke work closely analogous to dream work in that its work of displacement and double meaning deflects the inhibitions imposed by the conscious censor (1960, p. 213-214), although it operates at the level of community rather than of the individual psyche (i.e. as a collective self-deception). The fourteenth-century anonymous poetic treatise that defines the *cantiga d’escarnho* as a genre says that it operates *per palavras cubertas* (“through concealed words”) that have two meanings (LIU, 1998, p. 41-42), a definition that coincides nicely with the verbal strategies that Freud discusses. The poetic treatise also states that men laugh on account of these songs – “riiê ende a vezes os homês” (D’HEUR, 1975, p. 329), which characterizes them as jokes meant for male pleasure. According to Freud’s economizing model of *Witz*, the joke work requires an expenditure of psychic energy by the joke teller, and produces a pleasurable surplus in the listener, a discharge of *cathexis* expressed through laughter. The telling and circulation of jokes thus very much constitutes an economy of symbolic exchange, between men, in which the gift disinterestedly offered and received is the joke-work invested and the surplus of

pleasure obtained in “getting the joke.”

Henri Bergson had similarly underlined the community-defining function of laughter, writing that “notre rire est toujours le rire d’un groupe”⁶ (1972, p. 5). And to cite a more specifically Galician-Portuguese parallel, Ramon Piñeiro contrasts the longing of *saudade* as an individual lyrical impulse with humor as its counterpart in male company: “Ante la naturaleza somos líricos, ante los demás hombres, humoristas”⁷ (*apud* DE LA VEGA, 1983, p. 41). However, the “we” in “notre rire” and “somos humoristas” is by no means inclusive, since humor in general and verbal jokes in particular are famously inflected by identity categories, whether British humor, Jewish jokes, or mens’ jokes about women, as is the case in these *cantigas d’escarnho e mal dizer*. These are tendentious jokes, aimed at someone in particular, always identified by group and often by personal name. Freud remarks, precisely in the context of the smutty joke, that tendentious jokes call for three parties: the teller, the listener, and a triangulated object, the butt of the joke (1960, p. 118-119). In smutty jokes like these, the third, mediate place is occupied by the sex-working *soldadeira*.

Nevertheless, in the *cantigas d’escarnho* the butt of the joke is not always excluded from the ensuing laughter; in fact, contemporary legislation dictated that if the object of the joke were not to participate in that laughter, it could be considered and punished as slander (FILIOS, 1998, p. 30-34; LIU, 1998, p. 45-46), that is to say, a lowering of prestige or symbolic capital. If jokes told and circulated at court, then, constitute a gendered economy of symbolic goods (or an anti-economic economy), the hostility manifested toward the butt of the joke, in this case sex workers, may not be their only purpose. Rather, these jokes, however playful they may seem, also operate covertly (*per palavras cubertas*) to maintain that “denial of self-interest and calculation” that Bourdieu places at the very foundation of the symbolic economy. In other words, they work against the very idea of work performed in exchange for gain, here embodied in the *soldadeira* who exchanges sex for pay.

What is being negated here is the misrecognized truth of the exchange: that in formal terms, joke work functions in a nearly identical manner to sex work. There is an expenditure of energy to produce pleasure under obligation, whether of economic or symbolic capital, whether to earn pay or to win “favor”. The artifacts of joke work –

carefully fashioned for a time designated specifically for play and leisure – represent a source of material gain for many of the courtier poets themselves, who depend on and profit from the generosity of patrons. The work of the joke is nevertheless freely offered for the pleasure of its hearer, because its purpose is the accumulation of not economic but symbolic capital, convertible, after the appropriate lapse of time, back into economic capital. Whereas the economic violence – the sexual usage – performed on the courtesan’s body is overt, and immediately paid for, on the courtier it is symbolic, and recompense is deferred. Of course, the ongoing repetition of the misogynist joke perpetuates a social *habitus* of masculine domination. But, at the same time, courtiers’ jokes that openly ridicule courtesans and their economy of gain contribute in this manner to two collective self-deceptions: first, the illusion that the moments of leisure spent in the courtly pleasures of joking entertainment and *otium* suspend the measured passage of time and so negate the tedious *negotium* of work; and second, the game of “common miscognition” of a gendered economy of symbolic goods, which sustains, at women’s expense, the masculine fictions of disinterested generosity and universal laughter.

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¹ [accursed words, to whose magical ambiguity we entrust the expression of the most brutal and subtle of our emotions and reactions].

² Cf. Denise Filios (1998, p. 32-35).

³ [I asked a woman for her cunt, and she asked me for a hundred *soldos*].

⁴ [business is not done that way, but rather first by taking then by giving]

⁵ Another group that is similarly mocked, and feminized, in the *cantigas d'escarnho* are the miserly nobles who, because of their material and spiritual avarice, dwell, secluded and withdrawn, almost completely shut off from public life or any economic or social circulation whatsoever.

⁶ [our laughter is always the laughter of a group].

⁷ [Before nature we are lyrical, before other men, humorists].