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Na Lebra, the Naughty Nun in Francesc de la Via's Libre de Fra Bernat

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NA LEBRA, THE NAUGHTY NUN
IN FRANCESC DE LA VIA'S
LIBRE DE FRA BERNAT

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The long narrative poem *Libre de Fra Bernat*, written in Catalan during the first quarter of the fifteenth century by Francesc de la Via, is preserved in a single manuscript that resides in the Biblioteca Colombina in Sevilla and dates from the end of the fifteenth-century. The text, which consists of 2095 *versos de codolada*, relates the adventures of a monk, Fra Bernat, who is besotted with a nun named Na Lebra. Bernat is on his way to visit his beloved in the monastery when he meets up with the author-narrator. When the two arrive, they discover that despite her vows of chastity and poverty as a Poor Clare, Na Lebra is actively encouraging two other suitors for material gain: a canon and a knight. She takes their money in exchange for her attentions, tricks each into thinking he is her favorite, and then concocts an elaborate scheme to rid herself of them. She misdirects the knight and canon into the river outside her monastery, tricks Bernat into drinking a purgative in her chambers by promising him sexual favors and sets angry nuns on him. Bernat, in the throes of the potion, runs from staff-wielding nuns who chase him into the river where his rivals are waiting to take their revenge. Bernat is caught by the townspeople, coated with honey, pilloried and beset by bees. In the meanwhile, Na Lebra and the author-narrator, Francesc de la Via, frolic in her cell. The few critics who have considered this work tend to situate it historically or generically, labeling it a *fabliaux* or satire, but nobody has done a more detailed analysis of the text. This study attempts to fill that lacuna, classifying Na Lebra as a female literary type, the "naughty woman," also found in other medieval texts that include, for example, the *soldaderas* of Alfonso el Sabio's *Cantigas Profanas* (Paredes Núñez), the *serranas* and nuns from Juan Ruiz's *Libro de buen amor* (Daichman, Joset, and Willis), and the scandalous women of the Old French *fabliaux* (Bloch, Benkov, and Goldberg) and troubadour traditions (Dragonetti and Paden).

A summary of the criticism of the *Libre de Fra Bernat* date has been gathered by Jordi Vinyes in the introduction to his modern edition, where he remarks: "el llibre i el seu autor són ignorats en molts dels estudis literaris que hem consultat" 'the book and its author are ignored in many of the literary studies that we consulted' (7). A. Pagès classifies the work as a *fabliau* (320), while Martí de Riquer and

Kenneth Scholberg include it within the tradition of anticlerical or misogynistic satire. In his edition of the *Libre de Fra Bernat*, Arseni Pacheco relates the work to events in 1445, noting letters of complaint from the magistrates of Girona about goings on in a convent of the Poor Clares on the river Onyar near Girona:

En 1445 els jurats es queixaven encara de fra Alemany i escrivien a la reina a propòsit d'ell: "lo qual continuament, sots color de confessar, entra massa sovint en lo dit monastir (el de les clarisses) e ben sovint se acompanya de companjons que són massa solícits de acompanyarlo" "In 1445 the city councilors also complained about brother Alemany and wrote to the queen about him: for continually, under the pretext of confessing he enters far too often in said monastery (that of the Poor Clares) and is often accompanied by companions most eager to go with him." (41)

Pacheco hypothesizes that Fra Alemany was, in fact, a pseudonym for Fra Bernat Serradell, a Franciscan monk who died in 1445, and that Na Lebra was probably Nicolava Casanoves, a nun excommunicated for *deshonesta conducta* with Franciscan friars (41-43).

In the absence of more thorough studies, the ambiguous characterization of Na Lebra and the internal contradictions of the plot of the *Libre de Fra Bernat* merit attention (Gadea and Romeu). Na Lebra actually belongs to a class of medieval female characters that do not conform to the Mary-Eve paradigm that was first laid out by Eileen Power in her 1926 study, "The Position of Women." Such "naughty women" are characterized by ambiguous representations, speech that reveals the threat of female sexuality, hybridization of physical descriptions and actions which effectively reverse sexual roles and challenge patriarchal authority (Splittgerber iii-iv). With its comic narration, the central story of the *Libre de Fra Bernat* reads like a funny, dirty joke about a naughty woman who is bested by a clever man, the narrator. However, the supposed moral of the story is really undermined by the characterizations of the "bad" woman and "virtuous" man. Na Lebra is portrayed as a *figura Eva*, a prostitute who baits and fleeces three suitors who pay for her favors. Yet she also punishes their amorous advances with an elaborate scheme and uses her vow of chastity to avoid sleeping with them. In the end she frolics with the narrator of the poem, who ironically boasts of his conquest, laughs at the suffering of his unfortunate competitors and leaves her *burlada*.

The author juxtaposes two descriptive modes to underscore the contradictions inherent in Na Lebra's characterization. Her physical description begins as courtly and idealized, but becomes more sexually suggestive:

- 246 Ha-n'í una molt falaguera,
 ab cors isnell,
 e pens-me bé que son par d'ell
 no's pot trobar
- 250 e son bell cors crech no ha par
 en aquest món.
 Aquesta monja'm té en preson
 e'm fa languir,
 car tant l'am yo, que no'u sce dir
- 255 ne dar entendre.
 Si li plagués me volgués pendre
 per servidor,
 presara'u més que ser senyor
 de tota França.
- 260 En ella floreix e s'avança
 tota proesa,
 humilitat e gentilesa
 e bon capteny,
 e raonar ab noble seny
- 265 qui l'anvirona:
 esta mereix portar corona
 sobre son cap;
 aquesta val, hi pot, hi sab
 a qui li plau,
- 270 e si li plagués que sots clau
 ab ley dormís,
 no ha tal goig en paradís.¹

'There is one there, most comely/ with a svelte body,/ and I really think that one equal to her/ cannot be found/ and her beautiful body, I believe, has no peer/ in this world./ This nun has me imprisoned/ and makes me languish,/ for I love her so much, that I don't know how to say it,/ nor make it understood./ If it would please her to take me/ as her servant;/ I would value that more than being the king/ of all of France./ In her flourishes and shines/ all worth,/ humility and nobility/ and good understanding/ and reasoning with noble sense/ that surrounds her./ She deserves to wear a crown/ upon her head,/ she is worth this much; she can and she knows/ whom she pleases/ and if she would allow me/ to sleep with her in a locked room/ I would be happier than a saint in paradise.'

The poet endows her body with courtly attributes: she is *falaguera* with a peerless *cors isnell*. But this lofty praise quickly acquires a sexual

1. For the Old Catalan edition, I have used the 1968 edition of Arseni Pacheco. The English translations are my own, with special thanks to Philippe Costaglioli. An earlier version of this paper was read at the 2001 SAMLA convention in Atlanta, GA.

undertone: *si li plagués que sots clau ab ley dormís, no ha tal goig en paradís* 'and if she would allow me/ to sleep with her in a locked room/ I would not find such joy in paradise' (270-74).

And the author completes his description of Na Lebra with a highly eroticized vision which reads like medieval pornography with the narrator indulging in voyeuristic tendencies:

525 La monja stech ab gran deport
 ab lo cavaller,
 que no's curech del desplaer
 de fra Bernat;
 e quant eu viu son cors delgat
 e tan adorn,
 530 fuy pus calent que si'n un forn
 fos eu pausats,
 car ab sos esgarts biaxats
 lansech tals darts,
 que no'm defès enginy ne arts
 535 que no'm farís
 d'una dolçor, que'n paradís
 cuydey estar,
 car eu pensí que deu passar
 totes les belles.
 540 Quant eu viu ses blanxes mamelles
 sens cubertor,
 may no viu falcó ni estor
 tam bé debatre.

'The nun had great sport/ with the knight/ and didn't care about
 the displeasure/ of Fra Bernat/ and when I saw her delicate body/
 and so beautiful,/ I was hotter than if I had been put in an oven/ for
 even when looking sideways/ she threw such darts/ that no weapon
 or arm could defend me/ from being wounded/ by a sweetness, so
 that in paradise/ I thought I was/ because I thought that she must
 surpass/ all beauties./ When I saw her white breasts/ uncovered,/
 never did I ever see a falcon or a hawk/ fight so well.'

Exactly what kind of erotic sport she has with the knight is not explicitly stated, but whatever she is doing, it affords the narrator a good view of her naked body and bare white breasts. The use of the word *debatre*, an ancient metaphor for sex, makes this sexual encounter a battle that Na Lebra wins (Adams 147). The author continues to contrast Na Lebra's courtly appearance and her non-courtly behavior: her gentle appearance is a mere façade which conceals her inner animalistic nature, represented by the bird imagery. This hybridized description of Na Lebra is actually a barometer of her sexuality and power.

On the surface, Na Lebra means Sister "hare" or "rabbit," a feminization of Vulgar Latin *lepore*. In her book on animal symbolism, Beryl Rowland writes about the tradition of this word:

[. . .] an animal prized for its fertility became the perfect symbol for woman as a whole and for a specific part of her anatomy. One of the most obvious references to this kind of word play dates from the middle of the fifteenth century [. . .] but even earlier instances of the symbolism occur [. . .] In England *coney* and *bunny* have had the meaning of *pubendum* up to the present day. *Cunny-warren* [. . .] may have meant *brothel* [. . .] [and] the use of *bun* for *prostitute* was recorded in Glasgow in 1934. (133-34)

But in line 542, this non-threatening "bunny" is paradoxically compared to a fierce hunting hawk or a starling that fights. It is because she is sexualized that Na Lebra is equated with dangerous birds of prey. There is an ominous transformation involved—though at first perceived as a soft and receptive *lepore*, Na Lebra turns into a raptor that violently preys upon the three suitors rendered helpless by her sexuality. Because laughter is a way of coping with fear, the use of animal imagery is a safe way to make this dangerous, sexualized version of Na Lebra risible. Metaphorical associations with animals, in particular with birds, make it easier for the narrator to think of Na Lebra as less than human and to treat her accordingly. Gerson Legman, who has studied the dynamic behind dirty jokes, writes that bird imagery is, "the simplest disguise for actions which cannot safely or diplomatically be ascribed to human beings, and particularly not to the speaker or joke-teller himself" (894). Legman's understanding of the motivation behind bird anecdotes involves a reaction to what is socially unacceptable or not safe behavior and, by associating Na Lebra's behavior with avian acts, the author not only distances himself from the behavior, but adds to it the connotations of whatever bird he chooses.

Na Lebra's ambiguous nature becomes even more evident when we see her appeal to religious customs to stop the sexual advances of the knight who is pressuring her, saying that she could never break her vow of chastity, a vow we know she broke at least once a hundred lines earlier in the poem:

La monja, com sàvia y certa,
 respòs tot pla:
 650 "Mossényer, vostra raysó m'á
 tota torbada,
 e som fort marvellada
 com me digués
 que mes amors a vós don;

- 655 que no' u deig far,
 car per jesucrist a lausar
 suy ça venguda,
 e en cest loch retenguda
 per Ell servir.
- 660 Aquest am e vull obesir
 e dar m'amor;
 aquest hay pres per mon senyor
 e per espòs,
 e faria gran traÿciós
- 665 qu'eu lo lexàs;
 aquest dóna gauig e solaç
 e gran plaser:
 e qui'l ama no pot haver
 treball mi mal.
- 670 Donchs, mossényer, vers mi no'y cal
 haver fiança
 ni encara sperança
 de tal demanda,
 car nostra regla no'u comanda
- 675 ne far no'u dey,
 car eu trencaria la ley
 de castedat,
 e qui pert la virginitat
 no la pot cobrar.
- 680 Doncs anats en altra part cercar
 fer vostre pro,
 perquè, tot ras, vos dich de no".

"The nun with wisdom and confidence/ answered thus plainly/
 "Sir, your discourse has left me/ completely confused/ and I am
 awestruck/ that you have told me/ to give my love to you,/ which
 I should not do/ because it is to praise Christ/ that I have come
 here/ and remained in this place/ in order to serve him./ Him I
 love and want to obey/ and give my love./ Him I have taken for
 my lord/ and spouse,/ and I would greatly betray him/ if I allowed
 this./ He gives great joy and solace/ and great pleasure,/ and one
 who loves him cannot have trouble or pain./ Therefore, Sir, with
 me do not think/ to have a relationship/ nor any hope/ for such a
 request,/ because our Rule does not allow it/ and I should not do
 it/ because I would break the commandment/ of chastity,/ and she
 who looses her virginity/ cannot recover it. So leave and look
 elsewhere/ to do your will/ because, in short, I tell you no."

This hypocritical passage contains suggestively erotic vocabulary that increasingly undermines Na Lebra's seeming piety (Cela, Paden, and Vila). The feudal or religious metaphors in her speech, like *servir* and *obesir e dar m'amor*, are potentially erotic. *Servir* is often a metaphor for intercourse in the Provençal tradition, and the phrase

"obey and give my love" may be taken quite literally (Paden 76). The eroticism of the text is overtly confirmed a few lines later when Na Lebra tells the knight en *breu temps yo compliré vostres plasers* 'soon I'll do whatever you like' (754-55) after he gives her a gold chalice with a hundred gold coins, a fertility symbol representing the female reproductive system (Neumann 47).

Na Lebra brings about the symbolic castration of her suitors through careful manipulation. When the knight gives her money, she deliberately embraces him in plain view of her other two suitors. This action incites Bernat and the canon to fight in an astoundingly unseemly fashion, considering they are men of the cloth:

- 1205 Ladonchs vérets lo framenor
e'l canonge,
qui's batien davant la monja.
Del primer salt,
lo canonge's mostrà pus alt
e pus ardit
1210 mordé'l frare ab gran despit
sus en l'orella.
Fra Bernat arronça la cella
no li parech joch,
ans volgué dar scach per roch
1215 al capellà,
que'n un moment li mes la mà
dins la braga,
e dix: Yo'us daré la paga
qu'avets guanyada.
1220 Donà'li molt gran tirada
al genetiu;
e vérets la monja que riu,
fent gran joya
que parech que tota Savoya
1225 l'agués hom dada.

"Then you saw the friar/ and the canon,/ fighting in front of the nun./ On the first assault/ the canon shows himself taller/ and more daring;/ he bit the friar with great spite/ upon his ear./ Brother Bernat wrinkled his brow,/ it didn't seem like a joke to him;/ rather would he trade tit for tat/ with the canon./ For in an instant he stuck his hand/ within his (the canon's) pants/ and said: "I will give you/ what you deserve."/ He gave him then a vicious pull/ of the genitals/ and you will see the nun laughing/ with such great joy,/ that it seemed all of Savoy/ someone had given to her."

This symbolic genital-pulling castration and ear-biting represent an eventual economic gain for Na Lebra, who pits all three suitors against

each other for her benefit and reduces them to a sexually-frenzied animal state with the contagion of lust (Smith and Zemon Davis).

According to Angelina Puig Vals and Nuria Tuset Zamora, in the Middle Ages, brothels were often called *monasterios*, run by *abadesas* or *matronas* (280). Na Lebra certainly conforms to the definition of a prostitute by virtue of her promiscuity and the fact that she charges men money for sexual favors. And the basic ambivalent tolerance that characterizes the medieval attitude towards prostitutes underlies the tense dynamic of desire and repugnance found in this text: such women were despised yet tolerated as *publica utilitas* (Brundage 521).

When Fra Bernat asks Na Lebra why she has abandoned him in favor of the canon, she replies that it is because he has never given her anything of value:

- 1475 Dix la monja a fra Bernat:
 "Sabets per què?
 Tostemps me porta algun bé,
 argent o drap;
 e vós no valets sols un nap,
 tant sots avar;
 1480 jamés m'avets volgut res dar
 sí co'l canonja.

'Said the nun to Fra Bernat:/ "Do you know why?/ He always brings me something of value/ silver or fine cloth/ and you are not worth a turnip,/ so miserly you are;/ never have you given me a thing/ as nice as the canon.'

The items Na Lebra mentions clearly establish her ideas about the sexual economy. She says Fra Bernat is not worth a turnip, all he usually has, and simultaneously makes a despective commentary on his sexual anatomy, according to Cela (654) and Adams (26). The canon, however, brings her silver coins and "*draps*," a sexual euphemism for being "well covered."² Na Lebra states that in her

2. We find the metaphor of "cover" as sexual intercourse in Dante's poem about Forese Donati's wife:

Chi udisse tossir la malfatata
 moglie di Bicci vocato Forese,
 otrebbe dir ch'ell'ha forse vernata
 ove si fa'l cristallo, in quel paese.
 Di mezzo agosto la truove infreddata:
 or sappi che de' far d'ogni altro mese...;
 e non le val perché dorma calzata,
 merzé del copertoio c'ha cortonese.
 La tosse, l'freddo e l'altra mala voglia

economy, sex equals money or goods and a man's sexual prowess is equated with his ability and willingness to pay her. The next passage further develops the point:

Frare, yo'us portava amor
 e'us acullia
 per ço com per dit me tenia
 1495 que, sens tardar,
 vós me deguéssets aportar
 algun present.
 E prech-vos no'us doneu marriment
 si no'us acull,
 1500 car d'ara avant yo no'us vull
 res demanar,
 car no'us vull bé ne menys amar.
 Via'n mal guany!
 Car a tal frayrot no pertany
 1505 que'l deg'amar.
 Jamés m'avets volgut res dar
 que portàs per vós.

'Brother, I loved you/ and I received you/ because I took it for granted/ that, without delay,/ you ought to bring me/ a present of some kind./ And I beg you that it not make you sad/ if I do not greet you/ because from now on I don't want/ to ask anything of you/ because I don't like you, let alone love you./ Go to hell!/ For it is not fitting that I love such a petty friar./ Never have you given me a thing/ to wear in your name.'

In this passage, Na Lebra uses the rhetorical language of courtly love ironically to add insult to injury. Understood in this context, the love she bears him, the greeting and the gifts she expects from him are feudal metaphors which liken a vassal's obligation to his lord to a romantic suit, placing the lady in the position of liege lord. Within this system, Na Lebra's love and her greeting have a monetary rather than emotive value; but her feudal language also carries a potential erotic charge (Dragonetti and Paden). Like other naughty women in this tradition, Na Lebra demands money, rebuffs male advances and uses

no l'addovien per omor ch'abbia vecchi,
 ma per difetto ch'ella sente al nido. (116)

'Who heard her cough, that ill-fated/ wife of Bicci, as Forese known to us,/he'd surely say she maybe spent the winter/ up in the northern town where crystal's made./ You catch her, in mid-August, with a cold:/ so you can guess the other months...;/ In vain, when sleeping, she still wears her socks,/ having no blanket on, or one too short./ Her cough, her cold, and all her other fears/ are not because she is advanced in years/ but only for some lack inside her nest.'

inappropriate speech. For example, in Na Lebra's economy, impotence and poverty are not differentiated. She states her motto:

La monja dix [. . .],
 1515 estant en sus:
 "Sicut nos visitas, sicut te colimus,
 per veritat
 car si'm haguéssets res portat,
 bé'us acullira,
 1520 e graciosament vos servira
 de mon poder."

'The nun said [. . .],/ standing over him:/ "As you visit us, so shall we receive you;/ truly,/ for if you had brought me something,/ I would have greeted you sweetly/ and graciously served you/ to the best of my ability.'

This Latin maxim lends a pseudo-ecclesiastical authority to her immoral conduct and establishes that hers is a *quid pro quo* economy. If he had paid her or brought along more than a wilting *nap*, she would have responded. And this is yet another form of symbolic castration through speech. According to medieval norms, a woman who was out of control vocally is also out of control sexually, while a woman who does not speak or speaks little is chaste and decorous (Benkov and Bloch). By voicing her demands, Na Lebra conforms yet again to the naughty woman type.

In order for the final punch line of this story to work, Na Lebra must remain in control of the sexual economy. She punishes her suitors for their *calor*, the amorous advances she encouraged, through a "mortal joke" she plays on them:

Dix la monja en si meteixa:
 "Jo us daré loch,
 e fer-vos he un mortal joch
 1575 per castigar,
 e'm pens que yo'us faré passar
 vostra calor".
 La monja no mostra furor,
 Ans és alegra,
 1580 e acull ab cor entegra
 A fra Bernat,
 E moltes veus l'a'monestat
 Que'y torn dema

'The nun said to herself:/ "Do what you want/ and I will play on you a mortal joke/ to punish you,/ and I think I will make you get out of/ your heat."/ The nun did not show her ire;/ rather was she

happy/ and she embraced whole-heartedly/ Fra Bernat,/ and many
times did she request/ that he should return there tomorrow.'

Annoyed by their persistence, which she has in fact encouraged,
Na Lebra hatches an evil plot:

E dix-nos: "Yo'us he recaptat
ab l'abadessa
e ab la nostra prioressa
que'us leix entrar;
1650 car mils nos porem raonar,
e pus cubert".

'And she said to us: "I have arranged it for you/ with the abbeß/
and with our prioress;/ that they let you enter./ For we can better
converse then,/ and more secretly.'

Once her suitors enter her trap, Na Lebra has arranged for angry
nuns to ambush them, beat them with phallic staves and chase them
into the moat, an ancient metaphor for vagina (Adams 85-86). Fra
Bernat ends up beaten, coated with honey, placed in the stocks and
attacked by bees. His powerlessness is yet another form of symbolic
castration, underscored by the erotic *double entendres* of the passage:
she will arrange for them to "enter" in order to "argue better under
cover." In this last section of the poem, Na Lebra has essentially
reversed the male and female sexual roles through her actions.
Meanwhile, Na Lebra betrays all three suitors with the narrator,
Francesc de la Via:

Ladonchs prenen lo framenor,
2015 qui cridant desia:
"Bon amich Francesch de la Via,
vine'm aydar!"
E yo no'm volguera levar
si'l món perís,
2020 car yo stava en paradís,
nuts ab la monja.

'Then they took the friar,/ who cried out saying:/ "Good friend,
Francesc de la Via,/ come help me!"/ And I wouldn't have gotten
up/ if doomsday was upon us,/ for I was in paradise,/ naked with
the nun.'

In the *Libre de Fra Bernat*, the suitors who pursue Na Lebra find
themselves morally, financially and symbolically castrated by a
women, relegating them to "female" status. As Harriet Goldberg

points out in the case of *fabliaux* which portray the same sort of comic male-female dynamic, such texts are really about men and what happens to them when they encounter and are challenged by strong, independent women (69). In other words, texts like the *Libre de Fra Bernat* that contain the naughty woman type are really about men's own conflicted sexuality and their fear of women.

The author tells us that his poem has a didactic purpose, in the medieval tradition of the *tractado*, and Na Lebra is held up as a negative female *exemplum*: "Es stat fet lo present tractat per pendre solaç; en lo qual se descobren dels engans e burles que les dones males, e no les bones, solen fer" "The present treatise was made to take solace; and in it are revealed a few of the tricks and wiles that bad women, not good women, often use" (107). But it is really the narrator himself who is a bad example; cavorting with Na Lebra while his companion, Bernat, suffers. Na Lebra, who had scorned the three men vying for her affection, invites the narrator to return to her chambers often: *moltes veus ella'm ha pregat que'y torn sovint* 'many times she asked me to go back often' (2092). The narrator has no intention of ever doing so, leaving her behind and riding off towards Girona:

E quascú havia despès
de son argent,
e a mi no costà nient,
2085 mas bona cura,
qu'eu aconseguí la ventura
que no cuydava,
car quascú dels tres se pensava
ab ella dormir.
2090 De la monja'm convench partir,
prenguí comiat;
moltes veus ella'm ha pregat
que'y torn sovint.
Aní'me'n cavalcant tot gint
2095 vers Gerona.

'and they all wasted/ their money/ but it didn't cost me anything/
but good planning,/ by which I accomplished the pleasure/ which
I wasn't expecting,/ for each of the three thought/ he would sleep
with her./ From the nun it was time to go;/ I took my leave./ Many
times did she ask me/ to return there often./ But I took off riding
happily/ towards Girona.'

The tables are turned, the *burladora burlada*, and the male author wins a questionable victory by making her an exemplary *dona mala*, *figura Eva*. He essentially condemns her for doing precisely what he glorifies and boasts about doing himself. This double standard

undermines the author's negative characterization of Na Lebra and the overt didactic pretensions of the text are effectively undone.

Like her medieval counterparts in the Iberian and French traditions, Na Lebra initiates all sexual encounters, profits from male sexuality, and rejects men who don't measure up or who attempt to initiate an unwanted encounter. Effecting a complete reversal of gender roles by wresting control over the sexual dynamic from men, Na Lebra represents the very threat that social and religious laws are formulated to prevent. What is actually at stake in the *Libre de Fra Bernat* is the balance of sexual power, the medieval sexual *status quo*; something far more profound than a few dirty jokes at the expense of a nun who is prostitute. The narrative reads like an extended dirty joke; ostensibly a comedy about a clever man who gets the better of a bad woman.

The descriptions of the nun, the way she talks and the way she acts are designed to provoke mirth. But underlying the humor lurks an ambiguous, fearful truth. According to Legman:

It is the ambiguity of purpose of the 'dirty' dirty joke, as well as its tellers' openly compulsive need for it, that is disquieting [. . .] In the jokes certainly, the ambiguity or contradiction that is so difficult to endure, especially for the unwarned listener, is that the 'dirty' dirty joke apparently enjoys and offers as entertainment precisely those objects and images that both teller and listener really fear and are repelled by. (18)

As the butt of the main joke, Na Lebra does indeed frighten and repel us, while compelling us to laugh. But this comic narration really strikes a precarious balance between the *burlador* and the *burlado*. The tables could easily be turned because, as Legman states, "jokes are essentially an unveiling of the joke-teller's own neuroses and compulsions, and his guilt about these, which he hopes to drive off and nullify by means of the magic release of exciting the listener's laughter" (20). On some level, both audience and author see these joking reversals as a possible and frightening reality. If Legman is right, then fear of female sexual and social domination underlies the *Libre de Fra Bernat* and the impetus for this negative form of expression is, at its core, the fear of female sexuality represented by Na Lebra's ambiguous characterization.

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