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**Content Warning:** This document contains misogynistic statements about spousal abuse and sexuality.

**Introduction:** *The Distaff Gospels* is a late-fifteenth century collection of popular folklore from Belgium and the north of France. The fictional “frame” presents this text as having been written by a male scribe or secretary whom a group of women has recruited to record the evening meetings during which they spin thread (using tools like the “distaff” of the title) while an older woman, as an “evangelist,” recounts her “gospel” or collection of sayings about topics like marriage, childbirth, health, and magic. The text describes these women in ways that associate them with superstition and witchcraft. It even gives them insulting names, including “Perrette du Trou Punais” (“Little Perry Stink Hole”) and “Beatrix Flabaude” (“Beatrix the Baggy”). At the end of each meeting, the scribe complains about the ridiculous things the women have said.

The anonymous author clearly was an educated man who viewed these popular ideas with both amusement and contempt. The text is a parody that, among other techniques, uses the reversal of established norms as a basis for humor. For example, the women speaking in the text are called “learned” although women were considered to be inherently less rational than men and were barred from higher education. These women also argue that a man should do what a woman wants when this writer (and his readers) clearly believed that the opposite was true. Not all of the humor is particularly sophisticated; the text has plenty of sex and bathroom jokes as well.

Despite its being designed to mock women and people of lower social classes generally, *The Distaff Gospels* nevertheless records those classes’ popular beliefs, something that few other premodern texts do.

This excerpt begins with the introduction of the first evening’s “evangelist,” Ysengrine du Glay (the Joyous). The numbers in square brackets are the page numbers of the English translation in the printed source.

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[79] Dame Ysengrine du Glay arrived, escorted by a number of her acquaintances who all brought their distaffs, flax, spindles, standard, reels, and all the tools used for their art. In brief, it really looked like a market where nothing was sold by talk and discourse, conversations of little consequence and value. Dame Ysengrine's seat was placed on one side, a bit higher than the others, and mine near hers; in front of me was a tray on which stood an oil lamp to shed light on my work. All the participants had turned their faces toward Ysengrine who, once she received permission, began her discourse.

But before starting to write her chapters, I want to describe her character and lineage. Dame Ysengrine was about sixty-five years old. She had been handsome in her time, but she had become very wrinkled; she had deep-sunken eyes and a big wide mouth. She had had five husbands not to mention her lovers. In her old age, she was busy delivering children,<sup>1</sup> but in her youth she had welcomed grown-up children! She was very skillful in many arts. Her husband was quite young; she was extremely jealous and often complained about him to her neighbors. However, once given permission, as we say, she began her gospel and expounded her theme about her husband, and grumbling, she spoke as follows:

[81] Here begin the chapters of the gospel of dame Ysengrine du Glay for Monday:

“My god companions and neighbors, you all know that I married my husband Josselin more for his good looks than his money, because he was a poor fellow. Well, I've not seen him either yesterday or today, which causes me great heartache. Assuredly, he has squandered all of the goods which my previous husbands struggled so hard to accumulate—I think it will be the death of me.”

#### THE FIRST CHAPTER

“And in this regard and for my first chapter, I say that it is as true as the gospel that the man who wrongfully wastes the possessions that come to him from his wife, without her permission and against her wishes, will answer for this before God, as if he had committed a theft.”

**Gloss.** On this chapter an old woman called Griele, wife of Jehan Joquesus [John the Simpleton], said that indeed the husband who acts as described in this chapter is sent to the purgatory for wicked husbands after dying in a vat of brimstone, if he has not carried out his penance in this world by making donations to the sick.

#### [83] THE SECOND CHAPTER

“There is nothing more certain than that a husband who goes against what his wife advises and wishes him to do and who contradicts everything she says, is a false and disloyal perjurer.”

**Gloss.** “Certainly,” said Gombaude du Fossé [Gombaude of the Ditch], “I have seen many miracles concerning those who have sinned against this chapter, my stepfather, for example, who

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<sup>1</sup> In other words, she was a midwife. Midwives would in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries frequently be accused of witchcraft, in part because they were blamed when infants or mothers in childbirth died (as often happened) and in part because, beginning in the sixteenth century, men were starting to “professionalize” medical practice and saw these women as competitors.

broke his leg because he would not heed my mother's advice.”

#### THE THIRD CHAPTER

“A man who beats his wife for whatever reason, will never obtain the mercy of the Virgin Mary in spite of all the prayers he may say, if he has not first obtained his wife's forgiveness.”<sup>2</sup>

**Gloss.** Marie Ployarde [pliant, “easy”] commented on this chapter that a man who beats his wife commits as serious a sin as someone who wants to kill himself “because, according to what I heard our priest say, a man and a woman joined in marriage are but a single body.”<sup>3</sup>

#### THE FOURTH CHAPTER

“It is the gospel truth that a man who does something without informing his wife is, in conscience, worse than a thief, for even a thief would not dare to behave like that.”

**Gloss.** The old women swear that the children born from such marriages will never become rich in this world and will probably become liars.

#### THE FIFTH CHAPTER

“My friends, I tell you truly that there is no sorrow or torment like that of a woman whose husband goes and squanders his wealth elsewhere, especially when that wealth comes from her.”

[85] **Gloss.** “For certain,” said an old woman called Flourette la Noire [Little Black Flower], “the man who breaks his marriage vows by committing adultery is more despicable than a Jew or a Saracen, because he is a perjurer.”

#### THE SIXTH CHAPTER

“A young woman who wishes to know the name of her future husband should stretch out the first thread which she has spun that day at her door and then find out the name of the first man to pass by—she can be certain that this will be the name of her husband.”

**Gloss.** To this, one of the gathering Geffrine, wife of Jean le Bleu [John the Blockhead], stood up and said that she has proven this from her own experience and that this very thing happened to her—she curses the moment that she met the man who has now lost all his bloom and good looks and who was such a poor lover that he did nothing but sleep.

#### THE SEVENTH CHAPTER

“When a woman is carrying a child and she wishes to know whether she is carrying a boy or a girl, you should sprinkle salt on her head while she is sleeping, so gently that she is unaware of it. When she wakes, note what name she says first. If she says a man's name it will be a boy and if she says a woman's name it will be a girl.”

[87] **Gloss.** “The same thing happened to me when I was carrying my daughter, Lise Tempremeure [Lise the Precocious],” said Griele du Solier [Griele of the Shoe—“Solier” later

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<sup>2</sup> According to the editors, “the husband's right to beat his wife is based on the notion that she is under his guardianship.” Although that right was supposed to be “limited,” according to laws of the city of Bruges, he could beat her until she bled without repercussion.

<sup>3</sup> Suicide was considered to be the same as homicide in church law because both involved killing a human being.

became a common surname]. “My aunt who was very old and skilled in many arts did it and taught it to me.”

#### THE EIGHTH CHAPTER

Young w men should never be given a hare’s head to eat for fear that they might think about it later, once they are married especially while they are pregnant : in that case, for sure, their children would have split lips.”

**Gloss.** Margot des Bledz [Margo of the Field, also a later surname] said: “That happened some time ago to one of my cousins. Because she had eaten a hare’s head when she was pregnant, her daughter was born with four lips.”<sup>4</sup>

#### THE NINTH CHAPTER

“You must also avoid giving young women sheep’s heads or cock’s combs or eels so that they don’t fall over backwards with Saint Loup’s disease.”<sup>5</sup>

**Gloss.** “Certainly,” said Belotte la Cornue [Bella the Horned, a reference to adultery], “this is very dangerous, because my mother ate them, I developed three afflictions which I think I will never get rid of. One of them makes me fall backwards, the second makes me bump into things, and the third is that I have something like a cock’s comb on the most private part of my body, which causes me great shame.”

#### [89] THE TENTH CHAPTER

“I swear you that it is as true as the gospel that when a young woman regularly drinks milk boiled in a frying pan or earthen pot, it will certainly rain on the day of her wedding. She will also for sure have a melancholic and grumbling husband and she will often be dirty and unkempt.”

**Gloss.** Dame Abonde said: “there is no other explanation needed for this text because its meaning is well known and there are no exceptions to it, as was evident at my wedding that many of you attended.”

#### THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER

“It is certainly as true as the gospel that when a man sleeps with his wife or his mistress with dirty and smelly feet, if he fathers a boy, the child will have smelly and unpleasant breath. If he fathers a girl, she will have a stinky rear end.”

**Gloss.** Maroie Ployarde said, concerning this chapter, that this happened to her first cousin. No matter where she went, she produced such a bad smell from her rear end that those around her held their noses without realizing what had caused the smell.

#### THE TWELFTH CHAPTER

“I tell you as the gospel truth that when a sexually inexperienced young man marries a young virgin, their first child is bound to be simple.”

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<sup>4</sup> In the original, this was an obscene joke.

<sup>5</sup> “St. Loup’s disease” was a name for epilepsy, but the term also was used for a “loose” woman, who was said to be sick with the malady of St. Loup. “Falling over backwards” had similar sexual connotation.

**Gloss.** Berthe l'Estroite [Bertha the Straightlaced, i.e. the Prude] said on this chapter that, a short time ago, it happened to one of her daughters who was married to the pig keeper of the estate. The first night, as it happened, she had to teach them what to do, and as a result, their first son is simple and innocent.