

# The Salting Down of Gertrude: Transgression and Preservation in Three Early German Carnival Plays.

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## **The Salting Down of Gertrude: Transgression and Preservation in Three Early German Carnival Plays**

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### Abstract

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The purpose of this article is twofold. First, it introduces a subgenre of the German carnival play to a wider audience by providing editions and translations of three fifteenth-century Bavarian texts on the theme of preserving unmarried women during lent by packing them in salt. Second, it discusses the historical context focusing on ways in which modern notions of the 'carnavalesque' as a putative agent for positive social transformation are themselves subverted by the conservative nature of much late medieval comedy. Paradoxically, what begins as anti-authoritarian licence ends in the affirmation of a patriarchal status quo

STEPHEN K. WRIGHT

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## The Salting Down of Gertrude: Transgression and Preservation in Three Early German Carnival Plays

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The purpose of this article is twofold. First, it introduces a little-studied subgenre of the German carnival play (*Fastnachtspiel*) to a wider audience by providing a new edition of three anonymous performance texts from a fifteenth-century Bavarian manuscript together with original translations for English-speaking readers. Second, it offers a discussion of the texts in terms of their historical and cultural context with particular attention to ways in which twenty-first century notions of 'transgression' as a force for positive social change are themselves subverted by the essentially conservative nature of much late medieval comedy. Under the guise of merry carnival hijinks, the plays considered here nevertheless treat unmarried women quite literally as leftover meat, slightly undesirable because of their advanced shelf life but nevertheless still edible when properly preserved from spoilage for future delectation. The essay argues that these texts present a paradox that might well go unseen by contemporary theatre historians enthralled by the undeniable appeal of the concept of the 'carnavalesque' as both festive entertainment and as a putative agent for social transformation. What apparently begins as uninhibited, anti-authoritarian licence and the celebration of sheer camality ends

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