Hundred Merry Tales, A. The English jestbook A Hundred Merry Tales was first printed by John Rastell in 1526 under the title A. C. Mery Talys. The dubious popularity of the book and the genre is famously expressed in Much Ado about Nothing, when Benedick insulantly says that Beatrice has her “good wit out of the Hundred Merry Tales,” implying that Beatrice is incapable of originality and improvisation. The quotation actually also points to one of
the original purposes of jestbooks, which was to provide a collection of anecdotes, entertaining examples, apothegms, humorous sayings, witty repartees, puns, and bawdy jokes with which a speaker—a priest, a politician, or an actor—could enthrall an audience or win a debate. Many of the anecdotes in *A Hundred Merry Tales* acquaint the reader-listener with religious mysteries, such as the Seven Deadly Sins, the Creed, and the Ave Maria; others are civilizing attempts to teach manners and provide a degree of urbanity; most jests bear out the superiority of common sense over artificial logic and cleverness. It is also clear that many of the short texts may have been included simply to keep an audience awake.

Over time, the entertainment value eclipsed the rhetorical and pedagogical uses of jestbooks. Some of the generic conventions of jests—stereotyping, "having the last word," and what Iona and Peter Opie have called "wordsmanship"—are certainly related to "the lore and language of children," but whether jestbooks should be considered children's literature is moot; they belong to a period before such categorizations. Moreover, like other vernacular forms, such as folk tales and riddles, jests (in both oral and written form) were to a large extent shared cultural expressions.

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