



*The Old French and
Chaucerian Fabliaux*



*The Old French and
Chaucerian Fabliaux*
A Study of Their Comic Climax



Thomas D. Cooke

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For My Mother and Father

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T. D. C.
Columbia, Missouri
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Uns joliz clers, qui s'estudie
A faire chose de c'on rie,
Vous vueil dire chose nouvelle.
Se il dit chose qui soit belle,
Elle doit bien estre escoutee,
Car par biaux diz est obliee
Maintes fois ire et cussançons:
Et abasies granz tançons,
Car, quant aucuns dit les risees,
Les forts tançons sont obliées.

Le Poure Mercier



I. Introduction



The survival of approximately 160 Old French fabliaux, some in several versions and in different manuscripts, attests to their widespread popularity in the Middle Ages.¹ That number, however, is undoubtedly only a fraction of the total, since many more were probably destroyed, lost, or, because of their very popularity, worn away "under the moist and unclean thumbs of a wide circle of readers."² And although it has been argued that the fabliaux as we have them were of written rather than oral origin, still there must have been a vast number of oral tales quite similar for which we naturally have no record.³ A further indication of their popularity is their

1. The canon for the fabliaux that I am following is the one established by Per Nykrog in *Les Fabliaux*. Nykrog's list has been generally accepted. For qualifications of it see the review article by Knud Togeby in *Orbis Litterarum*. See also Omer Jodogne, "Considérations sur le fabliau," 2:1043-55; and Clem C. Williams, Jr., "The Genre and Art of the Old French Fabliaux: A Preface to the Study of Chaucer's Tales of the Fabliau Type."

2. William C. Hazlitt, ed., *Remains of the Early Popular Poetry of England*, 3:131.

3. Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, pp. 36-50; Jean Rychner, *Contribution à l'étude des fabliaux*; see also Raymond Eichmann, "Oral Composition and the Fabliaux: A Study in Generic Evolution." For a study of the use of "oral" formulas in one fabliau see my "Formulaic Diction and the Artistry of *Le Chevalier qui recouva l'amor de sa dame*," pp. 232-40.

presence throughout all parts of the medieval world in which comic writings were widespread.⁴

Different reasons have been given for this popularity. Some readers praise the fabliaux for their clever, well-constructed plots; others find them delightful for their characters; and Joseph Bédier formulates the thinking of many when he praises the fabliaux for their "brièveté, vérité, naturel."⁵ Some, however, discount such literary values and find an ulterior reason for their value: "But to treat the 'fabliaux' simply as 'une risée et une gabée,' as the tendency has been to do, is to ignore their importance as a social phenomenon and to lessen their value as practical lessons of common sense, or in some cases of morality."⁶

But most readers of the fabliaux now believe that it is precisely their nature as comic tales that made them popular. Bédier's definition, still the most acceptable one, states that quality succinctly: "*Les fabliaux sont des contes à rire en vers.*"⁷ The major study of the fabliaux in this century is Per Nykrog's, and his main thesis is that these tales are, as a genre, a burlesque of courtly literature. Although there have been qualifications of his view of the fabliaux as a burlesque genre, no one since the appearance of Nykrog's work has seriously questioned the comic basis of the fabliaux.⁸ The exact nature of that

4. See Joseph Bédier, *Les Fabliaux*, pp. 46-287. On the extent of all forms of comic writings in the Middle Ages see Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, pp. 417-35.

5. On their plots see Gaston Paris, *La Littérature française au moyen âge*, p. 121; on the characters see Alfred Jeanroy, "La Littérature de langue française des origines à Ronsard," pp. 322-23; see also Bédier, *Les Fabliaux*, pp. 347-57.

6. Jesse Crossland, *Medieval French Literature*, p. 150. For a lengthy and quite complete historical summary of the major opinions of the fabliaux see the opening pages of Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, pp. i-iv.

7. Bédier, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 30.

8. Most of the reviews of Nykrog's book raise some objections, but see especially Jean Rychner's in *Romance Philology*, pp. 336-

comedy and its various manifestations and elements are still being discussed.⁹

This book is another study of the humor of the fabliaux. I believe that the most important single feature of their comedy is the comic climax. That belief is based on my reading of all the fabliaux as well as my experience in reciting and retelling them, mostly to students in classrooms. We know that these tales were originally recited to audiences and not read privately, and therefore we must assume that they are properly understood in that medium, just as drama is only fully understood and appreciated in the theater. My experience in telling these tales, which confirms my reading of them, is that, although interest would be shown along the way, listeners would naturally and invariably wait to see how the story turned out, and at the moment of finding out—the comic climax—they would laugh. Assuredly these listeners would appreciate many facets of the humor in these tales, such as the burlesque, the satire, and the farce, as well as other elements that might command their attention, such as some of the portraits, the reflections of medieval life and customs. But all these elements, I believe, are under the control of the comic climax, which forms and shapes all else to its purpose. Further, I find that the climax consists of two elements: it comes as a surprise, and yet it has been carefully prepared for in such a way that when it comes, it is seen as artistically fitting and appropriate. The tension experienced between the surprise and preparation generates the humor of these tales, and an audience's appreciation of the climax is the deep satisfaction that it feels in seeing the appropriateness of that climax.

39; his article, "Les Fabliaux: genre, styles, publics," pp. 41-54; and his book, *Contribution à l'étude des fabliaux*, 1: 64-65, 146.

9. See for example Thomas D. Cooke and Benjamin L. Honeycutt, eds., *The Humor of the Fabliaux: A Collection of Critical Essays*. This work contains ten essays, including a short English version of Nykrog's study, all on various aspects of the humor of the fabliaux. It also updates Nykrog's bibliography.

In claiming that the comic climax of the fables comes as a surprise, I do not mean to rely merely on the modern reader's psychological response to demonstrate the structure of these tales. I am assuming that, with no evidence to the contrary, medieval audiences and modern audiences would laugh at the same thing. (I found no evidence to the contrary.) Moreover, the surprise that we experience frequently is the same surprise that is experienced by one or several or all of the characters. Our reaction is similar to theirs. So when I use *surprise* as one of the key elements in my analysis, I am not primarily discussing it as a psychological response but rather as the word that best describes our reaction to the sudden and unexpected turn of events in the fables. In effect, I am arguing backwards; our surprise is the indication of some quick change in the stories, and it is this change that is the ultimate foundation for the surprise. Several theorists of comedy believe surprise to be one of its constituent elements (an issue discussed in chapter 5). Therefore, to base an analysis of these tales on our experience of the comic climax as a surprise is justified. Furthermore, internal evidence exists to indicate that the intention of the authors and the experience of the listeners was indeed laughter at the comic climax. Frequently the narrators tell us either at the beginning of the tale or at the end that their purpose in telling the story is to make us laugh. And, occasionally, the authors let us see the reaction of someone who hears the main part of the tale, and that reaction is laughter at the surprising comic climax. (The reaction of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims to the tale told by the Miller is the best example of this.)

To argue that the comic climax is carefully prepared for and then to show what elements prepare us for that climax may seem like a circular argument at first. It is actually an analysis of a cause and effect relationship; this preparation leads to that climax. And just as cause and effect, by definition, cannot be understood apart from each other, so it would be incomplete to talk of a

preparation without stating what it prepares for. Various scholars in the past have discussed certain elements in the fabliaux—such as characterization, moral tags, and rhetoric—in complete isolation and with no attempt to integrate them into the comic structure of the tales. The main argument of this study is that the essential parts of a good fabliau are integral to its comic structure and that it is misleading to treat them separately.

In calling the comic climax the most important single feature of the fabliaux, I am not attempting to define them by that element. Nykrog's definition has been questioned, and new ones are still being offered.¹⁰ It is possible, and legitimate, to argue that the climax is essential without having to argue that it defines the genre. Other genres, such as the farce, have a comic climax, and still others have climaxes that are surprise endings, which have been carefully prepared for, such as modern murder mysteries. Every genre is the sum of its components; a fabliau is everything that goes into a fabliau. Consequently, no genre can be defined by one of its features.

Another danger in defining the fabliaux by one element, no matter how essential it is, is that most definitions are, by nature, attempts to delineate the ideal of a type. Literary works can live up to an ideal only if the author has a very definite model to follow and if he is always successful in following it. But no definition of the fabliau has come down to us from the Middle Ages, and the evidence that we do have indicates that the word was used rather loosely at the time.¹¹ Further, authors are

10. Some of the more recent definitions can be found in the following: Jodogne, "Considérations," p. 1055; Iu. V. Ocheret, "K voprosu ob opredelenii zhanra fablio," pp. 219-45; Norma Jean Thompson, "The Old French Fabliau: A Classification and Definition"; Knud Togeby, "The Nature of the Fabliaux," pp. 7-13; and Roger Dubuis, *Les Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles et la tradition de la nouvelle en France au Moyen Age*, pp. 133-38, 189-90.

11. Rychner, "Les Fabliaux," pp. 41, 53; see also Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, pp. 3-19. T. B. W. Reid observes that fewer than half of the tales now accepted as fabliaux were called that in the manuscripts, and many are referred to by their authors as other genres,

not always successful. It is valid, therefore, merely to suggest what the type for the fabliau might be without excluding those tales that do not quite live up to the ideal. The merit of Bédier's definition is that its breadth allows for the medieval looseness and human variations. The proof that fableors were consciously or unconsciously working toward that ideal will be this study itself. It is significant to note, however, that the fabliaux that readers generally praise are the ones that have the kind of ending I have described, and the ones that readers dismiss as poor or trivial do not have such endings. When I state, therefore, that the fabliau as a genre is characterized by its comic climax, I mean only to suggest the ideal, which not all fabliaux fully achieve and which some fall quite short of.

I have made several other assumptions in this study. One is the effect on the tale of the dominance of the comic climax. Because of that dominance the fabliaux belong to the type of literature that exists for a single, concentrated effect. The sonnet, for example, is such a type. Highly regarded as a genre, the sonnet characteristically focuses on a single thought or feeling. That concentration is achieved by rigidly excluding other considerations, and the author of a sonnet is constrained by the limitations of the form. In fact, the prescribed limitations are seen as an inspiration to poets.¹² Perhaps the fabliaux would be accorded more praise if some medieval critic, having read several, had decided that they should all follow the pattern, described their limiting characteristics, advanced his theory, and had it accepted. Although such

such as *esemple, fable, proverbe, romanz, lai*, et cetera. Furthermore, several highly didactic tales are called *fabliaux* but would now be designated beast fables, debates, or the like. See Reid's edition, *Twelve Fabliaux*, p. ix.

12. "Its [the sonnet's] rather rigid rules have seemed a challenge to the poet to show how much range and variety he can create within the confines of its one hundred forty syllables." Lynn Altenbernd and Leslie L. Lewis, eds., *Introduction to Literature: Poems*, p. 23.

a legislative judgment was not made, the tales called *fabliaux* do have certain common characteristics, and so the result is almost as though they were prescribed.

In this concentration on the climax, certain economies are observed. The average length of a *fabliau*, based on Nykrog's canon, is approximately 250 lines.¹³ Hence there is not much room for certain subtleties of style nor for expanded, leisurely treatment. The author must present his characters and their setting as directly as possible. This economy is even more understandable when we consider that the 250-line story was presented orally to an audience (whose powers, in many cases, were no doubt somewhat under a cloud). Consequently the author is rather straightforward in presenting his characters, telling us simply that they are good, rich, stingy, attractive, lecherous, or the like. The author is especially careful in controlling our sympathies, for it would be destructive of his purpose if we cared too much for, say, a husband whose wife is going to betray or humiliate him at the end of the story. Admittedly this is a limitation, but too often it has been judged as a distortion of reality rather than as a deliberate act of artistic selection. It is easy to understand the neglect and animosity that the *fabliaux* have inspired through their long history—the silliness of some and the obscenity of many would account for much of the hostility—but it is hard to understand the critical evaluations of them that are attached to condemnations of those traits. In the same chapter in which he praises their “*brièveté, vérité, and naturel,*” Bédier also bemoans their “*négligence de la versification et du*

13. I am grateful to John Turnbull of Montreal, Canada, for this calculation. He also discovered that although the length of the *fabliaux* ranges from the shortest at 18 lines to the longest at 1,364 lines, over half were in the range of 100 to 300 lines. The total number of lines of all the *fabliaux* in Nykrog's canon is 39,655. For other estimates see Williams, “The Genre and Art of the Old French *Fabliaux*,” pp. 38–39; and Dubuis, *Les Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles*, pp. 160–74. Estimates vary depending on the canon used and on the texts used as a basis for the canon.

style, platitude et grossièreté.”¹⁴ This study assumes that medieval French authors of fabliaux accepted those limitations and worked within them carefully to achieve the special effect that they desired. The sixth chapter of this study will then show how Chaucer worked within those limitations but was able to fulfill their potential to its limit as no French author has done, but also how in one notable instance, “The Merchant’s Tale,” he went beyond those limitations and in so doing seriously marred the tale. Indeed, my discussion of that one tale can be seen as the negative proof of this study’s main argument.¹⁵

The second set of assumptions I have made centers on the values implied or stated in these tales. We can accept at face value the cultural and religious values implied by the author, stated by the narrator, or spoken by the characters. (That assumption does not, of course, rule out the presence of irony.) More important, there is no compelling evidence for allegorical meanings that would alter a straightforward reading of these tales. The central artistic value in the fabliaux is their humor, for again and again, at the beginning of the story and at the end, the fableors inform us that they are telling a story that will make us laugh. Medieval man might have laughed at more than we do, but there is no substantial evidence that he would not have laughed at the same things. The satisfaction that an audience experiences at the end of the fabliaux comes from their humor, and that humor cannot be separated from all the elements of the tale, however farcical and crude. To say that all the humor of one of these tales, even though it be Chaucer’s, comes from

14. Bédier, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 347.

15. Although he disparages the fabliaux (whose structures he finds “artless” and “crude”) and seems to look down on comedy, Erich Auerbach consistently points out the life and vitality that can exist within the limitations of certain genres. On the fabliaux see his *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, chapter 9; on comedy see pp. 30–31; on praise of vitality within limitations see, for example, pp. 120–21, 131.

its moral framework is to take comedy away from man and give it to the angels, with whom it has never dwelt.¹⁶ Chaucer's fabliaux are essentially the same genre as the Old French fabliaux, and hence their humor is essentially the same. Forty thousand lines of Old French fabliaux with almost no trace of moral framework whatsoever can hardly be wrong. I am, therefore, assuming that in spite of the hundreds of years that separate us from medieval people, we share the same comic values. I hope, moreover, to show that our enjoyment of them is in its own way quite refined and even analogous to certain spiritual experiences.

I shall not be dealing with certain things in this study. In preparing for it, I traced the evolution of theories of comedy from the classical period down through medieval times, hoping to find some clues to an understanding of the comic spirit of the fabliaux. I found none. If the theorists had any influence on the writers of the fabliaux, no evidence for it exists. In putting together a comic plot, a fableor would not, for instance, have been helped much by the well-known definition of comedy by John of Garland: "Comedia est carmen jocosum incipiens a tristitia et terminens in gaudium."¹⁷ Besides being too ethereal, that definition simply does not account for many fabli-

16. D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer*, p. 368: "It should be emphasized that the scriptural ideas in this story [*The Miller's Tale*] in no way detract from its humor; on the contrary, the humorous as opposed to the merely farcical element is due entirely to its theological background." Auerbach, whose interpretation of the figural nature of medieval Christian literature allows for man's delight in this world without separating it from the next one, of which it is a reflection, seems nearer the truth. Indeed, he even finds in the Incarnation the source of the medieval love for the particular and individual, the *this* and the *now* as opposed to the eternal. See Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 92. For a brief but very helpful discussion of the differences between the allegorical and figural view see Elizabeth Salter, "Medieval Poetry and the Figural View of Reality," pp. 73-92.

17. Giovanni Mari, "Poetria magistri Johannis anglici de arte prosayca metrica et rithmica," p. 918.

aux. Most importantly, it really does not tell us why we laugh at those stories.¹⁸

Consequently, this study will not attempt to make any kind of statement about medieval comedy. And although I talk about laughter, I am taking that merely as a sign of the presence of something comic; I shall not be discussing the nature of laughter. All the more, I shall not try to make any claims about comedy itself. We all seem to become Platonists as soon as we start theorizing about comedy (surprisingly, even more than when we theorize about tragedy); we want to capture the comic form in a formula, whereas in actual practice we are more down to earth and quite content to take our laughs where we find them. Whenever one begins to examine theories of comedy (which I did at great length in preparing for this study), one confronts a critical labyrinth. At every turn, there is a different interpretation of its meaning. The universal and daily phenomenon of the humorous inspires a maze of explanations that leads everywhere, and hence, nowhere. Commenting on this tangle, L. C. Knights says: "Profitless generalizations are more frequent in criticism of comedy than in criticism of other forms of literature."¹⁹ Like other important mysteries in life, comedy can never be fully explained. Those who have wrestled with her find her elusive and mysterious, and although they can occasionally identify some of the shapes she adopts, and can even analyze the configuration of those forms, she will always elude their final embrace. In this study, therefore, I am attempting only to under-

18. Two recent studies that contain many of the medieval theories of comedy are: Jeanne Thompson Mathewson, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Medieval Comic Tradition"; and D. S. Brewer, "Notes Toward a Theory of Medieval Comedy," pp. 140-49. Though not directly dealing with comedy, the following article has some significant material on related theories; see Glending Olson, "The Medieval Theory of Literature for Refreshment and its Use in the Fabliau Tradition," pp. 291-313.

19. L. C. Knights, "Notes on Comedy," p. 229.

stand the comic spirit of one group of tales. Again, Knights wisely stresses such an approach:

As in all criticism the only generalizations which may be useful are those, usually short, based on sensitive experience of literature, containing, as it were the distilled essence of experience, capable of unfolding their meaning in particular application.²⁰

Another exclusion is any direct consideration of the milieu of the fabliaux. Although no literature exists in a vacuum and all literature reflects in manifold and complex ways the times in which it is written, times that influenced and shaped that literature, still there is an inner working in the literature that can be understood and appreciated as long as that understanding and appreciation does not violate the literature's relationship with its milieu. This is especially true of the fabliaux, which seem not only to be a genre that was widespread throughout all the Middle Ages, but can be found in all lands of all ages. It is not the type of literature for which a great deal of understanding of the times is necessary. There have been several important studies of the milieu of the fabliaux, and my reading of those studies supports my interpretation of these tales, as I shall discuss in later chapters.²¹ But in focusing on the comic climax of the fabliaux, I necessarily talk about their structure, which has its own function within the story regardless of what influenced it or caused it to be there and regardless of what it reflects.²²

20. Ibid. For a helpful survey of theories of comedy, see J. Y. T. Greig, *The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy*, pp. 226-79; and Jeffrey H. Goldstein and Paul E. McGhee, eds., *The Psychology of Humor*, pp. 3-39.

21. See especially the essays by Jürgen Beyer, "The Morality of the Amoral," pp. 15-42; and Roy J. Percy, "Modes of Signification and the Humor of Obscene Diction in the Fabliaux," pp. 163-96; see also Charles Muscatine, "The Social Background of the Old French Fabliaux."

22. One study of the milieu of the fabliaux that has not been

Hence this study is about the comic structure of the fabliaux. As such, it attempts to elucidate the connection between two main elements in Bédier's definition, "contes à rire." All comedy ultimately comes from the structure of its work, as Susanne Langer has reminded us so succinctly: "Comedy may be frivolous, farcical, ribald, ludicrous to any degree, and still be true art. Laughter springs from its very structure."²³ Many other elements are part of the structure, such as the characters, settings, actions, and dialogues, and I shall begin by discussing just how they fit into that comic pattern.

undertaken, which could be quite profitable, is an examination of the increasing tolerance for erotic candor in the thirteenth century. See for example Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 226; Curtius, *European Literature*, p. 114; and R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, pp. 210, 214.

23. Susanne Langer, "The Comic Rhythm," p. 338. The work has been reprinted often.



II. Preparation for the Climax: The Showing



Throughout his influential study, Wayne Booth makes a distinction between the ways in which a story is told and the ways it is shown.¹ In showing a story, an author presents the materials as objectively as possible, excluding both himself and any narrator from commenting on the characters and their actions. He attempts to be a camera, recording only what appears before him. In telling a story, on the other hand, the author and/or his narrator feel free to comment on the characters and the actions, to tell us what we should think about those characters and to feel open about shaping our response to the story. Booth argues that, in spite of the pleas of some modern writers and critics, no real separation can exist between these two modes. All authors are subjective, even if they do tell a story as objectively as possible, because subjectivity influences the decision to tell this story rather than that story. There is no way that an author can avoid infusing values into a story. And although the two modes are frequently mixed in the same work (an author can allow the characters to act and speak for themselves for a while, and then he or the narrator can comment on those actions or words), each mode has a different effect. Those differences are manifold and cannot finally be

1. Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. My indebtedness to Booth will be evident in this and the following chapter.

separated from a discussion of the individual works in which they appear.

This same duality can be found in the Old French fabliaux. Some elements come across to the reader as being more objective, such as the simple and direct presentation of the characters, their settings, and actions; and some elements strike us as being subjective, especially the voice of the narrator in all its various roles and guises, commenting on the characters, giving us privileged information, and moralizing on the tale. In the present chapter I am going to discuss the more objective aspects of the fabliaux, and in the next chapter the subjective aspect, the role of the narrator. In both chapters, however, I shall be examining the ways in which they prepare for the comic climax. The separation of material into this and the next chapter will seem at times to be arbitrary, but that is due, as I trust my overall discussion will show, to the tight weaving of the different threads of these tales. Their unity makes them difficult to unravel.

The Characters

One of the features of the fabliaux is the narrowness of their characters, who invariably are no more than two dimensional and stereotyped. This seems to be the universal opinion of scholars.² Several valuable studies have been made of the different types of characters in the fabliaux. Victor LeClerc devotes some 150 pages to a study of the myriad types, which he finds to encompass almost the whole range of medieval life.³ Per Nykrog studies not just the characters but also the situations in which the characters can be found.⁴ His study is valuable for its careful and exhaustive categories in which he lists all the possible situations that exist for the characters. For example, in the fabliaux that present a love triangle,

2. See for example Walter Morris Hart, "The Narrative Art of the Old French Fabliaux," p. 211.

3. Victor LeClerc, "Fabliaux," pp. 69-215.

4. Per Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*.

Nykrog finds that a knight will always be a successful lover, as will a clerk, but that a priest will be discovered and punished more than 25 percent of the time (33 percent of the time when his adversary, the husband, is a peasant).⁵ Here, and elsewhere in his book, Nykrog thoroughly lays out the main elements of the fabliaux. But in being so rigorously exhaustive he furthers the impression that the characters are nothing else but stereotypes. To be fair to these tales, we must acknowledge the peculiar artistic effect which the use of characters has in each tale. Similar characters do not always evoke the same response from the audience. Peasants, for instance, are usually scorned in the fabliaux; indeed the humor of several tales depends upon the assumption that the *vilain* will find something crude which more refined classes find lovely and delicate.⁶ As such they are like the stereotypes in modern ethnic jokes—where it is assumed that all members of a race or class will act in the same way. But some peasants in the fabliaux defy that category and are completely admirable, and even some who act crudely demand a more complex reaction from the audience than mere scorn. Nykrog's schematization blurs some necessary distinctions.

Still it is generally true that characters in the fabliaux are not as fully developed as they are in some other genres. They are conventional types, although the range is quite broad, from God through almost every human type to Satan. Humanity in the fabliaux is a literary

5. Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 110.

6. The scorn felt for peasants is indicated in the following quote: "Mais Dieu déteste les vilains et les vilaines; et c'est pourquoi il a voulu que toutes les afflictions pesassent sur eus. Tel un âne, tel un vilain. Le vilain devait vivre dans les bois et être retranché du monde. Le vilain est embécile et sale. Aurait-il tout l'or du monde, il resterait ce qu'il est: un vilain." From *Le Despit au vilain*, quoted in Edmond Faral, *La Vie quotidienne au temps de Saint Louis* (Paris: Hachette, 1938; reprinted, 1968), p. 123. I am indebted to Robert Harrison for leading me to this quote. See his *Gallic Salt*, pp. 28–30, for a discussion of the ambiguous image of the peasant in the Middle Ages.

shadow of real humanity, although occasionally a character almost comes to life. When a character, for example, is capable of conflicting feelings, we begin to sense life. In the story *Le Chevalier qui recovra l'amor de sa dame*, a lady watches her lover defeat her husband in a tournament:

Et quant la dame a ce veü
 Q'à son seignor est mescheü,
 D'une partie en fu dolante,
 De l'autre mout le atalante
 Que ses amis l'a si bien fait.⁷

(And when the lady saw that her lord fared badly, on the one hand she was sad, but on the other she was pleased, since her lover had done well.)

The ambivalence of the lady is not further developed in the story, and it actually serves very little purpose. That kind of ambivalence is extremely rare in the fabliaux; most of the characters act in a straightforward way. But to admit that simplicity and to say nothing more is to deny the peculiar value of that kind of characterization. It is not only misleading to try to categorize the various types, it is also impossible when one goes beyond the most basic analysis. In his chapter on women, Nykrog lists the many faults that they embody and even differentiates them into major and minor vices.⁸ They are lustful, proud, unfaithful, avaricious, gluttonous, and so on. Again, such a listing could distract us from an appreciation of the artistic role each woman plays in her own story. In *Le Prestre qui ot mere a force*, the elderly mother of a priest is jealous of the fine gifts that he bestows upon his mistress. The townspeople gossip about

7. Anatole de Montaiglon and Gaston Raynaud, eds., *Recueil général et complet des fabliaux des XIIIe et XIVe siècles*, 6:141. Unless otherwise noted, all references to the fabliaux are to this text, hereafter cited as MR, and by volume and page number. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine.

8. Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, pp. 193-207.

the situation: "Et s'ot riche toissu d'argent, / Dont assez parloient la gent. / Mais la vielle parole plus / De l'amie au prestre que nus" (And she [the mistress] had rich cloth of silver, about which the people spoke plenty. But the old woman spoke about his love more than anyone), MR, 5:143-44. These lines certainly do characterize the mother as being jealous, and hence she could conveniently be categorized under that heading. But we would not thereby have the full and indeed the relevant picture. For one thing, the jealousy of the mother is intensified by being compared with that of the rest of the people. They murmured about the mistress but not as much as she did. There is also an implication that when the people whispered about the lavishness of the priest, the gossip got back to his mother, who in turn was enraged and jealous. The comparison, therefore, does more than intensify; it also suggests a causal connection: their gossip urged her on. She would not have been so jealous if they had not been so slanderous.

A close reading of most of the fabliaux would produce the same results, namely, a realization that the portraits result in some special and worthwhile effect.⁹ But even when a detailed reading leads to the conclusion that a particular character is only stereotyped, there is still a good artistic reason for the limitation, and that is the need of the author to marshal all his forces toward the comic climax. Consequently the overwhelming tendency in the fabliaux is to establish characters as simply and directly as possible. To that end, the authors use several simple but effective means. One of those means is the bestowing of proper names.

Names in literature can have various effects, but the underlying one is to make the story seem more factual, that is, more objective. Shakespeare's young tragic her-

9. The fabliaux contain relatively few formal portraits. See Louis A. Haselmayer, "The Portraits in Chaucer's Fabliaux," pp. 310-14; and Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, p. 256, note 6.

oine is not quite correct; our names do identify us as part of a family or clan. The legal restrictions that societies put on changing one's name attest to its sacredness, and the care with which people guard their good "names" not infrequently matches the care they show for their very persons. Consequently it is not unusual to find several proper names used in the fabliaux, though none seems to be used frequently: *Robin* and *Robert* are the names of young men in some half dozen tales, and *Mehans* and *Hersent* are the names of women in even fewer tales. On a few occasions the authors use names that their audiences would definitely recognize as types, such as the reference in *Le Lai d'Aristote* to certain slanderers as "Guenelons" (MR, 5:244), suggesting the possible traitorous actions that slanderers might perform. *Richaut* (or *Richeut*) is a traditional name in medieval French literature for a procuress, and as such it is found in the fabliau, *Les Tresces* (MR, 4:68), in some manuscript versions of *Auberée*, and it is the title of *Richeut*—a tale that most scholars regard as a fabliau, although Nykrog has rejected it from his list because of its length and number of episodes.¹⁰ In two cases its use is somewhat obvious, but in one, *Les Tresces*, it is more complex. The passage where it occurs in that tale is an account of the circumspection of a certain married woman's lover:

Bien ot parler de son affaire,
 Ne il n'en ose noise faire
 A nului qui soit de sa vile,
 Et di que chevaliers s'aville
 Et de ses amors ne li chaut,
 Qui se fie et croit en Richaut:
 Por ce n'en volt faire mesaige.
 Mais une suer qu'il ot molt saige. . . . (MR, 4:68)

10. T. B. W. Reid, ed., *Twelve Fabliaux*, p. 106, note to line 28; Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 15. Nykrog's rejection of *Richeut* is questionable, since several other fabliaux he accepts could be excluded for the same reasons, as, for example, *Le Prestre qu'on porte*, *Le Segretain Moine*, and *Aloul*.

(He indeed heard people talk about his affair, but he didn't risk talking openly about it with anyone in his town. He claimed that a knight who believed and trusted in a Richaut would debase himself and would show no real concern for his loves. He never wanted one of them for his messenger! But he did have a sister, one who was very prudent.)

The effect of this passage is somewhat complex. It is slightly ironic, since the lover will be foolhardy enough to sneak into his beloved's house at night to lie with her while she is in bed with her husband. But the praise extended to the lover also creates the favorable impression needed for the audience to respond sympathetically when the lover escapes after the husband catches him. Following the lover's escape, the husband throws his wife out of the house, and the two lovers meet at his sister's house. The wife then hits upon the strange scheme of sending a friend who resembles her back to her own house where she would take her place in bed. This friend agrees, and in the dark the husband mistakes her for his wife, curses her for daring to come back, beats her, and cuts off a large chunk of her hair. The poor friend staggers back to her house, and the wife returns to her proper bed, where, in the morning, she confounds her husband by showing no signs of a beating and by having all her hair. The earlier reference to Richaut establishes a standard against which the relative and friend are measured. The sister seems more prudent by the comparison with Richaut, but even more important, the strange and inexplicable passivity of the friend is more understandable because of the comparison, since the usual procuress would hardly accept such a beating.

Even an animal is occasionally given a name in the *fabliaux*, but this happens only when the creature is an important character in the tale. *Bauduÿn*, a stock name for a donkey, is the center of attention in Rutebeuf's *Le*

Testament de l'asne (MR, 3:215). It is perfectly appropriate for that donkey to be given a name common to others of his class, for, although he is admittedly very hard working, he still is just a donkey. On the other hand, the name is ironic, for whenever human names are given to animals they are in some way being humanized and since his owner buries this Baldwin in consecrated ground he seems to demand superior recognition.¹¹

Even when names are not used in the fabliaux, characters can act so in accord with a type that they might be considered as embodying that type. They could, indeed, be considered allegorical. Allegory was a popular and extensive literary device in the Middle Ages, but it is not the usual method of the fabliaux. I do not think fabliaux and allegory are mutually exclusive, since the pervasive realism in these tales still flows from characters that are basically types, and insofar as they are typical, they could be allegorical. Indeed, the main characters of two fabliaux seem to be almost allegorically named and more than live up to those names. Here is the story of one of those two, *Le Couvoiteus et l'Envieus* (MR, 5:211):

There were once two friends who were very evil. One was full of covetousness, the other of envy. One day they were riding along together, when they chanced to meet St. Martin, who offered to give both of them a gift. The one who asks for a gift first will be granted whatever he asks for, but the one who remains silent will be given twice as much. The covetous one exhorts the

11. As far as I know the only *objects* in the fabliaux that are given personal names are as in *Connebert* (MR, 5:160), and I have written elsewhere about this phenomenon. See Thomas D. Cooke and Benjamin L. Honeycutt, eds., *The Humor of the Fabliaux: A Collection of Critical Essays*, pp. 137-62. In this regard, the name *Bauduÿn* is not only the name of an ass in the fabliaux but also the name of a person (*La Veuve*, MR, 2:206), the penis (*La Prestre teint*, MR, 6:22), and in *Connebert* itself, possibly a double entendre combining two of those meanings (MR, 5:166).

envious one to go ahead and ask first, and to ask for a lot, but the latter says nothing. After a long silence, again the covetous one exhorts his companion to make a wish, and he even threatens to beat him if he doesn't ask first! Finally the envious one speaks up and makes his wish: he asks that he might lose the sight of one of his eyes! The narrator concludes that out of four eyes they lost three.¹²

It is tempting to say that the grim humor of this fabliau makes it almost artistically impossible to portray these characters as human beings, and so the author has fashioned them allegorically in order to make the story palatable. Although the tale does portray two of the most vicious characters in the fabliaux, others rival them (in *Les Trois Aveugles de Compiègne*, *Dame Joenne*, and *La Femme qui charma son mari*), and hence inhumanity does not necessarily demand an allegorical treatment. It is curious, however, that the other fabliau that resembles *Le Couvoiteus et l'Envieus* in its portrayal of characters whose names can be understood allegorically is also one of violence. It depicts a man and his wife, *Sire Hain et Dame Anieuse*, whose conflict like their names does indeed show their hate and vexation. They have a long and violent fight over who literally shall wear the pants in the family. No longer able to stand the bickering and contrary nature of his wife, Sire Hain, a tailor, throws his trousers on the floor and challenges her to

12. In their translation of this story, Robert Hellman and Richard O'Gorman make the two evil characters formal allegorical figures, using the abstract qualities as proper nouns and capitalizing them. See their *Fabliaux: Ribald Tales from the Old French*, pp. 159–60. Although the words *couvoiteus* and *envieus* are not used so in the manuscripts, and certain phrases in the tale, such as “cil qui avoit couvoitie” (he who was covetous) or “que le uns ert se pleins d'envie” (that the one was so full of envy) suggest that the allegory was not formal, still a medieval audience could certainly have accepted it as such. For some of the readings on the manuscripts see Jean Bodel, *Fabliaux*, pp. 113–18.

fight for them. The battle lasts some 170 lines, is quite vivid and detailed, punctuated with curses, and full of blood: "Hains fiert sa fame enmi les denz / Tel cop, que la bouche dedenz / Li a toute emplie de sanc"¹³ (Hain gave her such a blow to the teeth that her mouth was all full of blood), MR, 1:104. It ends, however, as Dame Anieuse finally capitulates, and her husband and those watching their battle all laugh (MR, 1:110). The resolution at the end, moreover, softens the effect of the battle and dilutes the force of the allegorical names of the combatants. It is the other way around in *Le Couvoiteus et l'Envieus* where the names make the story grimmer. Thus the use of such names again shows the unique artistry of each fabliau.

In one fabliau, *Les Trois Dames de Paris*, names, like the three women in the story, run riot. One reason for this highly unusual usage could be that, although most of the fabliaux tell of strange and fantastic actions, the author of this tale, Wautriquet Brassnel de Couvin, is more than usually conscious of the marvels he is relating. Unlike those fabliaux that begin with a statement that the story we are about to hear is a true one, Couvin begins in the manner of many romances, by telling us that he has some "grans merveilles" to tell us, and concludes by asking his audience if they ever heard such an *aventure* (MR, 3:145, 155).¹⁴ The three women, Maroclippe, her niece Maroie Clippe, and a hairdresser named Dame Tifaigne set out drinking one day and easily carry away the honors for drunkenness in the fabliaux (where, surprisingly, that particular vice is hardly represented at all). To observe simply, however, that they get exceedingly drunk would be to miss the increasing amount of wine consumed and the total oblivion from which they never quite emerge. The cumulative effect of their drink-

13. Nykrog in *Les Fabliaux*, pp. 88-89, says that their fight is perhaps a parody of the battles in heroic and epic literature.

14. In the one other fabliau Couvin tells, *Les Trois Chanoines de Couloigne* (MR, 3:137), there is no announcement about marvels or adventures.

ing is their frenzied, naked dancing in the winter streets, where they finally collapse in a twisted pile. In the morning the rest of the townspeople discover them, scratched and filthy, and showing no signs of life. Believing them to have been murdered, the good folk carry the bodies to church and bury them. But the three women revive, exhume themselves, and still so drunk they believe themselves to be back in the tavern, call for more drink. But the chill is too much for them, and they faint again, only to be discovered the next morning by the townspeople again, who now think that the devil has gotten into them. While the good folk thus contemplate the tangled and possessed pile, the three women again revive, and some forty-eight hours after they started drinking, call out for another round. Now the townspeople think they are devils and flee in terror.

One effect of the names in such a tale is to render the fantastic actions acceptable by the use of the concrete and specific. Jonathan Swift does the same thing at the beginning of *Gulliver's Travels* when he has his hero give the specific dates, names of people, places, and the like, to set a realistic framework through which we can gaze with acceptance at the unrealistic tale he is about to tell.¹⁵ In *Les Trois Dames de Paris*, not only are the women given names, they are given aliases: Maroclippe is also called Margue, Margue Clouve, and Margue Clippe; her niece Maroie Clippe is also Marion; and Tifaigne, the hairdresser, is also Dame Fresent.¹⁶ They are not the only ones named: Maroclippe is married to Adam de Gonnesse; the boy who brings them drinks is Druin Baillez; there is a tavern keeper named Pierre Du

15. See Herbert Davis's edition of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, p. 19, ("A Voyage to Lilliput," chapter 1). I am not suggesting that all unrealistic stories are or must be so framed but only that it is one approach.

16. For an explanation of these aliases, as well as notes on some of the subsequent terms and names discussed, see the following: Auguste Scheler, ed., *Dits de Wautriquet de Couvin*, pp. 509-11; and Harrison, *Galic Salt*, pp. 420-21.

Terne; and oaths are sworn on Saints George, Vincent, and Josse. An allusion is made to the Scots and to other jongleurs, Colin, Hauvis, Hersent, and Jetrus.¹⁷ The wine that the women drink is Grenache, which they think is better than Arbois or Saint-Emilion. The tavern where they begin their drinking is called *des Maillez*; the church to which they are borne is the Innocents. Most unusual of all, Couvin tells us exactly when it happened: the feast of the ".III. Rois de Couloigne" (Epiphany) in the year "M.CCC. et vint." This spirit of copiousness spills over onto the objects in the poem, not given proper names but made more specific than is usual in these tales. While drinking, the three women eat not just any food but *tripe, crasse oue, gauffres, oubless, fromage, amondes pelees, poires, nois, and .III. harnes salez*. When they go dancing in the street, they do not simply take off their clothes, they take off their *vardecors, pelice, cote, chemise, chaucement*, and leave behind their *bourse* and *corroie*. But the purpose of all these specifics can be seen in the order in which two other objects are placed, objects that unlike the others I have mentioned by nature have a numerical hierarchy: the amount of money paid for the wine and the quantity of wine drunk. The amount of wine staggers from the first unspecified amount to *.III. chopines* (roughly three pints), to a *plain pot* (two pints), to *.III. quartes*. The amount of money they spend begins with *.II. deniers*, then *.X. sous*, then *.XV. sous*, at which point Maroclippe says she would be willing to sell her cow for more wine and so tells Druin to run out and buy food and drink with *florins et gros tornois*.¹⁸ The growing amounts reflect the dramatic growth of the story toward

17. I could not find any other allusion to the Scots in the fabliaux. Scheler says that the four jongleurs are unknown; see *Dits de Wautriquet de Couvin*, p. 509.

18. On the amount of these measurements and the value of these coins see W. E. Clason, comp., *Lexicon of International and National Units*, pp. 44-45; W. A. Shaw, *The History of Currency, 1252 to 1894*, pp. 396-423.

its climax. All the elements, like the women, lurch toward the finale. The proper names and the specific objects not only anchor the fantastic actions to reality, they are the steps by which the comic climax is achieved.¹⁹

Most fabliaux, however, unlike other medieval genres such as the epics, lays, and romances, depict characters with no names. The fableors rely rather on the use of short descriptions to characterize, descriptions that vary in length from one or two words to passages of a dozen lines or more, though usually they are quite short. Invariably they are a means of preparing us for the climax. We expect good things to happen to characters who are worthy, noble, or generous, and bad things to those who are stingy, cowardly, or churlish. When a character has some quality to an extreme, we can expect some misfortune to befall him. It is as though his excesses throw the story out of balance and we intuit that a comic force is at work to right that imbalance. Just to be told, for instance, that the husband in *La Borgoise d'Orliens* (MR, 1:117) is "exceedingly rich" is to prepare us for the ill treatment that he will receive at the climax of the story. There are a few good husbands in the fabliaux, but unfortunately some of them have wives who are too attractive. Here is one such situation:

Mos sans vilonnie
 Vous veil recorder,
 Afin qu'en s'en rie,
 D'un franc Savetier,
 Qui a non Baillait; mès par destourbier,
 Prist trop bele fame. Si l'en meschéi
 Qu'ele s'acointa d'un Prestre joli,
 Mès le Çavetier molt bien s'en chevi. (MR, 2:24)

(I want to tell you a very proper story
 about an honest cobbler that will make you
 laugh. His name was Baillait, and unfor-

19. For a different view of this tale see Roy J. Percy, "Realism and Religious Parody in the Fabliaux: Wautriquet de Couvin's *Les Trois Dames de Paris*," pp. 744-54.

tunately he took a wife who was just too beautiful, for she chanced to fall in love with a wanton priest. But the cobbler knew how to remedy a bad situation.)

The omniscient judgments given to us by the narrator establish succinctly the values that we must hold if we are to laugh at the cobbler's victory over the priest. Of course it is easy to accept the values in this story, since they are the same as the ones people would normally hold in a real situation. Such is not always the case in the fabliaux. The hero in *Le Bouchier d'Abeville* (MR, 3: 227) should be regarded as a scoundrel. This butcher steals a sheep from a priest and then uses the same sheep as a bribe to convince the priest to take him in for the night. After the butcher, the priest, the priest's mistress, and his servant eat the sheep for dinner, they all retire for the evening, and during the night the butcher promises to give the valuable sheepskin to the servant if she will lie with him, and she consents. In the morning, the butcher seduces the priest's mistress with the same promise. The butcher then takes the sheepskin to the church and sells it to the priest. Only after the butcher leaves town does the priest and his household discover, one by one, his deeds. But in spite of his stealing, seductions, bribes, and lies, our admiration for the butcher never wavers. Many factors contribute to that attitude: the butcher had an onerous and useless trip to the market, and when he first asks the priest for lodging, which he offers to pay for, the priest refuses, claiming that no *vilains* will sleep under his roof. But even before these actions, the author makes it all quite clear; the man who does all those deeds is quite good, as indicated in the opening of the tale:

A Abeville ot .I. bouchier,
 Qui si voisin orent mout chier;
 N'estoit pas fel ne mesdisanz,
 Mès sages, cortois et vaillanz

Et loiaus hom de son mestier,
Et s'avoit sovent grant mestier,
Ses povres voisins souffraiteus;
N'estoit avers ne covoitheus. (MR, 3:227)

(At Abeville there was a butcher, one who was beloved by his neighbors. He was not wicked nor a slanderer but wise, refined, worthy, and a loyal member of his guild. He often helped his neighbors who were poor or in need. He was not stingy nor greedy.)

The narrator here gives us not only one of the most complimentary portraits in the fabliaux, but also one that expresses the essence of the man in his habitual actions. The omniscient statement by the author is reinforced to some extent by his mentioning that the butcher was loved by his neighbors, whose corroborating evidence also takes away the possibility of the portrait being ironic. (And, of course, the author does not say that he was the flower of chastity.) Most important, all this is necessary if we are to rejoice in the butcher's escapades and laugh at the priest's discomfort as he discovers the outrages committed on him. Because of the extremely favorable portrait—almost of the ideal man—whatever the butcher does to the priest and his household must, we feel, be justified.

We admire the butcher and excuse his actions. Not all characters in the fabliaux are presented that neatly. Some of these tales ask for an ambiguous response from the audience. Ambiguity is here not the same as it frequently is in modern literature, where it is often the thematic meaning of the work. In the fabliaux it is strictly a means to the end, a device used to elicit the desired artistic response. I think a rather clear case of this kind of story is *Saint Piere et le jongleur* (MR, 5:65):

There was once a jongleur at Sens who was very poor. He played dice constantly and so was often without his hurdy-gurdy,

without breeches, and without tunic. Consequently he found himself facing the north wind only in his chemise. He often had no footwear, and his garments hung in tatters from his body. Even when he happened to find a pair of shoes, they would be full of holes and the nails would be falling out.

His refuge was the tavern and the brothel, at which places he led a merry life. He loved drinking, and wenching, and gambling. Whatever money he had, he spent, and he only cared about debauching himself. He wore a garland on his head and wished that it was always a feast day or Sunday. He did hate rowdiness and squabbles, even though he spent his life in idle folly. So when he died, Satan claimed his soul and there was no good angel to challenge him. So with other sinners, like prizefighters, usurers, thieves (*sic*), bishops, priests, monks, abbots, and knights, he was sent below.

In Hell he was given the task of tending the fires, a job rewarded to him because, lacking clothes, it was the only way he could keep warm. One day the devil went on a mission, leaving the souls in the protection of the jongleur, threatening him with dire punishments if he lost any souls, punishments like hanging, blinding, and being eaten up alive! St. Peter came down to Hell and talked the jongleur into gambling for souls. St. Peter kept winning until he had won all of them, who gladly left and went to Heaven. When Satan returned he was so angry that he threw the jongleur out of Hell and swore that he would never allow another one to come there. The jongleur scampered out quickly, ran toward Heaven, where St. Peter let him in.

The narrator concludes by advising jon-

gleurs to have a merry life, since they have
no fear of going to Hell!

The hero here calls forth a double allegiance. We are encouraged again and again to see him as a wastrel, as lecherous, and as mortally sinful. The exigencies of the plot demand that he be put into Hell, so the author must make sure he deserves it. And yet he will not only get out of Hell himself but will also empty it of all the lost souls. So the author creates a character who is happy go lucky and good hearted, a damned soul with a heart of gold. He is also exceedingly poor and unlucky, qualities that further engage our sympathy. Even in Hell we feel sorry for him, since the fires there are needed to protect him from the cold. But he is also unlucky in Hell and so loses again at gambling, the vice that caused him to be poor and one of the vices that led him to lose his soul. We want him to bungle his assigned task and redeem all the souls, and we want him also to be freed. Our reaction to the jongleur is, therefore, rather complex. We cannot say that he is simply good or bad, skillful or clumsy, or any such simple quality. An ambivalent value system is necessary here in order to make the story successful.²⁰

A discussion of the delineation of characters in the fabliaux could be an almost limitless topic, since the essential question that must be asked is what exactly is the function of each character in his own story. Although they are basically types and do fall into patterns, each character does play a unique role based upon the needs of his own situation. Part of that situation is the setting.

20. Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 131, does not find any basis for admiration or sympathy for this jongleur: "*Saint Pierre et le jongleur* nous retrace le portrait de 'honteux ménestrel' dans le pauvreté et le misère où ses vices incorrigibles l'ont plongé. . . . Seul parmi ses confrères le *Jongleur d'Ely* sait réveiller notre sympathie et notre respect." D. D. R. Owen, "The Element of Parody in *Saint Pierre et le Jongleur*," pp. 60-63, believes the tale to be a blasphemous parody of Christ's harrowing of Hell, but he is not as hard on the hero as Nykrog is.

Setting

The world of the fabliau is very small.²¹ The geographical locale is most of the time a single place, with the action naturally taking place in France, but no single town being an overwhelming favorite. Some stories do take place in other spots, such as London, Genoa, India, Heaven, Hell. In several stories there is no mention at all of any specific geographical locale, as in *Brunain, la vache au prestre* (MR, 1:132). Where a setting is not needed, the authors do not force one on the tale. Occasionally the author states that his story took place in some town, but that he has forgotten the name of it: "Jadis avint à .I. chastel, / Mès le non oublié en ai" (Once it happened in a fortified town, whose name I've forgotten), MR, 1:13. We might wonder why the author bothers to mention that he cannot remember the name; since the stories are fictitious he could easily make up one. If he does not want to embarrass local people, as he surely would have done to *L'Evesque qui benëi le con*, he could have changed the location; but he does not—he forgets the name of the bishop's town (MR, 3:178). Such conscious absentmindedness does more than protect those who might be embarrassed; it also is a symbolic way of stating that the setting in those particular stories is unimportant. If it were important, as it occasionally is, then the author would have remembered it. There is another reason for this casual forgetfulness. By pretending to forget the name of the setting, the author in effect tries ironically to pose as a historian, to tell a true tale. Since he is not a historian, that pose creates a comic, tongue-in-cheek attitude toward the tale. This attitude,

21. Another discussion of the settings and one that comes to similar conclusions about their purpose is by Paul Theiner, "Fabliau Settings," pp. 119–36. For a discussion of the humorous use of the names of towns see Benjamin L. Honeycutt, "An Example of Comic Cliché in the Old French Fabliaux," pp. 245–55; see also Gerhard Joseph, "Chaucerian 'Game'—'Earnest' and the 'Argument of Herbergage' in *The Canterbury Tales*," pp. 89, 91.

which moves from narrator to audience, helps to reaffirm the comic tone of the story and thus prepares us for the comic climax.²²

A significant number of stories takes place merely in "a certain town." This is tantamount to saying that they could take place in any town, which no doubt meant to the audience that it could be "our town." The typical setting is really, therefore, the most appropriate locale in which the typical characters live and move. This perfect fusion of setting and characters ideally serves the purposes of the comic climax.

It is not the same with the immediate physical locale. Although they are almost never described at any length, the approximate surroundings are specifically mentioned. There is a house, a chamber, a bath, and quite frequently a bed. In some stories a bed is the only place mentioned, as, for example, in *Gauteron et Marion* (MR, 3:49), *La Pucele qui abevra le polain* (MR, 4:199), and *La Pucele qui voloit voler* (MR, 4:208). To know, incidentally, the title of the last fabliau mentioned and to know that its only setting is a bed is to understand the source of its humor. Even when there is more than one spot, however, it would sometimes be possible to know the action of many fabliaux merely by knowing the setting. One could construct a formulaic, geographical pattern for the setting, which alone would tell the story. Supposing the characters to be a lecherous monk, an unfaithful wife, a jealous husband, the story would follow this pattern: monastery, road, house, door, dining table, bathtub, bed, door, closet, window, road, and finally monastery. Those places, considered individually, may not be revealing but the pattern is all-important. It is more than a framework, it is the pattern of a farcical movement.

Some particular settings are associated with certain

22. Another effect is the establishment of comic distance. For a full discussion of that device in the fabliaux see Norris Lacy, "Types of Esthetic Distance in the Fabliaux," pp. 107-17.

values. The author of each version of *Béregier au long cul* (MR, 3:252 and MR, 4:57) places his story in Lombardy, but in one version (MR, 3:252) he mentions that it is a country not known for brave people, which partially explains the cowardice of the husband in that version.²³ The setting for *Le Vilain Asnier* is Montpellier, a city well known for its spices and perfumes, and thus the most logical place for the manure-carting peasant to be when he faints from, what are to him, very unusual odors.²⁴

But just as with characters, authors can make out of a setting what they desire. This is seen most clearly if we consider two different uses of that favorite of medieval places, the garden. In *Le Lai d'Aristote* (MR, 5:243) the wise old philosopher warns his pupil, Alexander, about the dangers of love and convinces him to give up his beautiful mistress. In revenge, and in order to remedy the situation, she goes out into the garden one morning, dressed only in her chemise, with her hair flowing loosely. She sings at Aristotle's window, causing him to forget his own advice and to make advances toward her. She promises him her favors, if only he will fulfill a request: she desires to ride on his back. Alexander sees his master in this humiliating position and is henceforth allowed his mistress. The garden here serves as an appropriate setting for the tale, which can be seen as a humorous defense of courtly love.²⁵ But the same setting can be used

23. For fuller discussions of the differences between the two versions see Jean Rychner, *Contribution à l'étude des fabliaux*, vol. 1; and Roy J. Percy, "Relations between the *D* and *A* Versions of *Béregier au long cul*," pp. 173-78.

24. R. C. Johnston and D. D. R. Owen, eds., *Fabliaux*, p. 86, note to line 11.

25. "Thus the *Lai d'Aristote*, which describes the conversion of the dour philosopher to courtly love, is a defense of the system." Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, p. 67. For that and other reasons, some scholars have praised it highly but found it to be an unusual fabliau. For instance: "Les éléments de cet amiable conte ne sont pas du domaine habituel des *fabliaux*. L'élégance de la description, le charme souriant des personnages supposent

for a radically different purpose, as it is in *La Gageure* (MR, 2:193). To win a girl's love, a young squire must agree to kiss her in a humiliating way, but he turns the "misdirected kiss" into a seduction and hence forces the girl to marry him. The action all takes place in a garden, under a "perer Jahenyn" tree. Nykrog regards this tale as a parody of courtly love, since the insulting kiss is a condition for winning the girl, and according to certain courtly love rules, true love will not refuse any task.²⁶ The setting in both tales is physically similar, a beautiful garden, but it must be regarded as different in both. In one it is fitting, in the other it is ironic. Ultimately, however, it does serve the comic purpose of both tales.

There are other instances of the different values that settings can have. This is not merely because the values that in real life are attached to some settings change, but rather because the poet finds it artistically necessary to change them. Even places that reportedly stay the same for all eternity can change for the artist. Theologians would consider the Hell of *Saint Pierre et le jongleur* to be heretical. A setting can be whatever the poet desires. In three fabliaux, all analogues, the setting is actually the topic. In *Dame Joenne*, in *La Contrarieuse*, and in *Le Pré tondu*, a man and his wife argue about a meadow, he claiming that it was mowed, she that it was clipped.²⁷ Eventually the husband gives her a violent beating, but she continues to argue by using her fingers to make a cutting motion, to indicate that the meadow was clipped. The condition of the setting becomes here the occasion for the character conflict and the ensuing action, and this

chez le poète une culture littéraire qui n'était point celle des vulgaires jongleurs." Robert Bossuat, *Le Moyen Age*, p. 157.

26. Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 80.

27. The text for *Dame Joenne* is edited by Arthur Långfors, "*Le Dit de Dame Jouenne* [sic]: Version Inédite du Fabliau du *Pré Tondu*," pp. 99-107. That for *La Contrarieuse* is in Marie de France, *Die Fabeln der Marie de France*, pp. 304-6. All references to Marie de France's fabliaux will be to this text, hereafter referred to as *Warnke*. The text for *Le Pré tondu* is in MR, 4:154.

fusion of elements creates the comic value system that makes the tale humorous. Even though she has been badly mauled, the wife persists in her belief that the field was cut in a certain way, and she does so by making a cutting motion with her fingers. This somewhat grim stubbornness is admirable only in a comic way: their interpretation of the setting is repeated comically by the characters and their actions.

Actions

The fabliaux, however, are not noted for their settings, nor for their characters, but rather for their actions.²⁸ Descriptions of persons and places are slighted in order that the action can get underway, and indeed the descriptions merely pave the way. This concentration on action rules out the development of refinements that can be found in other medieval genres, such as the full, rich characterization in the epic, the interest in psychological states of mind in romances, or the delicate sentiments in the lays. The action in those genres is important but usually not as central as in the fabliaux, where it dominates. I would like, therefore, to make a few observations about the nature of actions in the fabliaux, but their actions, for the present, will be considered only as individual acts, since I discuss the arrangement of the actions, that is, the plot—the important action in these tales—in a later chapter on the comic climax. A few generalizations and one or two examples will suffice for now.

There are many different actions in the fabliaux. There is a great deal of sexual activity, quite a bit of

28. "Plot, action, intrigue, these were what they [the fableors] cared for." Hart, "The Narrative Art," pp. 212-13. See also Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, p. 63: "Action is the greatest source of its [the fabliau's] vividness, of its appearance of inexhaustible vitality." See also Michael W. McClintock, "Games and the Players of Games: Old French Fabliaux and the *Shipman's Tale*," p. 114: "The thematic focus of these stories [the fabliaux] is neither on the actors nor on the significance (or value or rectitude) of the action, but on the action itself, action proceeding not from characters as such but from some potentially humorous situation."

excremental action, and much violence. It would, however, be misleading to attempt to list the different kinds of action in the fabliaux. The main difficulty would be in the selection of the categories, since there could be many different distinctions. One might consider the actions from the standpoint of the conflict, and then they could be considered according to the intention that perpetrated them; are they planned, spontaneous, accidental, or just what? A good corrective to the popular opinion that the fabliaux are "realistic" would be a breakdown of them according to the realism of their action. On a scale, say, of five, the range could go something like this: normal, unusual but plausible, extreme or wild, implausible, and impossible (supernatural, miraculous).²⁹ Nykrog has, in fact, made a category of the actions and has concluded that there are about 150 different subjects. He has divided them into two groups: *erotic* (by which he means stories dealing with any confrontation of the sexes) and *non-erotic*; the first group comprising 106 tales, the latter 41. The erotic tales are further subdivided into 16 categories that embrace such distinctions as success or failure in a seduction, husbands who are treated well versus those who are treated badly, and so on.³⁰ This information is of definite value for our understanding of the genre as a whole, but it still does not help us appreciate the significance of the action within each fabliau, much less the value of that fabliau itself.

It is not only very difficult to categorize the actions in the fabliaux, it is also misleading, since events in lit-

29. I attempted to do this for all the fabliaux, but found it an impossible task, and abandoned it. Other than a few clear cases, most fabliaux could fit several of the levels. My own opinion, incidentally, is that there are almost no fabliaux whose actions are "normal." Not all would agree with me. Part of Montaignon's definition of the fabliaux says that the "Fabliau est un récit d'une aventure réelle ou possible, même avec les exagérations, qui se passe dans les données, de la vie humaine moyenne. . . . Un Fabliau est le récit d'une aventure toute particuliere et ordinaire. . . ." MR, 1:vii-viii.

30. Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 55.

erature, like deeds in history, have no value outside a particular context. No actions in literature have an absolute value. This is true not only of ones which we would regard as indefinite in real life, such as eating, sleeping, walking, or the like, but even of those that are usually regarded by us as right or wrong. Many actions in life have a debatable value; some people, for example, regard premarital sex as right, some as wrong. But the absolute literary amorality of all actions extends even to those which almost all men would regard as wrong, such as murder. The point needs to be stressed, since references are still made to the "immorality" of the fabliaux.³¹ There are several "murders" in the fabliaux, but the only legitimate artistic way to regard them is in the context of their own stories. A good summary statement of the manifold ways murder is regarded in various works of art is given by Wayne Booth:

Consider the following murders: Macbeth murders Duncan and we pity Macbeth rather than Duncan; Markheim murders the pawnbroker, and we hope for Markheim's salvation; Monsieur Verdoux murders a series of wealthy women, and we side with him against a rotten civilization; the would-be heir in *Kind Hearts and Coronets* murders a half-dozen or so of his relatives and we simply laugh; Zuleika Dobson "murders" the whole of the undergraduate body at Oxford and we laugh, quite complicatedly; Ch'en, in *Man's Fate*, murders a stranger in cold blood and we are terrified—for Ch'en. There is no need to list the many murders in which the more "natural" responses of hatred toward the murderer and pity for the victim are made to predominate.³²

A similar listing could be made not only for the murders in the fabliaux, but also for their beatings, adultery, crude and vulgar actions—in short, everything. This point needs to be stressed, since we tend to think of cer-

31. See for example Reid, ed., *Twelve Fabliaux*, p. xii.

32. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 113, note 6.

tain actions in literature as carrying the same values they usually have in life, whereas fictive settings and even characters tend to be accepted as more neutral or ambivalent. But all characters, settings, and actions are given their adopted values in the works in which they live; they are not born into that literature with those values. A clear example of this is the fine short fabliau, *Les Trois Boçus* (MR, 1:13). In this story, a hunchback and his wife entertain three hunchbacked minstrels one Christmas day. When the husband has to go to town on business, he orders the minstrels to leave, but after he is gone, the wife sends after them, so enjoyable was their entertainment. The husband returns unexpectedly, and the wife, for quite innocent reasons, hides the three in chests. After her husband leaves, she goes to the chests where she discovers that the three unfortunate hunchbacks have all suffocated. She then hails a passing street-porter and offers him a goodly sum to dispose of a body, which he does by throwing it into a nearby river, but when he returns to collect his fee, she presents him with the "same" body. He is naturally bewildered and angry at finding this "same" body, but even more so when he returns to find it a third time. After he finally, and with many curses, disposes of the third hunchbacked minstrel, he starts back for the house, only to meet the hunchbacked husband returning home. He is enraged, cudgels the husband, and then throws him into the river.

In this story the three hunchbacked minstrels die accidentally, but the husband is the victim of a homicide (or at least of involuntary manslaughter), and our reaction is still laughter. There are many reasons for that laughter: the incongruity, the comic repetition, the absurdity of mistaking a live hunchback for a dead one, the tone of the story, its pacing, but, ultimately of course, the whole story contributes to the comic effect. This structure is true of all the fabliaux, whose ultimate value is comic. One might argue that in stories such as *Les Trois Boçus* there is no thought of a "real" murder, hence there

is no difficulty in laughing at it. No "real" deaths occur in tragedies, but we still grieve. To say that tragedy takes death seriously while comedy takes it lightly is really only to say that one is tragic and the other is comic. Real men have joked about their real deaths.³³

The fantastic actions that take place in the fabliaux are, however, a contributing factor to the humor, since comedies do favor unrealistic actions. Indeed, the humor of one fabliau is based on our appreciation of unrealistic behavior, and we laugh at and appreciate someone who is quite unusual. The tale is *Le Vilain Asnier* (MR, 5: 40) and it is as follows:

At Montpellier there was a peasant who was accustomed to carting manure for fertilizer. As he came to town one day, he happened to pass down a street lined with apothecary shops. When he smelled the sweet scent of the spices, he didn't take another step, he fainted away. People rushed to him, and they thought that he was dead, but they couldn't understand why. A certain man came along, sized up the situation, and said that he could cure him. He took a pitchfork, got a load of dung, and stuck it under the peasant's nose. Immediately the bad effect of the spices left the peasant, who opened his eyes and jumped up, completely cured. There was much happiness because of that.

Moral: Whoever goes against his nature acts unnaturally.

33. As William Roper reports of Thomas More: "And so was he [More] by *master* Leiuetaunte brought out of the Tower, and from thence led to [wardes] the place of execution. Where, goinge vppe the scaffold, *which* was so weake that it was ready to fall, he saide merilye to *master* Leiuetaunte: 'I pray you, *master* Leiuetaunte, see me self vppe, and for my cominge downe let me shifte for my self.'" *The Lyfe of Sir Thomas Moore, Knighte*, pp. 102-3.

There are many things to admire about this brief (51 lines) tale: perfect unity of time, place, and action; quick, deft characterization, such as the author telling us in line two that the peasant was accustomed (*custumiers*) to hauling manure, an action that establishes the habitual action necessary to make the peasant's unusual reaction plausible. Later the author tells us that after the peasant has fainted the donkeys who pulled the manure cart stood still, for they are not accustomed (*custumiers*) to move until they are summoned. Some irony is certainly involved in the repetition of *custumiers*; it underlines the importance of habitual action in this story and suggests that the peasant and his donkeys share some important traits. But more important is the comic vision that emerges from the tale. I do not think that it is the same as the moral, which actually has a rather complex relationship to the tale. In their edition of the fabliau R. C. Johnston and D. D. R. Owen make this observation about the moral: "The precise application of this moral to the ass-driver is difficult to see."³⁴ Yet surely the moral is completely fitting. We normally are delighted when someone who is sick becomes well again, and I think that is true even of this peasant. He is, of course, brought back to his senses by an action that separates him from society, just as it was an action which society finds invigorating and refreshing that almost killed him. I am not forgetting the light nature of the story in talking about such heavy and serious conflicts. The peasant is different from "normal" people, to be sure, but it is rather the combination of qualities that are unnatural for us but natural for him that is significant. Although he and the donkeys do have a close association, he is not one of them (they do not faint from the smell of spices) nor is he even some medieval Yahoo. The Middle Ages was quite capable of being cruel and of laughing at peasants, at deformities, and at any differences as differences, and that is certainly

34. Johnston and Owen, eds., *Fabliaux*, p. 86.

part of the humor here, but the other part is that the peasant is cured and brought back to life. We are happy that he is cured, but we laugh because his cure would make us ill. Thus an audience can appreciate and laugh at actions precisely because they have a meaning and a value that society does not share.³⁵

One of the more objective goals of an author is to render his story as dramatically as possible. The closer to a dramatic account he can come, the more he withdraws and lets his characters stand on their own in front of an audience. Many scholars have noted the dramatic nature of the fabliaux, claiming that they led naturally into the farces, though the exact lines have never been traced.³⁶ Many are the similarities between these two genres, one being the vivid scenes of action. These range in quality and length, and a brief example could suffice for the whole. In *Jouquet* a young bridegroom named Robin is the victim of a cruel practical joke: he is tricked by the minstrel Jouquet into eating a large quantity of pears on his wedding day, and consequently the bed that should be a place of bliss becomes a place of torment. The author gives us this vivid scene: "Par le lit se va detordant, / Son linçuel d'angoisse mordant" (All over the bed he writhes, biting the bedcovers out of grief), MR, 4:117.

But the most dramatic way of telling a story is to let

35. Interpretations of this story have generally emphasized its possible satiric thrust. See Charles Aubertin, *Histoire de la langue et de la littérature françaises au moyen âge, d'après les travaux les plus récents*, 2:14; and LeClerc, "Fabliaux," p. 206. LeClerc states that it is something of an allegory, showing that peasants cannot live without dirt.

36. Grace Frank, *The Medieval French Drama*, p. 246. This relationship was also the subject of a seminar ("Fabliau and Farce") at the 1975 Modern Language Association meeting in San Francisco. It might even be conjectured that the bareness of most fabliaux could be the equivalent of a dramatic text, one without stage directions. Just as such a dramatic text allows the actors to supply gestures, expressions, and tone, so the texts of the fabliaux allow the jongleurs the chance to fill them out with appropriate vocal inflections, gestures, and the like.

the characters speak, just as though they were on the stage in front of an audience. Hence, the dialogue in the fabliaux is quite important, and so I shall treat it separately and at some length.

Dialogue

The amount of dialogue in the fabliaux varies quite a bit, from tales with none, *Le Provost a l'aumuche* (MR, 1:112), or with one line such as *Le Prestre pelé* (whose one line is not even spoken by a main character),³⁷ to a story that is all dialogue, *Le Roi d'Angleterre et le Jongleur d'Ely* (MR, 2:242). The typical fabliau consists of about 50 percent dialogue.³⁸ Its quality almost always receives high marks. Nykrog honors it with a ten-page discussion in his chapter on the literary art of the fabliaux, where he states that it is "un des traits les plus charmants et les plus vivaces du genre," and that in some tales it "coule librement, et avec un naturel parfait. . . ."³⁹ Charles Muscatine further notes that in the fabliaux "we hear very skillfully represented all the shriller sounds of everyday life," and that the "rhythm of this style of speech is notable for its turbulence."⁴⁰ Its purpose, of course, is manifold, but again Muscatine deserves quoting because he zeroes in on the central purpose: "The rhythm and sound of the direct discourse, then, supports the representation of *action*—direct, violent, practical—which is one of the chief ends of the whole style."⁴¹ That emphasis on the relationship of the speech to the action can be taken one step further, and the speech can be con-

37. The text for *Le Prestre pelé* has been edited by J. Morawski in "Le Fabliau du Prestre Pelé," pp. 542-48.

38. Hart, "The Narrative Art," p. 213.

39. Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, pp. 152-53. One of the harshest critics of the fabliaux is Ferdinand Brunetière, who claims that the "naturel" that so many have praised in the fabliaux is really a fault, since its authors were incapable of anything more sophisticated. See his article, "Les Fabliaux du moyen âge et l'Origine des Contes," p. 191.

40. Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, p. 64.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

sidered in relationship to the *comic* action, which culminates in the comic climax.

Many are the ways in which the comedy of these tales is furthered by their dialogue. The use of oaths, curses and interjections, in verse that is quick and staccato, contributes to the comic tone of the tales. In the midst of the fighting between Sire Hain and his wife, Dame Anieuse hurls this at her husband: "'Filz a putain, vilainz pullenz'" ("You son of a whore, you stinking clod"), MR, 1:105. Examples of that kind abound: both Muscatine and Nykrog give many examples. Nykrog also makes one of his most telling points when he discusses the complex duality that some dialogue has, which is to render a portrait of the person doing the talking. As he explains it:

On reconnaît ici, sans comparaison d'ailleurs, une technique chère aux romanciers réalistes du XIXe siècle: faire voir un des personnages par les yeux d'un des autres, pour arriver à deux fins à la fois: nous faire la description du premier et nous dépeindre l'impression qu'il produit sur l'autre.⁴²

A good example of that duality and of turbulent speech is in *Nonnette*. A prioress who has been lying in bed with a priest hears the convent door open and sees a young nun sneak in with her priest. Furious, the prioress jumps up, reaches in the dark for her veil but grabs instead her priest's breeches, throws them over her head, and thus attired confronts the young nun and priest, unaware that the culprits can clearly discern the breeches, with their leather straps hanging down in front of her eyes:

"Orde ribaude prouvée
Or vous ay je en mal trouvéel
Bien diffamés ore notres ordre!
De male mort vous feray mordre!
Vous serez an male prison;
Trop avez fait grant mesprison!
Qui tous les membres vous trairoit,

42. Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 162.

L'amende mie n'en aroit.
Comment avez ozé ce faire?
Les membres deussiez avant traire.
Comment ozé penser avez
L'ort pechié dont morir devez?
Nulle aultre amende il ne y a.
Fy! a! fi! a! fi! a! fi! a!"⁴³

("Dirty slut! Now I've caught you in the act!
You're a scandal to our convent! I'll send
you to a wicked death! I'll have you locked
up! You've done a terrible thing! If someone
were to tear you limb from limb he would
still not have given satisfaction for your sin.
How dare you do such a thing? You should
have torn off your own limbs! How dare
you plan such a filthy sin—you should die
for it! That would be the only fair compen-
sation for your sin! Fie! oh fie! oh fie! oh
fie! oh!")

That scene would make good theater. There is the slapstick in the prioress with the priest's breeches over her head, their leggings probably hanging down over her ears, haranguing the lovers in violent, repetitive (twice she says they should die for their sin as well as being dismembered and/or imprisoned) and strong, surging rhythms. The irony of her condemning the young nun for what she is guilty of is satiric, but I sense that it is lightly done, since it is hard to treat anyone with a priest's breeches over her head too seriously. The portrait she gives us of the young nun almost literally exemplifies the duality which Nykrog noticed; the young nun is a mirror image of the prioress. That speech, moreover, does not, good as it is, exist in and for itself. It helps build toward the climax, which occurs when the young priest points out to the prioress the contradiction between what she says and what she wears. Although we are not surprised

43. The text for this tale is in Gaston Raynaud's "Une Nouvella Version du Fabliau de *La Nonnette*," pp. 279-83.

by the revelation, the prioress is, and we can appreciate the sudden shock she feels when her hypocrisy is uncovered. Being in on the joke from the beginning, we are prepared for it when it happens. The surging violence of her harangue is not only interesting in itself, it is also a necessary part of the structure of the tale.⁴⁴

Another form of dialogue in the fabliaux is the structural use of puns or verbal misunderstandings, such as in *Estula* (MR, 4:87), *La Male Honte* (MR, 4:95), *La Couille noire* (MR, 6:90), and *Les Deux Angloys et l'anel* (MR, 2:78). The last tale depicts that perennial theme so loved in France—the Englishman who cannot pronounce French correctly. A young Englishman who is ill asks his companion to fetch him some lamb to eat, but the companion asks the butcher for *anel* (ass) rather than *agnel* (lamb), and that is what he gets and feeds to his ailing friend, who does not discover the mistake until he sees the size of the bones. Nevertheless, he is cured (and there may be some Gallic humor in the thought that Englishmen thrive on ass meat). The verbal misunderstanding is central to the story, and the comic climax is based on it. By its very nature, the verbal misunderstanding has two meanings: *anel* or *agnel*. The audience (at least a French one) would realize the mix-up and be prepared for the discovery. A pun or a verbal misunderstanding will always follow that pattern: the recognition of the dual meanings comes as a surprise (either to the character, the audience, or both), but since the duality is an inherent part of the word, the very use of the word prepares for the realization.⁴⁵ The pun is the structure of the story, and the climax is the recognition of that struc-

44. Besides the version I have used, Nykrog includes another one, *La Nonete* (MR, 6:268) by Jean de Condé. Although basically the same story, it varies in many little details. The harangue that I have quoted is not in *La Nonete*, which, however, has some fine lines in it, as when the priest who is caught with the nun tells the prioress that her head covering looks more like a bottom covering.

45. A similar analysis of puns is made by Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, pp. 35–36, 64–65.

ture. All the fabliaux built on puns or verbal misunderstandings are so structured.

One of the more characteristic features of the speech in the fabliaux and one that makes it quite different from the more refined medieval genres is its obscenity. It has not always been acceptable to talk about this element. Joseph Bédier, for example, hardly mentions it, dismissing it by simply calling it "l'incroyable monotonie de l'obscénité humaine."⁴⁶ Many printed editions of the fabliaux omit obscene words with an ellipsis, and some obscenities have been erased from the manuscripts.⁴⁷ One of the refreshing merits of Nykrog's study is that it meets the subject straight on, devotes a whole chapter to obscenity, gives examples, and explains how, in a genre which he argues is courtly, there could be such "uncourtly" language. His main point is germane to my argument. Having claimed that there were acceptable social limits to the vocabulary an author could use in thirteenth-century France and that the authors demonstrate that they know how to use words carefully, he states that the authors used obscenities deliberately in order to shock the audience.⁴⁸ That interpretation is bolstered by Roy J. Percy's view of the obscenity, which is that its use frequently comes when a character who had been using euphemisms for sexual organs and acts discovers that he has been tricked or duped, and that discovery expresses itself in the change from euphemism to obscenity, from illusion to reality. Thus the use of an obscenity marks the comic peripety.⁴⁹ Both of these interpretations touch on my present argument but come at it from a

46. Bédier, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 358.

47. See for example MR, 2:81 and MR, 3:142. For commentary on this see Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 219.

48. "Voilà le caractère de l'obscénité dans la fabliaux: elle veut choquer en faisant ouvertement infraction à la décence." Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 216.

49. Roy J. Percy, "Modes of Signification and the Humor of Obscene Diction in the Fabliaux," pp. 163-96. See also the essays in *The Humor of the Fabliaux* by Jürgen Beyer, pp. 33-39; Benjamin L. Honeycutt, pp. 76-80; and my own essay, pp. 137-62.

different angle. The shocking moment and the discovery are, in effect, the comic climax. I do not think this is always the case; some fabliaux use obscenities rather indiscriminately, and hence the shock wears out and the discovery fades, as in *Le Chevalier qui fist parler les cons* (MR, 6:68), where the obscene word is not only in the title but turns up throughout the tale.⁵⁰ But in some fabliaux the obscenities are used sparingly and with great effect. A tale discussed neither by Percy nor by Nykrog under this heading is *Celui qui bota la pierre*, a story in which a ten-year-old boy is in the habit of watching his mother as she works around the house. One day as she absentmindedly putters about, she pushes a stone about the floor with her foot. A lecherous priest comes in, sees her pushing the stone, and using that as the occasion for a rather direct proposition says:

“Dame,” dist il, “laissez la pierre;
Foi que doi mon seigneur saint Pierre,
Se huimès le vos voi bouter,
Ge vos ferai ja acouter
En ce lit, et si vos foutrai;
Ja autre amende n’en prendrai.” (MR, 6:148)

(“Lady,” he said, “leave the stone alone, or by the faith I owe to Saint Peter, if I see you do it again, I’ll make you account for it in bed. I’ll screw you! I won’t accept any other penance.”)

The mother smiles and then gives the stone a little push. The priest eagerly keeps his promise and carries her to bed. Later that night the father comes home, sees the stone lying in the middle of the room, and starts to pick it up to throw it outside. Out of the mouth of his son comes this warning: “ ‘Ne faites, / Pere; laissez le pierre toute, / Que nostres prestres ne vos foute, / Ausince com il fouti ma mere’ ” (“Don’t do that, Daddy; let the stone

50. Others in which the obscenities occur with more force before the peripety are *Du Con qui fu fait a la besche*, *La Couille noire*, and *Esquirriel*, to name but a few.

alone, or else our priest'll screw you, just like he did Mother"), MR, 6:150. There is a vast difference between the two instances in which the word *foutre* is spoken in that tale. Its use by the son surely marks the comic peripety, and it comes as a shock to us as well as the father, but its effect depends upon the first usage. The whole story is almost a study in preparation, an example par excellence. The child's warning is damning only because it repeats the priest's proposition. It has no relevance at all except as a repetition of the priest. The blunt use of *foutre* by the priest is shocking because it is spoken by a priest, because it is so direct, and because it is an adulterous proposition, but the son's use of the word is more shocking because the young have been scandalized and because it will lead to some violent action. It is also highly ironic and perfectly appropriate that the son expose the priest with the very words with which the priest seduced the mother.⁵¹

This is, however, only one case of obscenity; each instance is used in a way that can be fully understood only by examining it in its proper context. Sometimes, for example, the climax does not entail the obscenities, which are submerged into another pattern. One type of deliberate submersion, as well as another type of dialogue, appears in those fabliaux in which young girls give metaphoric names to their sexual parts instead of allowing themselves to refer to them by their obscene names.⁵² In

51. There is another version of this story with the identical title in MR 4:147. The main points of my discussion would apply to both, but the version I have used is fuller, richer, and better motivated. For a discussion of these differences, see Rychner, *Contribution à l'étude des fabliaux*, 1:36-37. In *Le Prestre qui fu mis au lardier* (MR, 2:24), a young daughter reveals her mother's adulterous relationship with the priest to her father, but the revelation takes place at the very beginning of the story, and her words do not echo anyone's.

52. Three different contributors to *The Humor of the Fabliaux* discuss these tales all from different approaches and with significant conclusions. See Per Nykrog, "Courtliness and the Townspeople: The Fabliaux as a Courtly Burlesque," pp. 68-69; Percy, "Modes of Signification," pp. 188-92; and Cooke, "Pornography,

these tales the structure is frequently a metaphoric one. For example, in *La Pucele qui abevra le polain*, a young girl calls her pudendum a fountain (MR, 4:204). She has, indeed, metaphoric names for all the sexual and erotic parts of her body. A young student discovers this and approaches the girl, who, protected as she believes by a metaphor, allows the young man to lie in bed with her. But he has a plan. When he starts to caress her, he asks her to name the various parts of her body, and when he discovers her fountain, he is prepared. The comic climax takes place when he tells her about his thirsty horse, which would love to have a drink at her fountain. Assuming that a young man in the fabliaux will always try to seduce a young girl, once she gives a metaphoric name to her pudendum, it is almost inevitable that he will find a metaphoric name for his penis. Her metaphoric name prepares for his, which, because we do not know what it will be exactly, is attended with surprise.

Examination of other fabliaux would reveal a similar function appropriated to obscenities and euphemistic metaphors. On a higher level, the same thing is true of the moralizing and philosophizing of the characters. The purpose of that kind of dialogue depends on its meaning in relation to the context. The story of *Barat et Haimet* is about two thieving brothers who give their names to the title, and a fellow thief, Travers, who joins them for a while. In the early part of the story the two brothers have a contest to see who is the best thief, which Barat wins by stealing the pants right off his brother. Travers congratulates him with this wise pronouncement: "‘Bien est leres qui larron emble’" ("Skillful is the thief who can steal from a thief"), MR, 4:96. We can agree with the evaluation of that saying, both in its particular application in the tale and in its universal significance. At the same time, it looks forward to the second part of the story in which Travers, who reforms and returns to his home

the Comic Spirit, and the Fabliaux," pp. 158-59. See also Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, pp. 77-78.

and an honorable trade, is robbed of a pig by Barat and Haimet. But Travers learned something of their profession while he was with them, and the rest of the tale involves stealing and counter stealing, until the audience has difficulty knowing just who has the pig at a particular time. The adage that is used at the beginning of the story is illustrated by all that follows, and so it serves as the "moral" that evaluates the whole tale. It is also comic in itself, since there is an incongruity between the content and the form of the adage. In form it is moralistic, since its style is usually used for proverbial statements concerning goodness and wisdom. But its content expresses something that is patently immoral. The artistic function of this adage is, therefore, complex but perfectly apt.

Another example of the unique function of sententious dialogue bears mentioning. In *La Plantez* a rather churlish tavern keeper spills wine while pouring it into the cup of a Norman customer, contemptuously justifying his action by trying to make it seem proverbial: " 'Car a celui qui vin espant / Vient, ce dit l'an, gaaigne grant' " ("When someone spills wine, it is said that he will be rewarded amply"), MR, 3:171. In his anger the Norman goes over and pulls the spigot out of the tun of wine, and when the tavern keeper becomes irate, he defends his action by quoting the proverb right back at him:

"Ne sez tu que tu me deis
 D'un po de vin que m'espandis,
 Je gaaigneroie a planté?
 Or saches bien de verité
 Qu .c. doubles doiz gaaigner,
 Que en ton vin te puez baignier
 Qui par ce celier cort a ruit." (MR, 3:172)

("Don't you remember that you told me that if I spilled some wine I would be gaining much? Well, you should really get more than a hundredfold—you can even bathe in your wine; it's flowing in streams in your cellar.")

The tavern keeper uses the proverbial statement as a rationalization, but the Norman picks it up and uses it as a weapon with which he fights his surly host. Thus this bit of wisdom is more than mere dialogue; it is a functional element in the story, becoming the inspiration and motive for the important action. This importance is explicitly recognized by the author since he uses its key word as the title to the tale.

The quarrel between the tavern keeper and the Norman is resolved when they are brought before the king, who, hearing all the facts of the story, decides the tavern keeper did wrong. His judgment is expressed in the following proverb, which concludes the tale: “‘Qui a perdu, si ait perdu’ ” (“He who lost is thus a loser”), MR, 3:174. The king’s proverb, because it is perfectly fitting for the tale and because it concludes it, can be taken for the author’s final judgment on the conflict. The final proverb, in effect, resolves the battle of the proverb that rages within the story. Both the Norman and tavern keeper use the same weapon, but since the tavern keeper lost the greater amount, he loses the battle. Since a proverb formed the conflict within the tale, it is only fitting that a proverb resolve the struggle. The final proverb also captures the comic movement of the story and hence summarizes the tale’s structure. The structure also leads to the comic climax, which is, of course, the resolution of the fight—the king’s proverb. It was prepared for by the loss suffered by the tavern keeper, and its appropriateness still comes as a surprise.

A final example of dialogue will show both how it is an essential part of the comic climax and how dialogue can be cleverly transformed into a different media. It is *Dame Joenne*, a story I alluded to earlier.⁵³ The story has three parts. In the first, Lady Jean is scolded by her husband for being so contrary, and the two of them call each other names back and forth; in the second section, he forbids her to put her hand in a certain hole, so naturally

53. See above, pp. 43-44.

she does, and she cuts herself by doing so; and lastly she claims that a certain field has been clipped, he that it has been mowed, so he beats her until she can argue no more, but she struggles on by indicating with the motion of her fingers that the field has been clipped. In exasperation, her husband finally commends her to the devil. The first part of the story, which occupies some two hundred lines, is all talk and no action, Lady Jean's nagging, and her husband's cursing her for that fault. The second section is the wife's rebellious deed, which she does just because it is rebellious. The third section combines the first two very neatly. Her contrary nature has shown itself in speech and action, with mouth and hand. Her husband beats her so badly that she can no longer talk, but she can still communicate and does so with her fingers. Thus she continues to defy her husband by "talking back" to him and by avenging herself for the injury done to her fingers by using them to talk back. Thus dialogue here takes a new form when it cannot take the usual one. The wife's stubborn refusal to be quiet is prepared for not only by her stubbornness throughout but also by the specific nature it takes, the use of her tongue and of her fingers. The final incident is proof of the theme. To emphasize the significance of this relationship, the author gives to the husband a piece of wisdom that cleverly, although crudely, calls attention to it. When he finds that his wife has cut her hand by defying his warning, the husband lectures her on the folly of her ways, but now that she has cut herself it is too late to undo the deed. He summarizes that bit of wisdom with this proverb: "Tart est main a cul, pet est hors'" ("Too late is the hand in the butt when the fart's already gone"). The humor resulting from this crudeness is not as important as the intensifying effect it has on the role of the hand in the story.

I would like to conclude this chapter with a tale that combines all the elements I have been discussing. It is a good example of the fusion of character, setting, action, and dialogue, a fusion that takes place because of the ac-

tion that three different groups—knights, students, and peasants—see as most desirable in a particular setting. The story is *Les Chevaliers, les clers et les vilains*:

Two gaily dressed knights were riding along when they came to a clearing in the woods. It was very beautiful, surrounded by trees, the ground all covered with herbs and small flowers. One of them said:

“Dear God! How beautiful it would be to have a banquet right here, with barrels of wine, pastries, and all kinds of good things to eat. I’d rather eat here than at a table in some hall.”

With that, they rode on.

Two happy-go-lucky students came along, and when they saw the place, one said to the other:

“He’d have a beautiful time of it who had the girl he loved here.”

“He’d have,” said the other, “a weak spirit—and a mean one!—who couldn’t get what he wanted here.”

Then they went their way.

Two peasants came lumbering along, returning from market, all loaded down with their goods. One of them, Fouchier, saw the beautiful clearing and exclaimed:

“Wow! What a beautiful spot to take a shit!”

“You’re right,” said the other peasant, “let’s do it.”

And so the two peasants took their shit.

Moral: “Vilain est qui fait vilonie.”⁵⁴

Each set of characters puts a different value on the setting, a value that is expressed in terms of certain actions. This fusion, however, does not alone explain the comedy, which comes primarily from the clash of values between

54. The text of this tale is in E. Barbazan, ed., *Fabliaux et contes des poètes français des XII, XIII, XIV, et XVes siècles, tirés des meilleurs auteurs*, 1:45-47.

the individual groups. The first two groups in the tale treasure good food and sex, and the last, it must be admitted, treasures something less dignified. This is a clear example of the importance of values and norms in the fabliaux, since the conflict between the values in this tale is the source of the humor. The conflict is not just between the first two groups and the third; it is also between the nature of the setting and the value which the peasants place upon it. That conflict between setting and action is intensified by the one between the characters.⁵⁵

55. Using a beautiful setting in such a way is possibly an indication of the intent to parody the motif of the *locus amoenus*. Compare Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, pp. 195–200.



III. Preparation for the Climax: The Telling



If an author uses the dramatic method in “showing” his story by remaining in the background as much as possible and by allowing his characters to speak and act on their own, then when he steps to the foreground and comments on the characters and action he is to that extent “telling” the story. These two approaches are in no way mutually exclusive, and the distinction between them is sometimes arbitrary. They overlap and are found together in almost all literature. Indeed, since the author is responsible for all that goes into a story, he is being just as objective in commenting on the actions as he is in letting the characters perform those actions. Sometimes the two modes are distinguished by referring to the author as the source for the showing and the narrator as the source for the telling. Although the author is the source of all that goes into a story, still this is a meaningful distinction in some literature, especially modern writings, such as those novels of Henry James in which we know that the character through whose eyes we are seeing the story is not to be trusted. Clearly, a narrator is not always to be identified with his author. But this device was not a common medieval one, and in the Old French fabliaux I can find no instances of a meaningful contrast between the voice of the narrator and the author of the poem. None of the fabliaux have a first-person nar-

erator, a character in the story who is telling us what happened or what he saw some day in some place. Although first-person narrators or dramatized personae are extremely rare in medieval literature, they do exist, as in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* and in *The Canterbury Tales*, and there is no reason why the fabliaux could not have been told in similar fashion. There is only the omniscient author, who also becomes an omniscient narrator. For these stories are very clearly told. The author as narrator is noticeably in the foreground, introducing the story, commenting on it, and concluding it. The principal reason for this is the medium for which these stories were intended. All the evidence that we have indicates that these tales were written out beforehand (rather than composed orally), and either from memory or by reading were recited before an audience.¹ They were not primarily intended for a private reading audience. The opening of many fabliaux demonstrates that we are being told a story by someone, as, for example, the beginning of *La Borgoise d'Orliens*: "Or vous dirai d'une borgoise / Une aventure assez cortoise" (Now I shall tell you a very courtly tale about a bourgeois wife), MR, 1:117. These tales could have been recited by the author, but since they were written down, and many can be found in different versions and in several manuscripts, it seems conclusive that they would also have made up the repertoire of many jongleurs. Hence the telling has another dimension. They could be recited in a different manner by the same poet on different occasions as circumstances

1. On the method of presentation of the fabliaux see the following: Per Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, pp. 28-38; and Jean Rychner, *Contribution à l'étude des fabliaux*, vol. 1, *passim*. On the method of composition of these tales and the extent to which they use oral formulas see the following: Joseph Bédier, *Les Fabliaux*, pp. 127-30; Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, pp. xxii, 21-49, and in the Postscript, p. 2; Thomas D. Cooke, "Formulaic Diction and the Artistry of *Le Chevalier qui recouva l'amor de sa dame*," pp. 232-40; and Raymond Eichmann, "Oral Composition and the Fabliaux: A Study in Generic Evolution," and "Oral Composition: A Recapitulatory Review of its Values and Impacts."

changed (such as variations in audience response, the amount of wine consumed, or the amount of money expected), and they surely must have been told differently by all the individual jongleurs who recited them. We do know something of the art of the jongleurs in the Middle Ages, but we do not, as far as I have been able to discover, have any record of the performance of a single fabliau.² At the same time, the potential in these stories is for clever and witty dramatic readings. It is inconceivable that a jongleur would stand up in front of an audience and read these tales in a monotone or with an expressionless face. Entertainers do not survive that way. If it is true that medieval sermons were delivered in lively and dramatic fashion, we must surely allow the same—if not more—for these raucous tales.³ A good jongleur could have used myriad facial expressions, variations in the tone, volume, quality of his voice, and even have gestured and posed as much as he could. It is not even hard to imagine a jongleur almost acting out one of the fabliaux, first imitating the jealous husband's voice, then switching to the lecherous wife's, now the clever student's. In the previous chapter I discussed the dramatic possibilities that come from showing the story, such as the use of dialogue. In the actual recitation of a fabliau, that aspect of the tale would have become fused with the jongleur's telling, and we would have, in effect, a dramatic reading, though still not a full-fledged dramatic production.

Hence in this chapter I would like to elaborate on those aspects of the fabliaux that could be referred to as the telling of a story. Since there is no evidence for a performance of a fabliau, I can say with no certainty how a tale would have been recited. But it is quite fair to suggest possible dramatic readings, as long as the text gives some evidence for that reading. Indeed, it is fair to claim that just as we cannot fully appreciate drama unless we

2. Edmond Faral, *Les Jongleurs en France au moyen âge*.

3. G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*.

realize its theatrical possibilities, so we cannot fully appreciate the fabliaux unless we have some inkling of how they would actually be recited. To object that we do not know what the author intended or how he wanted it read is irrelevant. We do not know how many great dramatists, such as Shakespeare, wanted their plays performed. Even if we did have a record of how a fabliau was read, there would still be the possibility for other readings, as long as the story itself supported that reading.⁴ I must stress, however, that I am only suggesting, and in a relatively few cases at that, the possible ways in which a jongleur might have recited one of these tales.

The dramatic possibilities, after all, are only a few of the effects of telling a story. The conversational tone that someone uses when he is telling us a story has a certain effect; when we sense that he is talking directly to us that realization helps win us over to the author. Certainly it is a universal experience that we like being told stories, and to know that it is we that are being told. When an author begins by addressing us or by pausing in his story to point out something to us, we realize that he has us in mind, and that endears him to us.⁵ This has a further effect. Once he has won us over, we feel a deep satisfaction in seeing his values affirmed. When he announces that there once was a cruel and jealous husband, we rejoice with him when such a character is made a fool or a cuckold. This is elementary, granted, but only in that it is basic to storytelling. All entertainers have to win us over

4. In his essay "The Intentional Fallacy," W. K. Wimsatt discusses the absolute need for relying on the text of a literary work as the final authority for all interpretations. See his book, *The Verbal Icon*, pp. 3-18.

5. Nevill Coghill makes a similar observation about the effect of Chaucer's conversational style by means of comparison to two other major English authors: "Of all our poets, Geoffrey Chaucer is the most courteous to those who read or listen to him; he seems ever-conscious of our presence and charmed to be in such perceptive company. He never threatens or alarms us, as Milton can, intent upon his great theme; nor ignores us, as Wordsworth can, intent upon himself." See Nevill Coghill, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 20.

to their values, even if only temporarily, in order for us to appreciate their performance.

The conversational tone in these stories, which might be described as friendly, casual, and chatty, is an important contribution to the comic tone. That tone, which I equate here with mood, is established by a number of causes all working together. Although there are certain stock comic characters—the jealous husband, the nagging wife, the crude peasant, or the cowardly knight—and although there are fantastic and bizarre actions that are more typical of comedy than of tragedy, those characters and all actions can be found in non-comic works, so they are not the cause of the comic tone. Nor is it simply that in comedy things turn out well, because in the fabliaux they do not always do so. Ultimately the source of the comedy is the attitude of the poet toward his story. Since this matter is important, I shall be devoting a full chapter to it later, but at present I shall only say that it is possible for a poet to have a comic attitude toward any event whatsoever, even toward those things that do not turn out well, such as, for example, the death of the hunch-backed husband in *Les Trois Boçus*, whose untimely demise is the exact moment of comic climax, the moment at which we laugh. That attitude, moreover, is incarnated in many little things, especially the various modes of telling, which the poet puts into his work. It is easy to imagine a medieval audience sitting back and relaxing, ready to hear another good one when they hear a jongleur begin with these words:

Mos sans vilonnie
 Vous veil recorder,
 Afin qu'en s'en rie,
 D'un franc Savetier,
 Qui a non Baillait. . . (MR, 2:24)

Robert Harrison's translation captures the comic spirit and rhythm of those opening lines:

Without a hint of truckling,
I'll now unfold to you
a tale to set you chuckling
of an honest cobbler who
was called Baillet.⁶

A comic tale is comic, of course, because of all the elements that go into it and the unique way that the poet blends them, but by beginning with commentary such as above, he certainly has prepared his audience well. He will follow up with many little devices throughout the story, and it is to some of those that I would now like to turn. But again I shall be examining them for the ways in which they bring about not just the comedy but specifically for the ways they bring about the comic climax. There are any number of these devices, but I shall be considering only five: general commentary, tags or formulas, rhetoric, morals, and inside views. Throughout these I shall also suggest some ways in which a jongleur might render them dramatically.

Commentary

Interspersed throughout the fabliaux are occasional comments by the authors, made either as author or as narrator. Their effects are varied. To name but a few, they can establish values, be a form of transition from one scene to another, serve as a philosophical break in a long narration, or crystallize the feelings of author and audience toward some character. Modern literature has forsworn impassioned outbreaks in the midst of its stories, but we can still respond to the righteous indignation of the narrator who curses the lecherous monk in *Frere Denise* who lures a pious young girl into his monastery only to be able to seduce her: "Male mort le preigne et ocie" (May a vile Death take him and slay him), MR, 3:266. There are many lecherous clergy in the fabliaux, some of whom are sympathetically portrayed, but this one is despicable, so the author, the well-known poet

6. Robert Harrison, *Gallic Salt*, p. 291.

Rutebeuf, is more than justified in this outburst, which a jongleur could deliver with great vehemence and anger. When the monk's hypocrisy is finally discovered and the girl rescued, our delight in her freedom and his downfall has been anticipated by the anger that the narrator's outburst expresses.

About a third of the way through *La Borgoise d'Orliens* the narrator makes this observation about the faithlessness of wives: "Fame a trestout passé Argu; / Par lor engin sont decéu / Li sage dès le tens Abel" (Women have even surpassed Argus. By their wiles they have deceived wise men since the time of Abel), MR, 1:120. This passage comes after some eighty lines of straight narrative, and so it serves as a philosophical break at this point. Further, it places the action of the wife in a larger context, one that is both classical and biblical at the same time. Without excusing her actions, the allusion makes it more understandable: if infidelity has been going on that long and in Judeo-Christian as well as pagan cultures, then it seems unavoidable. By making this historical allusion, however, the narrator seemingly steps outside the tale and condemns all women. But I do not think the effect of the condemnation is that sweeping in this instance. It would depend to a great extent on how the lines were recited. If they were done with bitterness and scorn, then the world of this fabliau would indeed be extended. But if they were done laughingly and lightly, then this comment would seem rather to point inwards toward the tale itself. Because the deceitful wife in this story is successful in her affairs, so much so that even her duped husband is satisfied at the end, I believe the lines would more likely have been delivered in a light manner in order to preserve, and even to further, the comic tone that is necessary for an audience to laugh at her cleverness.

A few lines later in *La Borgoise d'Orliens* there is a shift in the action. The husband, who has suspected that

his wife has a secret lover, tells her that he must go away for a while on a trip, but shortly after leaving he returns disguised, hoping that his wife will think he is the lover and thus he can trap her. But she realizes who he is and pretending to be fooled, she escorts him to a room in the house and tells him to wait there until she has a chance to return and be alone with him. The husband is sure that he has tricked her, but the narrator comments on his smug confidence with the following observation: "Li asniers une chose pensee, / Et li asnes pense tout el" (The ass driver has one plan, but the ass has a completely different one), MR, 1:120. Both this observation and the Argus-Abel one are concrete references, serving as figurative language, which is quite rare in the fabliaux. The image of the ass driver and the ass is also an effective transitional link between two episodes within the tale, the husband's churlishness in believing he is fooling his wife and her willful and clever rebellion. But the image of the ass driver and ass has another effect; even if an audience were inclined to accept as serious the Argus-Abel image, it would be difficult to do so after hearing this comment in which husband and wife are compared to ass driver and ass. Thus the comic attitude is firmly anchored to this concrete image.

Other commentary can be as vivid and concrete as the examples cited above, such as the homely "Car pire est . . . / I tel maus que n'est mal des denz" (For such an evil is worse than the toothache), MR, 5:47, but usually they are more abstract, such as "Fols est qui chace la folie" (A fool is one who seeks folly), MR, 2:104. There is a rather interesting mixture of the abstract and concrete in the following commentary on the qualities of greed and envy:

Que covoitise si est tieus,
Qu'ele fait maint home honteus:
Covoitise preste à usures
Et fait recouper les mesures

Por covoitier d'avoir plus aise.
 Envie si est plus malvaise,
 Qu'ele va tot le mont coitant. (MR, 5:212)

(For covetousness is such that it makes many men contemptible; it urges them to usury, and encourages them to tip the scales unfairly, all just to have more ease. But envy is far worse, for it goes through the world like the plague.)

Taken out of context, this passage would be appropriate material for a philosophical discussion of the two vices mentioned. But its context is *Le Couvoiteus et l'Envieus*, and in this tale, the universal statements are also particular descriptions of characters. The philosophical commentary in this tale is at the same time a description of the characters, and the concrete imagery is an attempt to give some flesh and bones to the abstract figures. Its complex nature as commentary, philosophy, and description is also a good example of the difficulty in separating the various strands in the fabliaux.

Tags and Formulas

Some brief commentary by the narrator seems to be a mere filler, such as the frequent *ce m'est avis* ("me-thinks") or *sanz demore, sanz deslaier* ("without delay"), which occur usually at the end of the line in order to fill a space or complete a rhyme. Occasionally, however, they are used effectively, even brilliantly. One tale *Le Chevalier qui recovra l'amor de sa dame* uses the phrase *sanz deslaier* and its exact synonyms (*sanz arestee, sanz plus atandre, sanz tardier, sanz demoree, and sanz demorance*) so frequently that they must be there for a special reason.⁷ But before I discuss those phrases and their effect on the tale, I would like to give a brief summary of the story:

7. Elsewhere I have discussed this tale and the problem of whether these phrases are true formulas or not. See Cooke, "Formulaic Diction and the Artistry of *Le Chevalier*," pp. 232-40.

There was once a knight who was trying desperately to win the love of a lady, one who was married to another knight. She demanded to know what right he had to ask for her love, since he had never proved himself in battle for her. He therefore asked her for permission to organize a tournament, which she granted. He is victorious, even defeating the husband in single combat. When the tournament is over, which comes about abruptly due to the accidental death of another knight, the lady sends word to her lover for him to come to her that night when she will become his beloved. He arrives, but while waiting for her falls asleep. When she comes to him and finds him asleep she is furious, tells the serving girl to go awaken and dismiss the knight, and then returns to her husband's bed. But instead of leaving when he is awakened, the knight goes to the couple's bedchamber and tells the startled pair that he is the ghost of the knight who was killed in the tournament that day and that his soul will never be at rest until the lady forgives him for the one wrong that he did her in his lifetime. At first the lady refuses, but urged on by her husband, she finally forgives her lover. Thus did the knight recover the love of his lady.⁸

That summary gives the main action of the story, and as such the plot is rather simple and plain. I have, however, presented it drained of the words that give it life, the expression *sanz delaiier* and its synonyms. Although they are very common in the *fabliaux*, the number of times they are used in *Le Chevalier* is unusual: nine times (ll. 1, 35, 39, 48, 60, 96, 135, 187, and 243). I have found only

8. The text I have used for this tale is found in R. C. Johnston and D. D. R. Owen, eds., *Fabliaux*, pp. 78-84. It is also in MR, 6:138 with identical lineation.

three other fabliaux in which these phrases are used as frequently, but those tales are all around 1,000 lines long, whereas *Le Chevalier* is only 254 lines long.⁹

But those phrases are actually only the beginning. Besides the frequent expression of that one formula, many other phrases also express the idea of speed, haste, and impatience. All in all, I have counted 34 lines with such expressions, which means that a startling one-seventh of the total number of lines includes that idea. The effect is predictable. With those phrases the tale takes on a new vitality. It is easy to imagine the breathless haste with which a skillful jongleur could recite *Le Chevalier* with those expressions. He opens with the phrase: "Sanz plus longuemant deslaier" (Without any more delay), and 11 lines later adds: "Je ne voil pas lonc conte faire" (I don't want to make a long story out of it), an idea he expresses again in line 84. When she grants her lover permission to hold the tournament, the lady does so "sanz nul deslaier" (l. 35). He goes out, "De maintenant, sanz plus atandre" (l. 39) and calls together all the knights who are "molt entalante" (very eager) (l. 46) for the fighting. The tournament moves quickly, in part because the horses are very "coranz" (swift) (l. 58). The lover and the husband meet in single combat and fly at each other "sanz delaier" (l. 60). When their lances break, the lover continues to charge the husband "par tens" (quickly) (l. 72) rushing him, as the poet notes in an appropriate simile: "Plus tost quo foille qui depart /

9. The other three with the lines in which those non-hesitation formulas occur are: *Le Prestre et le chevalier* (MR, 2:46), lines 545, 547, 775 (twice), 823, 1052, 1056 (twice), 1078, 1118, 1175, 1249, and 1360; *Le Prestre qu'on porte* (MR, 4:1), lines 36, 71, 370, 607, 654, 800, 844, and 978; and *Le Vair Palefroi* (MR, 1:255), lines 496, 698, 735, 835, 906, 915, 1046, and 1245. There are possibly more, such as the phrase *sanz plus*, which could have either a temporal or quantitative meaning in certain contexts (compare *Le Vair Palefroi*, line 1189). My figures are based on a computerized concordance to the MR collection of fabliaux that Prof. Benjamin L. Honeycutt of the French department at the University of Missouri-Columbia has prepared.

D'arc" (Quicker than an arrow leaves the bow) (ll. 74–75). After the lover has been victorious and the tournament is over, the lady sends a message to her lover, "sanz plus atandre" (l. 96), telling him to come that evening to be welcomed as her lover. While waiting for evening to approach, "molt le fu tart" (he was very eager) (l. 106) to go to the lady, and when he does go, he has to wait a long time before she comes, which to him is, of course, "ennoie" (irksome) (l. 122). When she is able, the lady rushes to him "tot maintenant" (straightaway) (l. 130). But when she discovers that her knight is asleep, "maintenant s'an ve ariere" (she went back immediately) (l. 133) and tells her serving girl to go " 'tost . . . sans tardier' " (l. 135) and tell the knight to leave the castle " 'vistemant' " ("this instant") (l. 137). When the knight is awakened by the girl he jumps up "maintenant" (l. 157) telling the girl, whom he drowsily believes to be his beloved, that " 'Molt avez fait grant demoree' " ("You have been awfully long in coming") (l. 159). Although the girl tells him to leave, the knight, in desperation, convinces her to let him go to the lord and lady's chamber, so that "Sanz faire nule demorance, / Tantost en la chambre se lance" (Without any more delay, he immediately rushed into their chamber) (ll. 187–88). The poet emphasizes the knight's impetuous speed with a slightly grotesque litotes: "Il n'ot pas es jarrez lo chancre" (There was no defect in his legs [l. 189]).¹⁰ He goes "tot droit" (straightaway) (l. 193) to the bed and stands in front of it with his sword unsheathed. The husband is startled out of his sleep by the reflection of the sword and asks the knight who he is. "Li chevaliers tantost parla / Qui n'ot cure de l'atargier" (The knight spoke up at once, for he had no desire to linger) (ll. 200–201). The lover tells him of his need for the wife's forgiveness, and in a brief three

10. Compare Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (577. 25–26): "One of the maidens ran off so fast that it was clear that she had no limp." Helen M. Mustard and Charles E. Passage translation, p. 306.

lines the husband, who is no doubt frightened by the presence of a ghost with a sword in his hand, begs his wife to pardon the knight. But the lady, knowing full well that it is her lover, refuses. The nervous husband can say and do little but insist that his wife pardon the knight. She finally consents, and the lover goes away, *sans arestee* (l. 243), naturally.¹¹

The result of the presence of those expressions is radical. They are certainly more than mere rhetorical injections, prescribed in order to give an otherwise listless tale a bit of pep. Rather, they are, not only in their numbers but also in their forcefulness, part of the essential spirit of the story. They make it a surging, bustling tale that races breathlessly from one scene to the next. That this tone is not a mere additive is evident from its organic connection with the main characters. Their anxiousness with its resulting haste is the natural result of their feelings: the passion of the knight for the lady, her love for him that turns abruptly into anger when she is disappointed, and the fears of the husband all cause them to speak and act hurriedly. Characterization motivates the pacing of the story, as, conversely, the pacing reflects the psychological state of the main characters.

This speed contributes to the development of the comic climax. The first part of the poem is all channeled toward the lover's desires for a night of love with the lady. We can easily imagine the ecstatic force such a tryst would have after all that dizzying speed were the lovers to meet and embrace and love in a courtly romance. But the fabliaux have a different goal than the romances. In this story, after all the racing about, haste, and eagerness all of which is only for a chance to love the lady, when she finally does come, what does she find but that her knight, exhausted because of all the physical and emotional turmoil, is sound asleep! Thus the pacing of the story changes, moving from the frenzied pace of the fighting

11. Other lines that contain similar expressions that were not included in this retelling are 45, 48, 59, 123, 129, 152, and 154.

and preparation for the tryst to a gradual slowing down, a softly spoken, almost hushed pace when the knight is asleep.¹²

That somnolent pace is rudely jarred as soon as the lady comes in and discovers the knight, propelling the tale toward its second climax.¹³ The second one is similar to the first, only this time it is not only the lover who is anxious, but also the husband, confronted as he is by an armed ghost. There are other significant parallels between the two sections. Because he is asleep in the first part, the knight delays the romance; because she is angry in the second part, the lady refuses the romance. The knight is asleep in the first section, husband and wife in the second. He awakens and thinks the servant girl is his mistress; the lord awakens and thinks he is a ghost. But the most pervasive and effective means by which the two parts are combined are the expressions of speed and anxiety in both sections that perfectly capture the feelings of the characters and perfectly prepare for the comic climaxes.

I am not suggesting that all fabliaux use tags and formulas with such artistry; most of the time it seems that they are mere fillers. Nevertheless, I suspect that many other tales besides *Le Chevalier* would, upon examination, reveal a purpose that has as yet not been realized.¹⁴

12. In their notes to this tale, Johnston and Owen, *Fabliaux*, p. 111, point out that a lover who falls asleep at a crucial moment is a common motif in medieval literature and folklore. In spite of its frequency, it is here handled in a humorous way as part of the comic climax, the comic point of the tale. It is also possible that as a frequent motif, it is the object of a bit of parody.

13. Many fabliaux have two or more comic climaxes, for example, *Le Chevalier qui fist parler les cons* (MR, 6:68), *Le Jugement des cons* (MR, 5:109), and, in English, Chaucer's "Miller's Tale."

14. Another purpose of the formulas in *Le Chevalier* is parody. I discuss this in my article, "Formulaic Diction and the Artistry of *Le Chevalier*," pp. 238-40. For discussion of another comic formula see Benjamin L. Honeycutt, "An Example of Comic Cliché in the Old French Fabliaux," pp. 245-55.

Rhetoric

One of the more respectable ways of telling a story in the Middle Ages was to embellish it with rhetoric. The sensitive use of the innumerable rhetorical devices that were at the disposal of medieval writers certainly could add grace and fluidity to their style. All too often, however, the embellishments become too conscious, precious, and ultimately an end in themselves. But with the best writers, rhetoric could be so much a part of their style that it is even debatable that they were formally trained in the rhetorical tradition.¹⁵ Not only is rhetoric integrated into their art, it is used with purpose. In some types of medieval literature, the grace and charm that seem to be an inherent quality of rhetorical devices are naturally appropriate, such as the romances and lays. If for no other reason, rhetoric shows a kind of control and polish, at least verbal, which fits in with the dignity and refined life usually depicted in the more courtly genres. They are not found as often in comic writings as they are in serious ones, which has nothing to do with the skill of the authors of comic poetry, who often were poets of great talents, but rather with the needs of comic writings. The Latin poem, *Comoedia Lydiae*, teems with rhetoric, being one of the products of the study of rhetoric in various medieval schools.¹⁶ It is an analogue to several fabliaux, a variant of the pear tree story in which a duke (Decius) is deceived by his wife (Lydia) and a friend (Pyrrhus) with the aid of a servant (Lusca) as the duke watches them from a pear tree. Here is the passage when

15. James J. Murphy, "A New Look at Chaucer and the Rhetoricians," pp. 1-20. Murphy challenges the long-accepted theory that Chaucer was well acquainted with the rhetoricians, even though his tales abound in rhetorical devices. Murphy does not take up this issue again in his recent full-length study *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages*. Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, pp. 140-42, states that there is no deliberate use of rhetoric in the fabliaux.

16. The text for *Comoedia Lydiae* that I have used is in Larry D. Benson and Theodore M. Andersson, eds., *The Literary Context of Chaucer's Fabliaux*, pp. 206-33.

Decius tells Pyrrhus to climb up into the tree to gather fruit:

Dux ait: "Ascende, collige, Pirre, pira."
 Pirrus ad alta piri surrepit. Lusca profatur:
 "Iam meliore piro succute, Pirre, pira."
 Inque piro Pirrum succernens Lidia lustrat:
 Arboris in fructu fructus amoris erat. (ll. 508–12)

Benson and Andersson translate the passage as follows:

The Duke said: "Climb, Pyrrhus, and gather pears."
 Pyrrhus climbs high in the tree and Lusca speaks:
 "Shake pears from the better pear tree, Pyrrhus."
 Lydia, looking up, sees Pyrrhus in a pear tree:
 In the fruit of the tree was the fruit of love.

This passage, which is quite typical, abounds with rhetorical devices, such as *exclamatio*, metaphor, chiasmus, *cacemphaton*, *parachesis*, alliteration, but especially the pun (*antanaclasis*) on *Pirrus* (Pyrrhus) and *pirus* and *pirum* (pear and pear tree), which runs throughout the whole tale. Certainly that pun adds to the humor of the story, though it is possible that one could tire of it after awhile. But what about such a line as, say, "Arboris in fructu fructus amoris erat"? Although it is obviously a well-constructed line with balanced and interlocking alliteration, still this tightness and control—even if we are not conscious of them but only feel them in the reading of the verse—add nothing to the humor of the story. Because of what it is describing—the growth of Lydia's passion for Pyrrhus—it would be quite appropriate in a romance, but it also would belong there because of its balance, control, and elegance. Those same stylistic qualities, which pervade *Comoedia Lydiae*, do not add to the comic movement or tone of the story. Read separately, such passages even tempt one to take them as parodies, but when taken as a whole, their relentless presence rules out the chance for parody.

Consequently, the reason that the fabliaux are told

“without literary graces” is an artistic one.¹⁷ There is little rhetoric in these tales, but when it is used, it fits into the style and purpose of the tale. One purpose is, as I suggested above, parody. A famous passage from Chrétien de Troyes’s *Cligés* is the source of a bit of burlesque in the fabliau *Connebert*. The lines from *Cligés* express Fenice’s unwillingness to divide her feelings from her body: “‘Qui a le cuer, cil a le cors’ ” (“Whoever has the heart, also has the body”); and later: “‘Vostre est mes cuers, vostre est mes cors’ ” (“Yours is my heart, yours is my body”).¹⁸ Here the balance of the phrases—each section having the same grammatical construction, the same number of syllables, and oblique rhymes—which reveal the use of such rhetorical figures as *anaphora*, *isocolon*, and *paramoiosis*—capture both in their rational balance and also in the very feeling of their symmetry, the firm, clear, and controlled thinking of Fenice. In *Connebert*, on the other hand, the wife speaks these words to the priest: “‘Vostre est mes cuers, vostre est mes cors / Et par dedanz et par defors; / Mais le cus si est mon mari’ ” (“Yours is my heart, yours is my body, / Both within and also without; / But my rear end is my husband’s”), MR, 5:166. The passage from *Connebert* is not only, as Nykrog points out, a parody of the courtly *Cligés*, it also demonstrates how rhetoric is frequently used in comic tales. The clash between the formalism, dignity, and balance of “‘Vostre est mes cuers, vostre est mes cors’ ” and the blunt, prosaic, and crude “‘Mais le cus si est mon mari’ ” is, regardless of its intent to parody (the author of *Connebert* could have created all three lines himself), a classic instance of comic deflation. Rhetoric in the fabliaux is frequently the fall guy in comedy; he is set up only to be knocked down. Of course, there

17. T. B. W. Reid, ed., *Twelve Fabliaux*, p. xii.

18. Nykrog discusses the parodic relationship of these lines in *Cligés* and *Connebert*. See his article, “Courtliness and the Townspeople: The Fabliaux as a Courtly Burlesque,” p. 66.

is no better way to set rhetoric up than by introducing a well-known passage from a famous story, especially when the audience is a listening one rather than a reading one; the more famous, the more easily it can be parodied. Many of the examples of parody that Nykrog gives are such rhetorical passages, and so their comic purpose has the profile of Janus: in parodying courtly genres they look outward, but in being a necessary part of the deflation, they look inward.

Occasionally one reads a line or two that stands out by its elegance. In *Le Lai d'Aristote*, the philosopher Aristotle, having lectured his pupil King Alexander on the dangers of women, passionately desires Alexander's mistress and goes through a long agonizing debate about the contradiction of his predicament, in the midst of which he says: " 'S'ai en aprenant desapris, / Desapris ai en aprenant' " ("After growing up, I become immature, unlearning all I have learned"), MR, 5:254. It would be quite possible to argue that in this courtly tale—so courtly that some scholars believe it almost to escape the bounds of the fabliaux world¹⁹—such a passage with its fine chiasmus and anadiplosis uttered by the learned philosopher could be taken seriously. In giving the lines to this particular character, one of the few in the whole corpus of the fabliaux from whom we would expect such utterances, the poet could certainly be trying to make them be taken seriously. But this does not seem to be the case. The whole tone of Aristotle's soliloquy is frantic and overblown. Coming as it does in the story after he has lectured his pupil on the wiles of women, Aristotle's words make him appear foolish, no matter how he might frame them in a neat chiasmus. Indeed, throughout the tale there is some playful use of rhetoric. The story begins with a 35-line attack by the narrator on the dangers and evils of envy. The seminal idea of that harangue is in these lines:

19. See above, p. 42, note 25.

Quar envie est de tel afere
 Qu'ele maint tout adès el cuer
 De ceus qui sont mis à tel fuer
 Qu'il n'oent de nului bien dire
 Qu'il ne le vueillent contredire. (MR, 5:243)

(For envy is of such a nature that it lives
 always in the heart of those who are reduced
 to such a state that they can't hear good
 spoken without wishing to contradict it.)

After the 35 lines, the author admits that he has been digressing: "Or, revendrai à mon tretié / D'une aventure qu'emprise ai" (Now I shall return at leisure to the task I have undertaken), MR, 5:244. But again he slips into another digression in which he states that he won't tell any ribald tales here. Finally, after fifty-nine lines of lecturing the audience, he begins the tale proper (*a reditus ad propositum*), telling us how Alexander was bounteous, unlike some niggardly princes, but then again the narrator digresses, only to catch himself finally at line 84: "Repairier vuleil a mon affaire" (Now I wish to return to my story).

In this story Alexander's men murmur behind his back when he neglects them to be with his love, the subject of Aristotle's lectures to the king. The opening digression on envy certainly applies to Alexander's men, who are not getting the feasts that they are used to (ll. 162–63) and are perhaps jealous of Alexander's contentment. But the self-conscious *digressiones*, with their sententious form, and the long-winded narrator they reveal, prepare for Aristotle's lectures to Alexander and his soliloquies with their rhetorical flourishes. Because Alexander's mistress makes a fool of Aristotle by gulling him to allowing her to ride horseback on his ancient back, we have a different perspective on his lectures to Alexander. His words to Alexander are not invalid, as his own stooping folly proves with a vengeance, but the comic point is that one must beware the kind of sententiousness that,

becoming an end in itself, does not allow the speaker to realize its full import, especially to himself. We are prepared for that interpretation by the digressive, rambling narrator, whose words are also true, but who gets carried away unduly by them.

One final example of the way that the fableors used rhetoric: Many of the portraits in medieval literature come under the heading of the rhetorical device of *descriptio*. A completely formal portrait that followed the rules exactly would be rigid and mechanical, describing each part of the body, beginning with the hair, then the forehead, eyes, nose, and on down. Medieval portraits, however, are almost never that stilted. Usually just a few more telling external features are described (*effictio*), and perhaps some indication of interior qualities (*notatio*). Frequently an author will even claim to find it impossible to describe the beauty or good qualities of someone (a combination of the rhetorical devices of *diminutio* and *praeteritio*) and that he must therefore go on with his story. Here is one such portrait, that of the heroine Fenice in Chrétien de Troyes's *Cligés*.

Ce fu miracles et mervoille
 C'onques a sa paroille ovrer
 Ne pot Nature recouvrer.
 Por ce que g'en diroie mains,
 Ne braz, ne cors, ne chief, ne mains
 Ne vuel par parole descrivre,
 Car se mil anz avoie a vivre
 Et chascun jor doblast mes sans,
 Si perdroie gie mon porpans,
 Einçois que le voir an deïsse.
 Bien sai, se m'an antremeïsse
 Et tot mon sain i anpleasse,
 Que tote ma poinne i gastasse,
 Et ce seroit poinne gastee.²⁰

20. Chrétien de Troyes, *Les Romans de Chrétien de Troyes, II: Cligés*, ll. 2692–2705.

W. W. Comfort's translation is as follows:

She was such a miracle and marvel that Nature was never able to make her like again. In order to be more brief, I will not describe in words her arms, her body, her head and hands; for if I should live a thousand years, and if my skill were to double every day, yet should I waste all my time in trying to tell the truth about her. I know very well, if I should undertake it, that I would exhaust my brain and waste my pains; it would be but misspent energy.²¹

The effect of that portrait is to make us admire Fenice, to feel for her the romantic attraction that Cligés feels. It justifies their love. Here is a similar description from a fabliau, *Les Trois Boçus*. The poet is giving us a portrait of a certain man's daughter:

Il avoit une bele fille,
 Si bele que c'ert uns delis,
 Et, se le voir vous en devis,
 Je ne cuit qu'ainz féist Nature
 Nule plus bele créature.
 De sa biauté n'ai or que fère
 A raconter ne à retrère,
 Quar, se je mesler m'en voloie
 Assez tost mesprendre i porroie;
 Si m'en vient miex tère orendroit
 Que dire chose qui n'i soit. (MR, 1:13-14)

(He had a beautiful daughter, so beautiful that she was a sheer delight. And if I can tell you the truth, I don't think nature ever made a more beautiful creature. But I can't just now do justice in relating her beauty, and if I wished to get involved in that, I would very soon go wrong. So it is better that I remain quiet rather than saying something that isn't exactly so.)

21. Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, p. 126.

Descriptio, *diminutio*, and *praeteritio* are used in both *Cligés* and *Les Trois Boçus*, but the effect is very different in both. Although the daughter's beauty in *Les Trois Boçus* rivals Fenice's she is not a romantic heroine, not only because she will be married to a hunchback but also because the story does not develop her romantic possibilities. We might wonder, then, just what purpose the portrait serves in this tale. One purpose is clear: because of her beauty she is a very desirable object, and for that reason is married to the rich hunchback. The two make an unlikely couple, for right after giving us the portrait of the beautiful girl the poet gives us one of the hunchback. Even though it is a grotesque reflection of her description, it employs many of the same rhetorical devices. It is worth repeating in full:

En la vile avoit .I. boçu,
 Onques ne vi si malostru;
 De teste estoit moult bien garnis
 Je cuit bien que Nature ot mis
 Grant entencion à lui fère.
 A toute riens estoit contrère;
 Trop estoit de laide faiture;
 Grant teste avoit et laide hure,
 Cort col, et les espaules léés,
 Et les avoit haut encroées.
 De folie se peneroit
 Qui tout raconter vous voudroit
 Sa façon; trop par estoit lais. (MR, 1:14)

(In that town was also a hunchback, the most misshapen one I have ever seen. His head was an incredible adornment—I know well that nature exercised great skill in fashioning it! He was completely unlike anything else; his form was the most hideous. His huge head carried a grotesque shock of hair, he had a short neck, broad shoulders, and they were all hunched up. Anyone who tried to describe him completely would be quite foolish; he was just too ugly.)

The hunchback's ugliness seems even more so in contrast with the beautiful girl who will become his wife. That beauty is also the source of his jealousy, which in the story is one of the indirect causes of the death of the three hunchbacked minstrels. Some of the rhetorical devices the poet uses in the description, especially the somewhat ironic use of *diminutio* (in the last three lines of the above quote), have the effect of withdrawing him somewhat from the tale and establishing comic distance. This fabliau is unusual in that the poet frequently intrudes upon the story to make such personal comments all of which help to maintain a comic attitude on a tale in which three men accidentally suffocate and one is murdered.²² The beauty of the wife as opposed to the ugliness of her husband also makes the ending easy to accept; something, we feel, has to save her from such a miserable match. All in all, therefore, the rhetorical devices are an integral part of this tale. The portrait of the girl here can be taken at face value and does not need another focus, such as parody or irony, to be appreciated, but it still serves the overall comic purpose of the tale.

Rhetoric can serve many other purposes in the fabliaux, such as irony. This is especially true of other formal portraits, but this subject has been dealt with at length elsewhere, and hence I need not repeat it here.²³ I hope the few examples of rhetoric that I have given here indicate some of the ways those devices can be used in the fabliaux. As suggested, the tendency seems to be not to use rhetoric seriously, but I have not examined all the tales rigorously. So far I have not found any cases where it did not serve the comic intent of the tale.

Morals

One of the most common practices in medieval literature is the use of morals, which are frequently expressed

22. See for example lines 7, 42, 44, 46, and 117.

23. See Benjamin L. Honeycutt, "The Knight and His World

in rhetorical forms, such as *sententiae*, proverbs, and exempla. They are an easy way for an author to comment on his story. In the fabliaux, they seem to be very much a part of the "telling" of the story, even gratuitous at times, whereas in some genres, such as the fable, they are integral and even necessary. In fact, in the fabliaux they are so unconnected to the body of the story that they seem pointless. Scholars have not regarded them highly, and Nykrog expresses the consensus when he says that most of them are "insipides."²⁴ He does, however, try to explain their presence, which he finds to be an indication either of the education in rhetoric that the authors undoubtedly had or of their descent from the fables or exempla, which are the ancestors of the fabliaux or finally, he says "un simple lieu commun, une habitude littéraire courante dans toute la littérature de l'époque."²⁵ Although a modern reader should try to recapture the medieval appreciation for philosophizing and moralizing in order to appreciate these morals, he still can agree with Nykrog's opinion that frequently the moralizing in the fabliaux, especially when it ends a tale, is pointless. As serious morals, they are failures. But there is another possibility, and that is to consider them as comic morals, not only the ones that are humorous in themselves but also the ones that do seem insipid and silly. Many of them have a comic dimension that justifies their existence.

Although most of the morals come at the end of the story, there are a few at the beginning. Whatever commentary there is at the beginning of these tales can often be attributed to the jongleur's attempt to win the attention of his audience. The versatile author of *Frere Denise*, Rutebeuf, is perhaps giving the audience a chance to set-

as Instruments of Humor in the Fabliaux," in *The Humor of the Fabliaux*, pp. 75-92.

24. Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 102.

25. Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 103. See also pp. 101-2, 248-52.

tle down as the first line is read: "Li abis ne fait pas l'ermite" (The habit doesn't make the hermit), MR, 3: 123.²⁶ It does more than that, however, since its precise application in this story keeps it from being hackneyed. Since this is a story about a monk who tricks a young and pious girl to enter his order only so that he may the more conveniently seduce her, the proverb has a double application that it normally does not carry; in spite of their habits, neither she, for physical reasons, nor he, for spiritual ones, is a true monk. Because of this double meaning, the proverb has new life. There is even a later allusion to it, when the wife who discovers the lecherous and hypocritical monk's deceit tells him: "'Teil gent font bien le siecle pestre, / Qui par defors cemblent boen estre, / Et par dedens sont tuit porri'" ("Such people as you mislead the age; on the outside you appear to be good, but on the inside you are all corrupt"), MR, 3:271. In this case the proverb embodies not only wisdom but also the essence of the tale.²⁷

But it is at the end of the fabliaux that most of the morals appear. Nykrog estimates that two out of three fabliaux end with a moral. Along with most critics, he disparages their artistic value.²⁸ Before I consider pos-

26. This was a common proverb in the Middle Ages. See J. Morawski, ed., *Proverbes français antérieurs au XVe siècle*, no. 1053: "Li abis ne fait pas le relegieus." Because editorial usage varies in the matter of italicizing proverbs, for the sake of uniformity I quote them throughout with no emphasis.

27. For another discussion of the beginnings and endings of the fabliaux see Clem C. Williams, Jr., "The Genre and Art of the Old French Fabliaux: A Preface to the Study of Chaucer's Tales of the Fabliau Type," pp. 52-68. My examination of the fabliaux leads me to disagree with Williams, as when he says that the sententiousness at the beginnings "rarely contains an observation specifically relevant to the particular story being introduced," p. 60. The only exceptions that he allows he excuses as actually being *dits* rather than fabliaux.

28. Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 102; Williams, "The Genre and Art of the Old French Fabliaux," p. 67; and Reid, ed., *Twelve Fabliaux*, p. x.

sible justifications for those morals, I would like to suggest briefly another approach. Lurking behind the modern disparagement of those endings is possibly a modern distaste for all didactic conclusions in medieval literature. The tradition for such endings, however, extends far beyond the boundaries of the Middle Ages. Many of Shakespeare's plays conclude with moving and enjoyable epilogues, not only the early plays but also the late ones, such as *The Tempest*, whose moral epilogue not only sums up the theme of charity and forgiveness that is thematic in the play but also can be considered as the poet's version of the Christian prayer. It is clearly demonstrable that modern audiences respond favorably to that epilogue and are touched by it. But even current literature offers examples of concluding morals, some of which evoke rather complex reactions. At the end of Robert Bolt's play, *A Man For All Seasons*, the character known as the "Common Man" addresses the audience with these words just after the execution of the hero, Thomas More:

"I'm breathing. . . . Are you breathing too . . . ? It's nice, isn't it? It isn't difficult to keep alive, friends—just don't *make* trouble—or if you must make trouble, make the sort of trouble that's expected. Well, I don't need to tell you that. Good night. If we should bump into one another, recognize me."²⁹

This surely is a highly ironic moral with which to end the play; although we laugh at the realistic attitude of the Common Man, we realize at the same time that his kind will never fathom the heroic idealism of a Thomas More. Its comedy makes it delightful; its irony makes it telling.³⁰ In a lighter vein and one much closer to the spirit

29. Robert Bolt, *A Man For All Seasons*, pp. 162–63.

30. Some members of the audience undoubtedly would fail to see the irony in these lines. If I may be allowed to relate what hap-

of the fabliaux, James Thurber uses homemade proverbs at the end of some of his stories to great effect. In his delightful tale, "The Unicorn in the Garden," a henpecked husband sees a unicorn in his garden, but when he tells his shrewish wife about it, she says he is crazy, the unicorn is a mythical animal, and calls him a "booby." She also phones the police and a psychiatrist to come and examine her husband. But when they arrive, the unicorn has gone away and so the husband answers their questions by saying that he never could have seen one, since unicorns, as everyone knows, are mythical animals. So the police and the psychiatrist then take the wife away. Thurber concludes his tale with the following moral: "Don't count your boobies until they are hatched."³¹ The mixture of a well-worn proverb with a slang name for a mental hospital is the perfect moral for the tale (so perfect that one can reasonably suspect that the author thought of that moral first and then made up a tale to go with it). These two illustrations, I would argue, suggest that the appreciation for serious and comic morals is really still quite possible.³²

Admittedly some fabliaux end with moralizing that is quite serious and that can be taken literally. Here is the conclusion to *Le Lai d'Aristote*: "Henris cest' aven-

pened when I saw the play on Broadway in 1960, I overheard an intelligent-looking man in front of me make this comment to his friends as they were leaving the theater: "Well, More was a great man all right, but what an impossible idealist!" *Verba sapientibus non semper satis.*

31. James Thurber, *The Thurber Carnival*, pp. 268-69.

32. Indeed it is possible to argue that we have not lost our love for didactic literature, even among today's young. One of the most didactic art forms I have ever encountered is the rock musical *Hair*, which quite literally lectures its thrilled audiences on the joys of the hirsute state, sexual freedom, and peace, all of which suggests that preaching can be enjoyed if some of the following conditions are met: (1) the audience agrees with the doctrine; (2) the doctrine is revolutionary; (3) it is presented in a delightful and unusual form. Even Christianity can be made palatable to modern audiences if only the last condition is met, as witness the success of *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell*.

ture fine, / Si dit et demonstre en la fin / C'on ne puet dessevrer cuer fin"³³ (Henry [d'Andeli] here ends the story and says that it shows in its conclusion that a true heart cannot be alienated). Or we might consider the conclusion to *Le Vallet qui d'aise a malaise se met*, a story whose title tells us all that is worth knowing about the action:

Or vous ai je dit du Vallet
 Qui d'aise à mallaise se met,
 Que si faisoit le cretelet,
 Et qui resamble l'oiselet
 Qui, ains qu'ait elles, veut voler,
 Et puis si demeure afolés. (MR, 2:169-70)

(Now I have told you about the young man who went from comfort to discomfort. He was quite a cocky fellow, who, like a young bird, wants to fly before its wings are ready and thus immediately comes to harm.)

Both of these conclusions are straightforward and literal. Neither one is capable of stirring up laughter in an audience. That inability has nothing to do with the quality of the tales themselves, since one is good and the other poor. Nor does there seem to be any way in which a jongleur could present them humorously. They are serious in themselves, and their relationship to their stories is serious. And both of the tales are, in different ways, serious. Although *Aristote* is a fine comic tale, it is something of a defense of courtly love, and a great deal of attention is paid to that defense. The moralizing conclusion points specifically to the courtly love in the story and not to the comic climax. *Vallet* has no comic climax and indeed no comic action at all.³⁴ One might have

33. The text I have used for this quotation is found in Reid, *Twelve Fabliaux*, p. 82.

34. In his review article on Nykrog's book, Rychner gives reasons why *Vallet* is disappointing, claiming that it "ne comporte aucune narration; cette pièce est essentiellement satirique. . . ." See Jean Rychner, Review of *Les Fabliaux*, by Per Nykrog, p. 338. He doubts that it should be classified as a fabliau.

hoped that the moral would redeem this pathetic tale (just as some present-day comedians redeem a poor joke by making a joke out of it), but the whole production is truly insipid.

Some morals are serious in themselves but become comic in their relationship to the tale. The ending of *Le Vilain Asnier* could be taken literally: "Et por ce vos vueil ge monstrer / Que cil fait ne sens ne mesure / Qui d'orgueil se desennature: / Ne se doit nus desnaturer" (By this story I want to show you that he acts neither sensibly nor reasonably who willfully departs from his natural condition. No one should act contrary to nature), MR, 5:41-42. Although that bit of wisdom is sage advice for everyone, in this story it refers to the ass driver who thrives on the smell of dung and almost dies at the smell of sweet spices. Since all morals at the end of such tales face in two directions, inward as a reflection on the meaning of the story and outward as the lesson the audience should apply to their own lives, there is a comic contradiction in trying to apply this lesson to ourselves; it fits and it doesn't fit. The moral does one other thing: whereas before we only knew that his olfactory preference was the peasant's "accustomed" mode of living, now, by stating the conclusion in the form of a universal law, the narrator seems to be saying that it is the very essence of his being.

There are many instances of this transformation of a serious moral to a comic one because of its attachment to a comic tale. The title alone of *Charlot le Juif qui chia en un pel de lievre* explains the *vilonie* that Charlie the Jew committed, and we need to know only that he was provoked into doing such a crude thing to appreciate the comic meaning of the moral: "Qui barat quiert, barat le vient" (To him who seeks trickery, trickery will come), MR, 3:226. For the priest in *Brunain, la vache au prestre* who begins with one cow, out of greed accepts from a poor peasant a second cow, only to end up with no cows, the concluding moral is also comically apt:

“Tels cuide avancier qui recule” (Some think they are going forward when they actually are going backward), MR, 1:134. In these two examples three factors are constant: both morals are serious and can be taken literally; both fit their tales; and both are comic. They are comic, therefore, because they are an extension of the humor of the tales. Attached to a serious tale, they would not be funny.

Several moral endings are inappropriate but receive a comic meaning from an ironic relation to the tale. The husband in *Les Tresces* catches what he believes to be a robber in the night, but when he goes to get a candle and his wife lets the “robber” go, he realizes that it was her lover. So he then kicks his wife out of the house, after which she betrays him and tricks him in several ways. The moral of the story is this: “S’el fait folie de son cors, / Quant el est hors de sa mainson, / Lors a ele droite achoison / Qu’ele face son mari honte (If she commits folly with her body when she is outside her house, then she has a good opportunity to bring her husband to shame), MR, 4:81. The author is ironically implying that all that is necessary in order to keep a wife chaste is to keep her indoors, as though he thinks that we have forgotten that the lover was caught (this time) inside the house. The same tongue-in-cheek irony is found at the end of *Le Chevalier a la robe vermeille*, where, after the wife convinces her husband that he only dreamed what in fact he really saw, the narrator concludes: “Mès cil qui vait la droite voie, / Doit bien croire sans contredit / Tout ce que sa fame li dit” (But whoever wants to follow the true path must believe all that his wife tells him and not contradict her), MR, 3:45. The humor of both these morals comes from their ironic relationship to their tales. The right delivery, of course, is important; if spoken in a serious manner, they would sound false and inept; if spoken with the right inflection and tone, their irony would be clear. Curiously enough, neither of these two tales sustains its comedy for a long time, and hence

the jolt that the ironic ending affords can possibly be seen as an attempt to end, at least, on a comic note.

Some endings are comic in their own right, but their relationship to their respective tales varies. A few of these are crude or obscene proverbs, a mild example being the following from *Bérenghier au lonc cul* by Guerin: "A mol pastor chie lous laine" (When the shepherd is weak, the wolf shits wool), MR, 3:262. We do not need to know that the metaphoric proverb applies to a lady who has no fear of cuckolding her cowardly husband right in front of his eyes to appreciate its humor; it is funny in itself as well as being a continuation of the humor of the story. Even the specific crudeness of the proverb can be seen as an appropriate extension of the crudeness of the tale, one whose comic climax is a "misdirected kiss." On a much higher level we can find the same comic duality at the end of *Estula*, a fabliau about two poor, unfortunate brothers who outwit their rich and stupid neighbors. The moral of the tale is: "Teus rit au main qui au soir plore" (He laughs in the morning who cried in the evening).³⁵ Embedded in that piece of wisdom is an implied comic cycle, a movement from sadness to happiness that also underlies the highest comic vision. In *Estula* there is a sense that the two brothers deserve such happiness, which had been denied them, and hence the justice that is part of the highest expression of the comic movement from sadness to joy is also present: "S'an ont assez gabe et ris, / Car li rires lor est randuz / Qui devant lor ert desfanduz" (And so they laughed and joked a lot. Laughter was restored to them from whom it had been taken). Taken together, the morals at the end of *Bérenghier* and *Estula*

35. I have translated "plore" in the past tense because the proverb naturally refers to the brothers, as my subsequent remarks and the next quotation from the tale indicate. As it stands, however, the time sequence in the line is ambiguous. To this moral compare Psalm 30, v. 5: "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning." The text I have used for *Estula* is in Johnston and Owen, eds., *Fabliaux*, pp. 6-9.

represent the extremes in the fabliaux, the one evoking a rather crude guffaw, the other hinting at a profound comic movement, and in both cases the morals are appropriate to their tales.

Admittedly some concluding remarks have no relevance whatsoever to their tales, as in *Le Provost a l'aumuche* (MR, 1:112), or *Le Vilain au buffet* (MR, 3:199). Some endings are merely inept, as those for *Les Quatre Souhais Saint Martin* (MR, 5:201), or *Le Sagretaig* (MR, 6:243). Some fabliaux end abruptly when the action ends, and so the author is spared the embarrassment of trying to tack on a moral that does not fit. Indeed, it is hard to see how some of the fabliaux, especially the obscenely supernatural ones, could have any kind of moral, as for example *L'Anel qui faisoit les . . . grans et roides* (MR, 3:51). In this tale a man loses a magical ring, which a certain bishop then finds. The ring has the power to arouse a man permanently and so it is a source of embarrassment for the bishop, who does not connect his unfortunate situation with the ring he is wearing. The previous owner of the ring hears about the bishop's plight and offers to cure him, for money and for the rings that the bishop wears. All these the bishop gives, and he is immediately cured. It is difficult to see what the moral of that story could be—serious, ironic, or whatever. From *L'Anel* and similar fabliaux, it is apparent that the fableors knew when to practice restraint and let the comedy in the tale proper suffice.

Occasionally the moralization at the end of a tale assumes another form, but even then it retains its comic purpose. Prayers were a common means of ending some medieval works. *Le Povre Mercier* deals, in a comic way, with religious matters, and hence a prayer at the ending is fitting. But the author is careful not to let such a pious ending spoil the comedy:

Et li Sires, qui toz biens done,
Gart cels de male destinée

Qui ceste rimme ont escoutée
 Et celui qui l'a devisée.
 Done-moi boire, si t'agrée. (MR, 2:122)

(And may the Lord, who is the giver of all good things, protect from a bad end all those who have heard this poem and him who wrote it. Now if you approve, give me a drink!)

The good humor of the prayer in this case is fitting for a tale that turns out happily for the hero. In *Le Couvoiteus et l'Envieus* the central characters are evil, and they come to an evil end. Very appropriately the narrator ends with a curse: "Mal dahez ait / De moie part qui il en poise, / Qu'il furent de male despoise" (My curses on them—no matter whom it displeases—they were of an evil nature), MR, 5:214. It is finally impossible to categorize the morals in the fables. Each one has a unique relation to the tale in which it is found and so cannot be adequately considered out of that context.

Inside Views

The last mode of telling I would like to consider is the author's use of inside views—recorded glimpses of what is going on inside a character's mind. The narrator can present the character's thoughts in indirect speech, merely paraphrasing what the character has thought, or he can report them in direct speech. These insights are the counterpoint of the open dialogue that was discussed in the last chapter. I believe they are part of the telling of the story because in the type of narrative fiction to which the fables belong, such a privilege is rendered in the form of an omniscient insight rather than a part of the dramatic action of the story itself. This is not a hard and fast rule, as subsequent examples will show, but generally in the fables that seems to be the case. They are like asides or soliloquies in plays, which frequently break the dramatic action and are spoken to the audience rather

than to the other characters on the stage. Often the inside views in the fabliaux seem to share that quality with the asides and would most effectively be spoken by the jongleur with a shift of tone and inflection. When, for example, the husband in *L'Enfant qui fu remis au soleil* returns home after being away for several years to find his wife with a baby at the breast, he tells her that he believes her supernatural explanation of the child's birth, but then the narrator adds: "Ne plus ne dist, ancois se test, / Ne de son cuer point ne gehi" (He didn't say anything else but kept quiet. In his heart, though, he didn't like it at all), MR, 1:163. The contrast between what he tells his wife and what he thinks to himself as reported by the narrator would effectively be presented if the jongleur captured the contrast in a shift in his tone, inflection, and even gesture.³⁶ In some stories, as I will try to show, there is a deliberate contrast between dialogue and inside views.

The privilege of seeing inside the mind of a character is one of the more valuable ones at the disposal of an author.³⁷ It enables him to probe beneath the surface, the objective level, and reveal the thoughts and motivations that explain the nature of the characters. In a sense then, these are the inner workings of the tales, the psychological machinery that powers the author's creations. They are not as frequent in the fabliaux as they are in some other medieval literature such as the romances of Chr e-

36. My own realization of the point I am making came when I was, in fact, reciting this tale to a class. That particular line never struck me as being funny when I read it to myself, but the first time I delivered it to a class, which I did by looking up from the text at that point and speaking the line in hushed tones as though I were letting the class in on a little secret, I was surprised by the laughter that followed. I have since told the tale many times and in the same way, and that line always gets a laugh. My own experience, incidentally, with these stories, is that they all are much funnier in the telling than in the reading.

37. "The most important single privilege is that of obtaining an inside view of another character, because of the rhetorical power that such a privilege conveys upon a narrator." Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 160.

tien de Troyes.³⁸ Given the economy of the fabliaux, this absence is not remarkable. What is surprising is that when these insights are given, usually some special effect is had. Although the fableors show little interest in psychological probing for its own sake, they do manifest the ability to use it selectively as needed. I would like to give just three examples of this privilege.

In *Le Preudome qui rescolt son compere de noier* there is a significant contrast between the words a character speaks to others and those he thinks to himself. It is the story of a fisherman who saves a drowning "fellow man" by throwing him a line with a boat hook but unintentionally puts out one of the victim's eyes by doing so. While recuperating, the rescued man broods over his loss and decides to take the fisherman to court. The mayor who serves as judge cannot decide the merits of the case, but it is solved when a fool (*un sot*) jumps up and suggests that they throw the victim back into the water, and if he can save himself, then the fisherman must make amends for the eye. The court recognizes immediately the fool's wisdom and the case is dropped. Whatever sympathy we might have had for the drowning man due to the painful loss of his eye is prevented by the author by the contrasting views of the victim toward his rescuer. This is what he thinks as he recuperates from the accident: " 'Cist vilains m'a mon ueil crevé, / Et ge ne l'ai de riens grevé; / Ge m'en irai clamer de lui / Por faire lui mal et enui' " ("This churl has stuck out my eye, and I have not harmed him at all. I'll go lay a complaint against him and bring him harm and pain"), MR, 1:301-2. Now here is what he says at the trial:

38. Bédier, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 357, says that the fabliaux show no "finesse psychologique." Other scholars have called attention to the exceptions. Robert Bossuat, in *Le Moyen Age*, pp. 157-58, mentions and very briefly discusses the *analyse psychologique* in *La Veuve* and *Le Vallet qui d'aise a malaise se met*. Walter Morris Hart makes a somewhat detailed study of this aspect of *Le Chevalier qui fist sa fame confesse* in "The Fabliau and Popular Literature," pp. 336-37.

“Seignor,” fait-il, “ge sui plaintis
 De cest preudome, qui, tierz dis,
 Me féri d’un croq par ostrage;
 L’ueil me creva: c’en ai domaige;
 Droit m’en faites; plus ne demant. . . .” (MR, 1:302)

(“Lord,” he said, “I bring a suit against this worthy man, who the day before yesterday struck me severely with a hook. He blinded me, and so I have the worse of it. All I ask is that you give me justice.”)

The difference between his ungrateful brooding as he lies alone and his plaintive and respectful request in open court surely cancels whatever pity we might have had for this man. But perhaps the most revealing difference between the two passages is his use of the word *vilains* in private and *preudome* in public. This contrast makes him appear to be worse than ungrateful; it makes him hypocritical. The court does not seem to realize his true nature, but we do, and we can therefore rejoice in the justice of the fool’s solution.

It is more usual for an inside view to create sympathy for a character. But in the fabliaux the purpose of that sympathy is not only for us to admire and feel for the character, it is rather a part of the humorous intent. A good example of this is in *Fole Larguesce*, the story of a salt-merchant’s wife, whose foolish generosity inspires her to give salt to her friends and neighbors for nothing. To cure her of this misguided charity, her husband one day makes her suffer the ordeal of carrying a heavy load of salt back from the sea. It is a long and arduous trip that the husband worsens by refusing to let her rest. When she finally drags herself into the house, she collapses into bed and ponders for a long time the fault that led to such torment. I quote the beginning and ending of her thoughts:

“Or m’estuet mon orguel quasser,”
 Pence cele, “qu’avoir soloie.

Certes bien hors del sens estoie,
 Quant je creoie mes voisines.

.
 Ne viegne mais nul à l'ostel
 Pour querre demie de sel,
 Se il ne m'apporte l'argent!
 Il est mout de chetive gent
 Qui folement jetent l'avoir
 Qu'à lor eos devoient avoir." (MR, 6:62-63)

("Well, now I'll have to crush all that pride I used to have. I was really out of my mind when I trusted my neighbors. . . . May no one ever come around here looking for even half a measure of salt if he doesn't have the money! He's an awfully sorry person who foolishly throws his goods around, which he should keep for his own use.")

In discussing the reasons why he has accepted some stories as fabliaux while rejecting others, Nykrog says that he has included *Fole Larguesce* but excluded *La Housse partie*, both sometimes considered as *contes moraux*, because the former has some comedy and irony, while the latter has only pathos.³⁹ The causes for these differences are several, but I think that one of them is the wife's musing, which is sobering but also comic. It shows that she has learned her lesson and changed, and we admire her for the reformation. Because of this privileged knowledge, we know what to expect when her greedy neighbors arrive, although they will be in for a surprise. There is also an unusual occurrence in *La Housse partie* (MR, 1:82), but it is more satiric than comic. The story is about a husband who, at the insistence of his nagging wife, asks his father to move out of their house, where his father has been forced to live because he had given all of his possessions to his son at the son's marriage. The only thing the son will give his father as he departs is a

39. Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 17.

horse blanket, which he tells his own son to fetch. But when the grandson brings it, he has divided it, giving his grandfather just one half. When the father asks him why, the son tells him that he is going to keep the other half to give him when he, his son, makes him leave his home. The father is sobered by this gesture, repents his ingratitude, and welcomes his own father back. When the wife in *Fole Larguesce* turns on her neighbors and bluntly refuses to give them free salt, we delight in her sensible action and their chagrin. We are not jolted nor shocked by it, as we are by the grandson's Solomon-like rescue of his grandfather. Granted the situation in *La Housse partie* is a more serious matter; still, part of its shock comes from being unprepared for the climax. The author does tell us that the grandson knew how his father came into his money (MR, 1:89), but he does not reveal his motivation for dividing the blanket. If we had known what the grandson was planning, his cleverness would be more triumphant than shocking. I agree with Nykrog that there is pathos in the tale and its presence squelches whatever comic effect there might have been, but part of the shock of the climax is that it is not one of recognition.

The last example of the author's use of inside views is from *Le Vilain Mire* (MR, 3:156), a story made famous by Moliere's telling of it as *Le Medecin Malgré Lui*. The fabliau is curious for several reasons, one being its structure. There are two fairly distinct sections;⁴⁰ the first dealing with a peasant, but one who also is stingy, boorish, rough (he has long fingernails and tough skin), and cruel. He marries a knight's lovely daughter, but be-

40. As well as involving three different motifs: "These motifs include those of the simpleton who must be beaten to make him accomplish some action, of the fake doctor who heals through stratagems, and of the physician who empties the hospital by threatening to kill the most sick to heal the others." Robert Hellman and Richard O'Gorman, eds. and trans., *Fabliaux: Ribald Tales from the Old French*, p. 79.

cause he suspects she will be easy prey for any knight who happens to wander by, he decides to beat her every morning so that she will be in no condition to consider anyone else and then to beg her forgiveness every night when he returns from the plow. For several days he carries out the cruel ploy, but the bewildered wife gets her revenge when, one day two messengers from the king come and ask if she knows of a doctor who could cure the king's daughter who has a bone stuck in her throat. She tells them her husband is a fine doctor, but that he sometimes needs to be beaten before he is convinced of the need of a patient. The second half of the story gets underway as the messengers go and ask her husband, who in his bewilderment naturally refuses, only to be beaten and dragged to court. When he tries to tell the king that he is no physician, the king has him beaten some more, until finally to save his own hide, he agrees to cure the daughter. He has her brought to him, asks everyone else to leave, and when they are alone, he goes to the fireplace and immediately takes off all his clothes, and starts to scratch his coarse body so vigorously and thoroughly that the king's daughter cannot control herself at this apish sight and bursts out laughing and in so doing dislodges the bone. The king is so pleased that he bestows fine clothes on the peasant and requests that he stay at court, but when he declines the king's offer, the king has him beaten again to convince him to accept, which, of course, he does. While at court his hair and beard are trimmed and he wears a scarlet robe. But then all the sick folk in the land, more than eighty of them, hear about his power, come to the king, and request the peasant doctor to cure them. At first he refuses, only to be predictably beaten again until he agrees. His cure this time is to gather all the sick townspeople into a room, with no one else present, and to announce that the sickest of the lot will be thrown into the fire and burnt to ashes, which because of their medicinal properties will be given as a cure to

the rest. One by one each of his patients denies that he is the sickest; indeed, he is quite well and leaves telling the king he is completely cured. The king is so pleased that he bestows great wealth on the peasant, who now returns home, needing no longer to work and hence needing no longer to beat his wife, whom he loves and cherishes forever after.

The two-part structure is welded together by large ironies. In the domestic scene the peasant beats his wife, which in turn is the cause of his being beaten at court: beating his wife is a form of trickery that gets him into his predicament, but he gets out of it by another form of trickery. These ironies are happy ones, moreover, for the tale is also tied together neatly by the progression of the peasant from a cruel, messy oaf to a loving, neat, and even well-to-do liege man of the king. In curing others, he himself is cured.

The tale is also interesting for its use of inside views, which are unusually numerous in this story, approximately one-eighth of the lines being someone's actual thought. These inside views give us an insight to the thoughts of the peasant and of his wife, and one of the things they frequently involve is their separate plan for future actions (another way in which the story is bound together), such as the peasant's decision to beat his wife in order to put her out of condition for romance with anyone else. In this insight the omniscient narrator is sharing with us one of his most awesome powers, the ability to foretell the future. But having made us partakers of that bit of divinity, he denies it to us at a crucial time, at the cure of the king's daughter. We know that the peasant has a plan, but not exactly what it is. Here are his thoughts as he realizes he must try to cure the king's daughter:

“Je sai de voir s'ele rioit,
A tot l'esforz qu'el i metroit
L'arestre s'en voleroit fors,

Car el n'est pas dedenz le cors.
 Tel chose m'estuet fere et dire
 Dont je la puis fere rire."⁴¹

("I know for a fact that if she laughs, with all the effort that she can muster, whatever is stuck would fly out, for it isn't down inside her yet. I'll have to do and say something that will make her laugh.")

Earlier we were allowed to see exactly what the peasant planned to do to his wife, but here we know only that he plans to make the daughter laugh, not how. From the directions he gives immediately afterwards, it is clear that he himself does know, and so the author is withholding information for some reason. The narrator is, in effect, trying to get not only the girl but also the audience to laugh, and he does that by leaving the exact nature of the peasant's plan a surprise. We are as amused as the girl is at the sight of this uncouth peasant huddled by the fire, giving himself a good thorough scratching, like some primate suddenly brought in out of the savage cold (a scene that would allow a histrionic jongleur a fine opportunity for some comic miming). The next cure shows a further withdrawal by the narrator, since he gives us no insight at all into the peasant's mind, which we do not need, having been prepared for his opportune cleverness by the previous bizarre cure. Our appreciation and understanding of this unique *vilain* (who escapes easy classification) progress in the story by, among other things, full disclosure of his thoughts to that point where we are so confident of him that we trust his judgment and need no longer be forewarned of his plans. In the end, we, like the king, believe in him.

These three examples indicate the ways inside views can be used in the fabliaux. Although these stories do not contain many, they always seem to be used artistically when they occur. More commonly the author withholds

⁴¹. Johnston and Owen, eds., *Fabliaux*, p. 62. See also MR, 3:164.

such views, since the effect of such insights is frequently to make the character sympathetic, which in stories abounding with so many acts of deception and trickery would too frequently be destructive of the author's comic purpose. In these tales, therefore, authorial silence is admirable.

Some contemporary critics, however, regard such devices as authorial intrusions and feel that the only valid way of presenting a story is complete objectivity, "showing" rather than "telling" it. One of the main goals of Wayne Booth's book is to defend literature against the distaste that modern readers and critics have for the author's obtrusive presence in his work. I think one of the wisest things Booth says concerns a major assumption that underlies his work: "It is frustrating to try to deal critically with such effects (authorial intrusions) because they can in no way be demonstrated to the reader who has not experienced them."⁴² I believe that a close reading of the fabliaux would demonstrate the value of comments made by author and narrator. I would like to close this chapter with one such commentary, the opening lines of *Le Pouvre Mercier*, which not only perfectly capture the spirit of the fabliaux and express their highest possible purpose but also serve as an example of an authorial intrusion in its most blatant and delightful form:

[U]ns joliz clers, qui s'estudie
 A faire chose de c'on rie,
 Vous vueil dire chose nouvelle.
 Se il dit chose qui soit belle,
 Elle doit bien estre escoutee,
 Car par biaux diz est oblïee
 Maintes fois [i]re et cussançons:
 Et abasies granz tançons,
 Car, quant aucuns dit les risees,
 Les forts tançons sont oblïees.⁴³

42. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 215.

43. Johnston and Owens, eds., *Fabliaux*, p. 44. Also in MR, 2:114.

(A happy cleric who takes pains to make something that will cause you to laugh now wishes to tell you a new story. If he says anything that is pleasing, you should pay attention, for fair words often make people forget anger and anxieties. They also can stop bad quarrels, for when anyone says something amusing, violent arguments are soon forgotten.)

Who can help but admire this poet and wish to hear more from him?



IV. The Comic Climax



Although the combined voices of author, narrator, and jongleur are sometimes a necessary artistic device, frequently an admirable one and often an effective one, the fundamental element in every narrative is the story itself. When all other factors are stripped away—the descriptions, the morals, all the rhetoric—there still remains some action that involves a conflict and moves toward a climax, and this action is the plot of the story. Several scholars have made significant studies of the plots: in the first part of his important work, Joseph Bédier speaks at length about the story line of the fabliaux, primarily with a goal of discovering their origins, and thus that part of his study is essentially a comparison of various versions and analogues throughout the world. Per Nykrog offers perhaps the most detailed analysis of the plots, which he breaks down into various motifs: stories dealing with seductions; stories in which the seducer is successful; stories in which he is unsuccessful; and so on. Jean Rychner has compared similar versions of several fabliaux, chiefly with a view to the differences brought about by their transmission and by different audiences. In an article dealing with obscene diction in the fabliaux, Roy J. Percy argues that these tales frequently involve a movement from illusion to reality, from being duped to being aware, and that the moment of realization is

accompanied by a change from the use of euphemisms to the use of obscenities. And finally Paul Theiner discusses the relationship of plot and setting and finds that the various moments of action actually determine the settings, which exist only as the needs of the plot determine.¹ The net effect of all these studies is to show how complex the plots of the fabliaux are and how it would be impossible to make a comprehensive study of them. I believe all of the above studies are valid and helpful but taken singly—and, indeed, even comprehensively—they offer only a partial view of the fabliaux. Throughout the present study I have argued that the important element in these stories is the comic climax, and that the rest of the action, although it leads up to that, arrives there by many different routes. The preceding chapters have considered some of those routes; the present chapter will discuss their destination.

The purpose of the climax in narrative literature varies greatly. In some works it is the moment of highest emotional interest, as it is in the death or reunion scene in several medieval romances, such as Thomas's *Tristan* or Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*. In those stories, the climax is the most intense movement in a chain of events that are linked together by the tragic or comic theme. The climax is not the fundamental link but rather the crowning one, and it achieves its prominence only with the support of the other events. In drama, on the other hand, the climax is often synonymous with crisis, the turning point in the action, and hence it becomes even more subservient to more important events in the play. The turning point may be critical, but it is so in relation to antecedent and especially subsequent actions that are more crucial. Still other types of narrative literature engulf the climax in the attention they give to

1. Joseph Bédier, *Les Fabliaux*, pp. 45-287; Per Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, pp. 52-71; Jean Rychner, *Contribution à l'étude des fabliaux*; Roy J. Percy, "Modes of Signification and the Humor of Obscene Diction in the Fabliaux," pp. 179-96; and Paul Theiner, "Fabliau Settings," pp. 123-35.

character study, sentiment, or mood. In these stories the climax may only be the final step in a series of actions that in themselves are so similar that the climactic action is indistinguishable from all the preceding ones, such as modern horror stories (or films). And finally there are stories in which the actions along the way are much more important than the climax, not only in themselves as interesting events but also thematically. In some of these works, like picaresque novels, the final action seems to be only a convenient means for bringing the story to a halt and hence has about the same importance as a punctuation mark.

In the *fabliaux*, however, the climax is all-important. It is their most distinctive characteristic, the *raison d'être* that governs, controls, and directs all else that is in the tale. Other intermediate features may arrest our attention, such as the characterization and the dialogue, but in the *fabliaux* that people admire, those things do not become ends in themselves but rather help pave the way toward the climax. Not every single *fabliau* has this characteristic ending, but the ones lacking it are often judged as poor or are placed on the periphery of the genre or are even excluded. As far as my research has carried me, however, no one has emphasized the importance of the comic climax in characterizing the genre. Hence no one has seen the lack or imperfection of that climax as the cause of the artistic difficulties with certain *fabliaux*. Some critics have seen one or the other of the two sides of that climax—its surprise and the preparation for that surprise—but no one has stressed the combination of the two as forming the comic climax.

In saying that the comic climax is the unifying characteristic of the *fabliaux*, I do not mean thereby to define them formally by that element. A formal definition attempts to set the boundaries on whatever is being defined in such a way that it expresses its uniqueness. By its very nature, a formal definition says that nothing else is identical. Earlier I gave some of the reasons why such

an attempt with literature is difficult, if not impossible, and here I would like to add that there are several other genres, especially some medieval ones, which have a similar ending.²

For example, the fabliau and the fable display startling similarities. Indeed, some fabliau stories exist also as fables: *Le Couvoiteus et l'Envieus* (MR, 5:211) is basically the same tale as "De Cupido et Invido," and the pear tree incident in Chaucer's "Merchant's Tale" is also found in several fables.³ Nykrog even suggests that some fabliaux might have grown out of fables, and so it is only natural that there are similarities.⁴ And it is true that the ending of many fables, such as the ones mentioned above, take the form of a comic climax. But even disregarding the other differences between fable and fabliau—the shorter length of the fable and its form as an animal story—the effect of the comic climax is not the same in the two genres. Laughter in the fabliaux is for itself, but in the fable it is for a moral or didactic purpose. There is no direct way of proving that; the response of the reader is the ultimate court of appeal. There are, however, several indirect ways of demonstrating it. One way that is very clear is the different effect that the moral has at the end of each. We have seen how the moral tag at the end of the fabliaux varies in its relationship to the story proper, sometimes being appropriate, sometimes ironical, and sometimes neither. Consideration of those moral tags shows, moreover, that the relationship is dependent on and takes its own significance from the humor of the tale itself. In the fables, on the other hand, the moral should always be appropriate to the tale, since the tale is essentially an anecdote exemplifying the moral. Although the fable and its moral are cast in different

2. See above, pp. 15–16.

3. Robinson Ellis, ed., *The Fables of Avianus*, no. 22; Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, pp. 115–27; and W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster, eds., *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, pp. 352–56.

4. Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, pp. 251–57.

forms, they both equal one another. They are equational in another way, too; just as one side of an equation equals the other, so it also depends on the other; both sides are necessary for an equation. Just so, the fable and moral usually need one another, and the story is not actually complete until the moral is given. Finally, and most importantly, the seriousness of the moral at the end of the fable has a way of transferring itself back to the story, and even though we may laugh at the end of a fable, it becomes, with the moral, an ulterior laughter, laughter with a purpose. The fabliaux share none of these characteristics with the fables.

Although most medieval ballads are not humorous, those that are often have a climax that is similar to those in the fabliaux. A plot similar to the one in the Old French *Le Chevalier a la robe vermeille* (MR, 3:35) is found in the Old French "Parbleu! Madelon," a very popular ballad in medieval France.⁵ It is the story of a man who comes home to his wife to find increasing evidence of a male visitor, only to have his wife successfully supply alibis for each piece of evidence. The plot of *Le Chevalier a la robe vermeille* differs in some ways from its ballad analogues, but the climax in both is the duping of the husband. But still the climaxes differ. In the fabliau it comes as a surprise, while in the ballad it does not. One of the reasons for that difference is a quality that is characteristic of the ballad in general, the development of its plot by a sequence of self-contained stanzas, a "series of rapid flashes."⁶ A ballad builds its structure after the fashion of bricklaying, adding scene on top of scene, the final one being essentially the same as the preceding ones. There is something of a surprise in each new scene, but in spreading that quality throughout the poem, the ballad in effect anticipates it in the climax.

5. Gabriel Vicaire, "Parbleu! Madelon: Chanson de l'Auvergne," p. 66. A bibliography of other versions, along with the text of the English analogue, "Our Goodman," is found in F. J. Child, ed., *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 5: 88-95.

6. M. J. C. Hodgart, *The Ballads*, p. 28.

The device of incremental repetition that is commonly found in the ballad adds to that effect; the changes that take place in the repeated phrases gradually unfold the climax rather than allowing it to come as a surprise. With incremental repetition, every stanza "repeats the one before it, but with some addition which leads on to the climax."⁷ Thus the ballad lacks the snap ending that is characteristic of the fabliau.

The genre that is most similar to the fabliaux is the farce. In his essay on the farce, Eric Bentley notices several qualities that could also be found in the fabliaux, such as the violence, bedroom situations (bedroom farce), a strange juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic, and absurd coincidences. What he says about the surprises in farce could stand almost verbatim for my view of the comic climax in the fabliaux:

What is usually said about surprises in farcical plots has to be qualified. On the surface of our minds we are surprised; but somewhere deeper down we knew all along. The convention itself creates certain expectations without which we would not have paid the price of admission. The expectation may go back before the first scene of the play to the rubric "A Farce" in the program or before that to the name "Feydeau" in the advertisements.⁸

Certainly some medieval farces have a climax similar to those in the fabliaux, such as *Maitre Pierre Pathelin*.⁹ Of course, the similarity of the endings may be due to their historical connection, since scholars generally feel that one of the sources of the farce was the fabliau.¹⁰ In spite of all the likenesses, nevertheless there are some important differences. Not all farces have a surprise ending;

7. Hodgart, *The Ballads*, p. 32.

8. Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama*, p. 246. See also Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, p. 83.

9. Grace Frank, in *The Medieval French Drama*, p. 257, notes the element of surprise in *Pathelin*.

10. See Edmond Faral, *Les Jongleurs en France au moyen âge*, p. 237; and Bédier, *Les Fabliaux*, pp. 428-29.

La Farce du cuvier, for one. On the other hand many fabliaux lack some of the qualities that Bentley finds in farce, such as the violence, the absurd coincidences, and the clash of attitudes, none of which are found in *Gauteron et Marion* (MR, 3:49), in *Le Jugement des cons* (MR, 5:109), or in *Le Sentier battu* (MR, 3:247), to name but a few. And yet they all have the kind of climax that combines surprise and preparation. This alone would seem to distinguish the genres.

The striking similarities between farce and fabliau have led one scholar to make the identification. Clem Williams claims that the fabliaux are essentially farcical.¹¹ His study does not, however, deal with the climax specifically but rather with a number of likenesses and especially the overall spirit of the genre. Since I am going to deal with the spirit of humor in the fabliaux in the next chapter, I shall deal with Williams's views on their farcical spirit at that time.

A survey of other literary works would undoubtedly reveal genres and individual works that share with the fabliau its characteristic trait. Some miracle stories, exempla, and some medieval lyrics, *dits*, to name but a few, have similar climaxes, as do various modern genres, such as murder mysteries and science fiction. Although there are, no doubt, differences in the climax due to the exigencies of each particular narrative form, it is quite possible that some literary piece other than a fabliau has a climax that is similar. Different works are, nevertheless, distinct because of the totality of different features. Two genres can have a similar characteristic, but in one it can be incidental, in the other dominant.

In the previous two chapters, I have indicated how various features in the fabliaux are significant primarily through their relationship to the climax of the story. There are two other indications of the prominence of

11. Clem C. Williams, Jr., "The Genre and Art of the Old French Fabliaux: A Preface to the Study of Chaucer's Tales of the Fabliau Type."

that climax. In many tales, the climactic action stretches itself out over a large portion of the plot. In *Les Deux Angloys et l'anel* (MR, 2:178), for example, the audience is immediately brought *in medias res*, and after the complication is established, it soon comes upon the sick man's discovery, which occupies one-third of the tale. Some fabliaux, in fact, can be considered as having nothing but a climax, such as *Le Prestre qu'on porte* (MR, 4:1) and *Le Segretain Moine* (MR, 5:215), in which the farcical repetition is the whole story. Like the ballads, these fabliaux bring the audience in for only the fifth act of the drama. And even when prolonged, these many-headed climaxes can still come as a surprise, as I will demonstrate shortly. It is much more usual, though, for the climax to come at one, final moment, and as a further indication of its importance when it does, it frequently saves all the real dramatic action for itself, all the violence, cursing, discoveries, and escapes all of which are concentrated in that one final scene. A convergence of all the important business into one final situation is not characteristic of all narrative literature. In some genres it can come at the beginning while the rest of the story unravels the consequences; or it can come in the middle, everything before leading up to it, everything afterwards leading downwards; or, finally, it can be spread throughout. Part of the punch of the fabliau's climax springs not only from its surprise but also from the extra power it packs in usually being gathered up together. That one final stroke is sufficient, too, since another indication of its importance is that a subsequent denouement is usually unnecessary; any needed unraveling usually occurs as part of the climax. There is no need to explain anything, no problems to solve, and no rough edges to smooth by extended leave-taking. Nothing more need be said, because nothing else matters. Almost never does a change take place after the climax; almost no one, regardless how catastrophic the climax, ever reforms, becomes wiser, or

takes vengeance because of some harm suffered. In the very few instances when someone does change, the change is likely to be an extension of the comedy of the tale, as in *La Borgoise d'Orliens* (MR, 1:117), when the husband tries to catch his wife in her adultery by pretending to be her lover, only to be beaten by his own servants. As a result, at the end of the story, he believes his wife to be innocent, living happily ever after with her, as she with him—and with her lover! But more typically, after the explosion of the climax, the characters, and poet, are silent.

The comic climax is shaped by two forces: surprise and the preparation for that surprise. Several scholars have called attention to the surprise. One of the earliest was Caylus, who refers to it when he says that a fabliau must have *un noeud*.¹² The image of a knot implies that the significance of the actions will not appear until the moment when the knot comes apart. Bédier is even more explicit. In his discussion of *Les Trois Boçus* he perceives how the death of the three hunchbacks prepares for the unexpected death of the husband: "Tout le conte paraît imaginé pour cet épisode final, si imprévu, si logique pourtant."¹³ He does not, however, extend that judgment to all fabliaux. Nykrog's contention that the comedy in the *non-érotique* fabliaux consists "en situations imprévues ou extraordinaires" shows a similar limitation since it does not apply to the majority of tales.¹⁴ Perhaps the statement that comes closest to my position is made by Williams in his discussion of the farcical element in the fabliaux:

For a decided farcical turn at the end not only provides a climax but also something like the entelechy or informing destiny for the whole action:

12. Anne Claude Phillipe Caylus, "Mémoire sur les fabliaux," P. 357.

13. Bédier, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 246.

14. Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 58.

and what precedes it can often be seen in retrospect to have led up to it like a fuse attached to the bomb.¹⁵

Although Williams does not develop that idea any further, the simile that concludes his sentence captures the image of my argument about the climax. Finally, Percy, in demonstrating how the fabliaux embody two characters, one a dufer and the other the duped, makes this observation:

The pattern followed as regards dramatic irony seems to be, then, that the author makes certain the reader or listener knows in advance the general outcome of events, or at least is so placed as to make a shrewd guess at it, but is kept in suspense about the specific moment when the dufer will triumph, and about the exact nature of the ruse by which he will outwit his opponent.¹⁶

Although I do not find the dufer-duped relationship as prevalent as Percy does, I do think his insight about the ruse, which is almost always the comic climax, could be extended to apply to most fabliaux. We do not see in advance the "specific moment" nor the "exact nature" of the climax, even though we may suspect "the general outcome of events."

But the element of surprise does not exist alone in the climax. It must be prepared for, as several scholars have seen. Bédier notes the duality in at least one fabliau, when he says that the final episode of *Les Trois Boçus* is not only *imprévu* but also *logique pourtant*; Williams's image of the bomb might contain a similar awareness, since an audience could be aware of the burning fuse; and Percy's view that the reader knows the "general outcome" also admits to the duality; and, finally, Walter Morris Hart sees at least the need for preparation when he says: "The end must be seen from the beginning; each step must be remembered at the right moment."

15. Williams, "The Genre and Art of the Old French Fabliaux," p. 20.

16. Roy J. Percy, "Humor in the Fabliaux," p. 144.

Hart does not develop that idea, and as it stands it overstates the case for preparation, unless he means something quite indefinite by the "end" that "must be seen from the beginning."¹⁷ Of course the ending of all good literature must be prepared for. It would be no mark of artistic ability for an author merely to spring some unexpected, irrelevant ending on the reader. In fact, that gimmick is usually the sign of poor artistry, a *deus ex machina* or contrived way out of the story. But in the *fabliaux*, the combination of surprise and preparation, along with all the other factors in those tales, is unique. And the aforementioned scholars have not stressed the dynamic connection of surprise and preparation as being the controlling force of the *fabliaux*.

Still, it would be impossible to make a blanket statement about the nature of the combination of surprise and preparation in the climax of the *fabliaux*. Sometimes, for example, we know exactly what is going to happen, but one or more of the characters do not, and so we share vicariously in their surprise. More usually, though, neither we nor the characters know what is going to happen. Sometimes the characters reveal what they are going to do, but neither we nor they know exactly how it will turn out. Indeed, I know of not one *fabliau* in which at least one of the main characters is not surprised by the turn of events at the end, an outcome that he or she does not expect, and which is therefore unforeseen. Sometimes the preparation is so neat and mathematical that when the surprise does come, it seems almost in-

17. Bédier, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 246; Walter Morris Hart, "The Narrative Art of the Old French *Fabliaux*," p. 209. The combination of surprise and preparation is mentioned in passing by J. H. Kirk, "Rutebeuf's Treatment of Medieval Genre: The *Fabliau*," p. 43. Arthur Koestler argues that comic surprises are always prepared for. See his book, *The Act of Creation*, pp. 35, 83. After completing this study I became aware of Roger Dubuis's *Les Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles et la tradition de la nouvelle en France au Moyen Age*, in which he discusses at length the combination of surprise and preparation as the essential structure of the *fabliaux*. See pp. 240-64.

evitable; at other times the preparation is casual or implied. Sometimes the preparation and the surprise appear like contrasting forces, meeting head on at some violent junction; at other times the surprise seems to grow out of a bud. There are approximately 160 extant fabliaux, and the nature of the climax in each is unique.

Because of this great diversity, it is not only impossible to make a summary statement about the nature of the two forces forming the climaxes of the fabliaux, it is also difficult to demonstrate the prevalence of unique climaxes in the fabliau as a genre. At the same time, some groupings can be made. The comic climaxes do take prevailing shapes all of which are some sort of surprise, such as discoveries, escapes, tricks, reversals, and so on. The best demonstration of the prevalence of the comic climax and the best method for analyzing the twofold nature of that climax is to examine some fabliaux that represent the different types.

The incredible and bizarre actions that occur in many fabliaux contribute to the astonishment we feel at the climax. It is as though we just cannot believe such an amazing thing is happening. *Le Chevalier qui fist parler les cons* (MR, 6:68) depicts a knight who is granted three gifts by three mysterious girls: wherever he goes people will welcome him; he will have the power to make any pudendum speak; and if that is somehow thwarted, he will have the power to make the rectum speak. He enjoys the first gift constantly, takes advantage of the second one on several occasions, but the climactic action takes place when he finally experiences the third gift. A certain countess who learns of the power of the second gift successfully blocks that power only to be more humiliated by her outspoken rectum. These actions are startling in themselves, and alone they would be surprising. But the author prepares for and identifies the surprise in several ways. Almost 250 lines, well over a third of the entire tale, elapse between the time the knight is granted the third gift (l. 235) and the time he puts it to work (l. 570),

enough time for it to have receded to the back of our memories. Indeed, the knight himself has forgotten about it, and his squire has to remind him of it (l. 566). Consequently, it still comes as a surprise. The preparation is not only in the bestowal of the third gift but also in the bestowal of all three gifts and the realization of the first two, leaving only the third one untried. If the knight experiences one and two, there is almost a mathematical necessity for him to experience the third. Finally, the author adds a small but significant bit of ironic forewarning when he describes the countess, who will soon be speaking out in foolish ways she never dreamed of, as being neither "fole ne janglerresse" (a fool nor a chatterbox), MR, 6:80.

In several fabliaux the climax is a discovery of some kind. *Les Tresces* (MR, 4:67) contains several related discoveries. The female companion of the lover discovers the reasons her companion wanted her to take her place in bed, and the next morning the husband discovers that his wife, whom he thought he had beaten and tortured, is without a mark and with all her hair intact. In *Le Bouchier d'Abeville* (MR, 3:227) the priest learns painfully and gradually that his servant and his mistress have been seduced, his best sheep has been stolen, and all three of them have purchased the same sheepskin. The discovery in these and similar fabliaux is the comic climax, and all discoveries have the inherent quality of surprise. The artistic preparation for the discoveries in these tales makes them seem not so much subject to chance, to the accidental stumbling upon something, but rather like the discoveries that come after a period of searching, as with a scientific discovery. There can be just as much surprise in a discovery that was sought after as there is in a chance one, and a great deal more satisfaction. In fact in some situations we would feel cheated if there were no preparation, like children who woke up one day to learn that it was Christmas and that there were lots of gifts for them; they would feel cheated out of the

intense pleasure and excitement that builds up when they can look forward to all those surprises. Thus in *Tresces* and *Bouchier*, the discoveries made by husband and by priest, although shocking to them, are satisfying to us because we expect them. We do not know exactly how they will happen, and so we too are surprised, but that feeling is balanced by the gratification in having our expectations fulfilled.

Not all misdeeds in the fabliaux are discovered. The usual reason they go undetected is the escape of the agent of the misdeed. The excitement that is felt during these flights (usually from some feared justice) has a startling quality about it, since we are never sure they will be successful; if they are not, there will be mayhem. The situation is invariably the same: a lover is with his beloved when her husband suddenly returns, as in *La Femme qui charma son mari*, *Le Pliçon*, or *Le Velous*. Regardless of where our sympathies lie, and it varies in different stories from husband to lover, we can intellectually admire the wife and her clever, on-the-spot plan for her lover's escape. In *La Femme qui charma son mari*, a woman is entertaining her lover when her husband comes running back from his vineyard with one eye poked out by a stick. His wife tells him to lie down and she will cure him. She closes his good eye with her mouth and mutters a charm over it, the purpose of which is not really for the husband: "Mais por ce que cil s'en alast / Dont ele esteit bien entreprise"¹⁸ (But that he with whom she had been so delightfully occupied might escape). The moral of this story is that such a wicked woman can be *veirement engignose*, and although we may dislike her, we have to admire her ingenuity. The emphasis in this tale is not so much on the surprising escape as on the cleverness that conceived, directed, and executed it. In

18. The text for the A version of *La Femme* is in Petrus Alphonsus, *Disciplina Clericalis: III Französische Versbearbeitungen*, eds. Alfons Hilka and Werner Söderhjelm, pp. 22-24, (B version, pp. 97-98).

tales dealing with discovery and in those dealing with escapes there is both surprise and preparation, but quite logically surprise dominates in discovery, and preparation in escape.

Sometimes the lover does not need to escape because the wife has cleverly fooled her husband by some trick, a device that also partakes of the quality of surprise. In *La Borgoise d'Orliens* (MR, 1:117), the husband who disguises himself as his wife's lover in order to catch her in her infidelity is recognized by her, led to a room in the house, and while his wife goes to greet her real lover, is there soundly beaten by his own servants. He is so completely convinced that the wife had him beaten as her supposed lover that he trusts her ever after, and she is free to enjoy her beloved. In another fabliau, *Un Chivalier et sa dame et un clerk* (MR, 2:215), the trick is almost the same as in *Borgoise*, but the preparation is quite different. In the latter no attention is given at all to the lover, but in the former the first 400 lines (out of a total of 586) describe the torments of love that he experiences for his beloved. The lady, who is very devout and faithful, refuses for a long time to grant the knight her favors, until he convinces her that she will be the cause of his death unless she relents. The tale has inspired interesting critical response, but Nykrog is perhaps correct when he says that it is really two different stories unsuccessfully fused, a courtly tale and a fabliau, and that the plot thus shows a movement from the sublime to the grotesque.¹⁹ The trick in both this tale and *Borgoise* em-

19. Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, pp. 66-69. On page 68 he says that the unusual joining of two different kinds of stories is, unfortunately, a "maladresse typique chez les conteurs anglo-normands," a judgment that does not please Anglo-Norman scholars. See K. V. Sinclair, "Anglo-Norman Studies: The Last Twenty Years," pp. 225-26.

Because the lady represents both a true courtly lover and a devout Christian, some scholars have praised *Un Chivalier et sa dame et un clerk*, but not for artistic reasons. Paul Meyer prefers this to *Borgoise*, which he finds to be vulgar, gross, and blatantly immoral. Of *Un Chivalier*, however, he says: "Dans notre fabliau,

bodies the theme of *le mari cocu, battu, et content*, and hence the focusing on the lover for such a long time in *Un Chivalier* is misplaced emphasis. *Borgoise*, on the other hand, gives the best preparation for the lover: none at all.

Part of the humor of these two tales is that when the husband tries to trick the wife into revealing her lover, she is able to outwit him instead. The reversal of fortune that the husband suffers is a very common fate for many people in the fabliaux. The artistic consequence of those reversals is often satiric, since they happen frequently as a sign of justice. But the fabliaux are not primarily satirical, a point I shall return to in the next chapter; consequently satire is not the primary result of the reversals. It is rather the humor that stems from the surprise which the victim suffers when his plans are suddenly reversed. One of the most startling reversals in all the fabliaux comes in Jacques de Baisieu's *Le Vescie a prestre* (MR, 3:106), an analogue to Chaucer's tale told by his Summoner.²⁰ The preparation for the unexpected gift in *Vescie* rivals Chaucer in artistry. In the French tale, a dying priest tells two greedy friars that he will bequeath them a jewel if they come back the next day. They go to their chapter and plan elaborate celebrations for the rich gift they expect to inherit—drinking, feasting, rejoicing, and even ringing of bells. The next day a procession of friars goes in solemn state to the home of the dying priest to greet him formally. The priest says he wants the alderman and mayor to be witnesses to the bequeathing, as though the treasure about to change hands is too valuable for only two parties to witness. When all

au contraire, tout est fin, de bon ton et presque distingué. Assurément, la dame finit bien par en arriver à faire tort à son mari, mais si peu!" See Paul Meyer, "*Le Chevalier, la dame et le clerc*," p. 70. For an article arguing for the unity of the tale see Stephen L. Wailes, "The Unity of the Fabliau *Un Chivalier et sa Dame et un Clerk*," pp. 593-96.

20. See Bryan and Dempster, *Sources and Analogues*, pp. 275-86.

the principals and witnesses are gathered together for the ceremony, the priest carefully explains why he is bestowing this gift, one which, alas, is so valuable and dear to him that he cannot part with it until he dies. The greedy friars cannot wait that long to know what it is, and they beg him at least to tell them now what it is. He complies:

“Volentiers voir, c’est me vescie.
 Se la voiîés bien netoïie,
 Mieus ke de corduan varra
 Et plus longement vos dura:
 Se poreis ens metre vo poivre.” (MR, 3:116)

(“Sure, gladly. It’s my bladder! If you want to have it cleaned, it’d be worth more than leather, and it’d last longer. You could even keep your pepper in it.”)²¹

The anger of the friars is a result of their great disappointment; they had expected so much and had been given so little. In this tale the deliberate preparations by the characters themselves help create the shocking effect of the comic climax.

Occasionally the climax comes about through chance or accident, qualities that generally cause amazement and wonder. In *Brunain, la vache au prestre* (MR, 1:132), a peasant gives his cow, Blerain, to the parish priest after hearing the latter preach about the rewards of generosity. The thankful and greedy priest ties the peasant’s cow to his own, Brunain, but Blerain is not content in his new

21. Even the word order in the verse indicates the sense of climax in the fabliau. The strong effect of placing *vescie* at the end of the line can best be judged by comparing the text to a translation where it does not occur there. Here is Robert Harrison’s rendering of the priest’s revelation: “Most gladly. It’s my bladder, men, / and if you’ll clean it up you’ll then / discover it is better than / the longest-wearing cordovan.” The word *men* takes some of the punch out of the line. See his *Gallic Salt*, p. 215. I should add that I find that Harrison’s English couplets capture the spirit of the original Old French better than any other translation I know of, and he is also remarkably accurate and close to the original within that framework.

surroundings and so, still tied to Brunain, he returns to the peasant, who thus unexpectedly experiences the rewards of generosity.²² Some endings, however, depict the opposite phenomenon, inevitable fate, and consequently these tales emphasize not so much the surprise but rather the inescapable result of the preparation. Given the almost allegorical nature of *Le Couvoiteus et l'Envieus*, the two wishes that Saint Martin grants the central characters must lead to the fate they actually experience. There is surprise in both tales, but it has a different quality in each. The chance return of Blerain stupefies because it did not have to happen; the evil outcome of the greedy and envious characters stuns us like an unavoidable accident.²³

Some fabliaux plots are structured on the device of comic repetition. The phrase is misleading since there is nothing inherently comic about repetition, which can be simply boring, as it is when used by poor comic writers. Repeating the same words or acts becomes comic for various reasons, but almost always the comedy arises from the conflict between the repetition and some need for change. A humor character, as in seventeenth-century comedy, acts the same in all situations even though some variation is called for. In slapstick, a typical situation is for the same person to keep getting pie thrown in his face but in different ways or by different people; he either

22. Victor LeClerc's contention that the peasant is greedy because he gives the cow to the priest seems to be an undue emphasis. I agree that he hopes to be rewarded in some fashion, but there is no evidence in the tale that he suspects that Blerain will return with Brunain, as LeClerc implies. See his study, "Fabliaux," pp. 198-99.

23. One of the usual distinctions made between comedy and tragedy is that man is free in the former but fated in the latter. See for example L. J. Potts, *Comedy*, p. 129: "For in comedy we must feel that man is free, not fated." I think it is much more complex than that, as my remarks on *Le Couvoiteus et l'Envieus* show. Granted that fabliau is grim (and invariably when I have told it the listeners give a stunned and shocked laugh), still the inevitability of its conclusion is shared by many fabliaux of a lighter vein, as I discuss below.

never learns or he cannot escape his predicament. Clearly, the humor arises in comic repetition from playing the repetition off the variation. In *Les Trois Boçus* (MR, 1:13) the comic climax occurs when the street porter, after throwing three hunchbacks into the river, thinking each time it was the same mysterious body, encounters the hunchbacked husband returning home and throws him into the river. The repetition of the same act three times, each done with mounting exasperation, establishes the pattern that makes inescapable the disposal of the husband who shares an important accidental characteristic with the three minstrels, but not an important, substantial one. There is a similar fabliau, *Les Quatre Prestres* (MR, 6:42), in which, instead of hunchbacks, three priests who have been accidentally killed must be disposed of by a vagabond. After he performs the task, which, as in *Boçus*, he thinks is the same task each time, he sits down by a fire to warm himself and falls asleep. A priest comes along, sits down by the fire, and when the vagabond awakes and sees him, his frustration returns, and he immediately disposes of his fourth priest. This tale has mathematical similarities to *Boçus*, but the climax is somewhat different. The humor in both tales arises partially from the unexpected variation of the pattern. The street porter and the vagabond think there is only one body to dispose of, and it is amusing to watch them as they keep discovering the same body, their anger and our delight growing with each repetition. In *Les Quatre Prestres*, however, the fourth victim appears purely by chance, since that priest had no previous connection with the story. In *Boçus*, on the other hand, the fourth hunchback is the master of the house from which the other three hunchbacks were taken. There is an inevitability in his return, and in these circumstances an inevitability in his death. The arrival of the fourth hunchback, like the arrival of the fourth priest, is unexpected during the course of the removal of the bodies, but because of its inevitability, it startles us with its appropriateness, where-

as the chance appearance of the fourth priest astonishes us with its coincidence. Both of these tales employ the device of comic repetition, but its use varies in both, and in itself is only a part of the source of the humor.

A similar comparison could be made between those climaxes that are the results of spontaneous acts and those that are planned. In *Le Preudome qui rescolt son compere de noier* (MR, 1:301), the wise men of the court cannot decide the merits of the case before them until a fool suddenly jumps up and supplies them with the answer. His act and suggestion are, in more ways than one, unpremeditated.²⁴ Not so in *L'Enfant qui fu remis au soleil* (MR, 1:162) in which the husband broods for fifteen years before he finally sells his son into slavery. In *Preudome* we marvel at the instinctive wisdom of the fool, wise beyond his ability, but in *L'Enfant* we are awed by the cleverness of the husband who turns his wife's explanation to his own purpose. Both climaxes are unexpected, and yet both are prepared for. In *Preudome*, the villainy of the victim forewarns us that he will not win the case, and in *L'Enfant* the husband simply turns the wife's lie around and traps her in it.

Another comic device partaking of surprise is incongruity, a quality frequently given as the source of all comedy. But this interpretation is surely wrong, since many non-comic qualities, such as deformity, ugliness, or even evil are forms of incongruity. Or as one modern theorist of comedy puts it: "The coming of Birnam Wood to Dunsinane, for instance, is unquestionably incongruous, but no one in the play or the audience thinks it is funny."²⁵ Incongruity is funny, but only in certain cir-

24. Omer Jodogne's observation that the fool's solution is "une sorte de jugement de Salomon" focuses on its wisdom rather than its source. The element of surprise comes from the combination. See his article, "Considérations sur le fabliau," 2:1052.

25. Robert W. Corrigan, ed., *Comedy: Meaning and Form*, p. 6. Many other theorists of comedy have made the same observation, such as Thomas Brown, Rev. Sydney Smith, James Beattie, George Santayana, and in Corrigan's anthology, J. L. Styan (p. 234).

cumstances. For the great philosopher Aristotle to serve willingly as a riding horse for a beautiful young girl is inconsistent with his wisdom and dignity.²⁶ It is also absurd that the only medicine that will revive the peasant in *Le Vilain Asnier* is the pungent odor of manure. The incongruity in both cases is funny because it is handled lightly, no one is permanently harmed or humiliated, and the stories turn out well. If *Le Lai d'Aristote* had received a slightly different emphasis when Aristotle was cavorting in the garden with the girl, or if the story had ended there, the incongruous situation would have become pathetic. The real comic climax in *Aristote* is not that scene, but in the subsequent clever way Aristotle escapes embarrassment. When Alexander chides him for his foolishness, Aristotle cleverly, and truthfully, answers by saying that his foolish conduct only proves him to be right, for if someone as old as himself can be misled by love, how much more should a younger man beware its force! That this retort is to be taken as the comic climax is clearly signaled by Alexander's response to it: "Le rois fu liez en iceste eure; / Son maistre en riant li pardone"²⁷ (Then was the king happy and laughingly pardoned his tutor). In *Le Vilain Asnier* (MR, 5:40), the incongruity of the peasant's cure is life-giving, bringing about an unusual form of rebirth, which is usually the final step in the loftiest comic pattern. The incongruity in both these cases is only part of the humor. Some fabliaux, indeed, depict situations that are incongruous but hardly funny. For a girl to dress up like a man is a common device in comedy, and in such plays as *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*

26. The popularity of this scene is evinced by its frequent representation in medieval and renaissance art. For a discussion of this phenomenon see the following: George Sarton, "Aristotle and Phyllis," pp. 8-19; and two articles by Joachim Storost: "Femme chevalchat Aristote," pp. 186-201, and "Zur Aristoteles-Sage im Mittelalter: Geistesgeschichtliche, folkloristische und literarische Grundlagen zu ihrer Erforschung," pp. 298-348.

27. Quoted from T. B. W. Reid, ed., *Twelve Fabliaux*, p. 81. See also MR, 1:260.

some delightful business results when girls are mistaken for men. But the young innocent girl in *Frere Denise* (MR, 3:263) who is lured into a monk's habit causes no laughter. The results of the incongruity here are sordid and shocking, partly because she is tricked and partly because Rutebeuf gives no details of the changes she undergoes in forsaking her virginity to become a mistress; he does not prepare us for that abrupt change. Even though the story turns out well for her, it does not make the incongruity of her changed habits funny.²⁸ Such incongruous conduct, however, could have been funny if it had been prepared for. Perhaps the most incongruous behavior in the fabliaux, behavior that is still within the realm of the possible, occurs in *Celle qui se fist foutre sur la fosse de son mari* (MR, 3:118). It is not unthinkable for a widow to take an interest in another man right after her husband has died: Chaucer's Wife of Bath admits that she had her eye on another man during her fourth husband's funeral, and we laugh. But the widow in *Celle qui se fist foutre* tops that. While she is mourning at her husband's grave a knight and his squire ride by. The knight notes her conduct and observes that she must feel great grief, but the squire says that he would wager that he could make love to her before they rode on. So on a bet he goes to the widow, consoles her, and tells her that he too has lost his beloved, whom he killed unintentionally. The widow asks how that happened, and he tells her he did it by literally loving her to death. The widow's reply to that is: " 'Gentilz hon, vien ça, si delivre / Cest siecle de moi, si me tue' " ("Gentle sir, come here, kill me and free me from this world"), MR, 3:121. He obliges her, but instead of dying, all her grief and memory of her husband, upon whose grave they make love, immediately evaporate. Considered in itself, the incongruity of her lovemaking is not only without humor, it is without

28. Jodogne, "Considérations," p. 1052, also finds *Frere Denise* lacking in humor, because he feels it is primarily a castigation of the Franciscan order.

sense. But as Norris J. Lacy has recently pointed out, the author carefully prepares for her change of heart by revealing to the audience that her grief is feigned. Lacy calls attention to the following lines (the italics are his):²⁹ “De grant dolor mener *se paine*” (She takes pain to grieve deeply), MR, 3:118. Speaking of her grief, the author observes: “Molt i emploie bien sa paine” (She puts great effort into it), MR, 3:118. At one point she apparently collapses out of grief: “A la terre cheir *se lait*” (She lets herself fall to the ground), MR, 3:119. Thus the audience has ample opportunity to realize, even before the knight and squire appear on the scene, that something is amiss. Clearly, then, incongruity, though it can be surprising and even shocking, is not in itself funny unless it is carefully prepared for and in the right circumstances.

Earlier I discussed the use of metaphor in the fabliaux and how it could prepare for the comic climax.³⁰ It frequently happens in the fabliaux that the metaphor is part of the climax, and, indeed, in one it is the climax. That tale is *La Saineresse* (MR, 1:289), the story in which a lover comes to his beloved in the disguise of a female bloodletter. The unsuspecting husband thinks nothing of allowing the bloodletter to take his wife upstairs for a bit of surgery, where, of course, the two make love, several times in fact. After *la saineresse* leaves, the wife comes down and tells her husband about the operation. I quote a part of her account:

“Par .iii. rebinées me prist
 Et à chascune fois m’assist
 Sor mes rains deux de ses peçons,
 Et me feroit uns cops si lons;
 Toute me sui fet martirier,
 Et si ne poi onques sainier.
 Granz cops me feroit et sovent;
 Morte fusse, mon escient,
 S’un trop bon oignement ne fust.” (MR, 1:291–92)

29. Norris Lacy, “Types of Esthetic Distance in the Fabliaux,” PP. 112–16. Translations of these lines are also Lacy’s.

30. See above, pp. 57–58.

A recent translation of that passage goes like this:

“Three times in succession that one took me,
 And each time placed
 Upon my thighs two of her tools
 And struck me with such long strokes
 That I was completely martyred,
 And yet I could not be bled.
 Heavy and repeated strokes beat upon me,
 And I would have died, I believe,
 If it had not been for a very good ointment.”³¹

Her whole speech lasts for 29 lines, or about a third of the tale, and is the only funny section in the story, although, as Benson and Andersson point out, it probably raised only a snigger, not a guffaw.³² That reaction would no doubt be due to the explicitness of the two terms of the metaphor, explicit, that is, to the wife and audience but not to the husband. The two terms of the metaphor, the bloodletting (vehicle) and the seduction (tenor), are the comic climax, and what is surprising is the cleverness of their appropriateness together. It is not simply a poetic metaphor but a narrative one, since in this story it is the ruse by which the wife gets revenge on her husband, who had claimed that he could never be fooled or made a cuckold. It would not be enough for her simply to have an affair, since he would have no chance of knowing he had been avenged, and she could hardly come out and tell him she had been unfaithful, so the metaphor is the perfect form for her revenge to take. It is also a perfect example of what I have been arguing all along: surprise and preparation are inseparable in the comic climax of the fabliaux. The preparation for the climax in *La Saineresse* is both the disguise and the seduction. But the two are kept separate in the tale until fused in the wife's double entendre. As actions they occur sequentially: the lover comes in disguise, and then he seduces the wife, a scene

31. Larry D. Benson and Theodore M. Andersson, eds., *The Literary Context of Chaucer's Fabliaux*, p. 267.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 263.

in which no mention is made of the guise of bloodletting, the lover himself referred to as *le pautonnier* ("the rogue") rather than *la saineresse*. But later as a metaphor, they not only occur simultaneously, they have become one entity.³³

The need for preparation and the effect its lack can have on a tale can be seen by comparing two tales that are similar in several ways but different in the extent of preparation in each. *Aloul* (MR, 1:255) and *Le Segretain Moine* (MR, 5:215) are two of the longest fabliaux, 987 lines and 816 lines long respectively. The principal similarity between the two tales is their multiplicity of violent actions. These actions could be grouped into scenes, each one including an action that might take place on the stage without a change in locale or sets. Both have about half a dozen such scenes, though the divisions between scenes naturally are arbitrary, since in both tales the scenes flow easily from one to another. There is, however, an important difference in the way they flow. But first it is necessary to give a brief account of each tale. In *Aloul* the scenes could be roughly outlined as: (1) a priest meets and seduces a wife in a garden one morning, and as a result she asks him to come to her bed that night; (2) the priest comes to her, but her husband, Aloul, discovers him, and so the priest flees to a roof where Aloul keeps his sheep; (3) Aloul's old shepherdess, Hersent, discovers the priest, who then seduces her, and she agrees to help him; (4) the priest returns to the wife, Aloul goes for help, so again the priest flees; (5) this time he goes to the top of the stairs, where he fights off Aloul and all his men, whom he knocks down the stairs; (6) the priest then flees to a storeroom and hides by perching on a rafter, where he is discovered, almost castrated, but finally escapes.

Now here is *Le Segretain Moine*: (1) a lecherous monk

33. As with the metaphor here, so with puns in the fabliaux—they often are the comic climax. See for example *La Coille noire* (MR, 6:90).

propositions a virtuous wife, Ydoine, whose husband, Guillaume, tells her to go along with the monk and invite him to come to her, but Guillaume's plan backfires when he accidentally kills the monk; (2) Guillaume takes the monk's body back to the abbey and props it up on one of the stools in the outhouse; (3) the prior discovers him there, and out of fear that he might be suspected of his death, takes the body into town and props him up against a townsman's gate—Guillaume's, of course; (4) Guillaume discovers him soon after, places the body in a sack, and buries it in one Sire Tibout's dunghill where, in exchange, he finds hidden there a sack of bacon that a thief has stolen from Tibout; he takes the bacon home; (5) meanwhile the thief, who had been drinking at a tavern with friends, comes to get the bacon but instead takes the sack with the monk back to the tavern; (6) when the thief discovers the body in place of his bacon, he takes the monk back to Tibout's and hangs him where he had found the bacon; (7) when Tibout discovers the body, he ties it to a horse and drives it back toward the abbey, where it runs around helter-skelter (causing the other monks to think the sacristan is out of his senses), until finally, in jumping a ditch, the horse tosses his ghostly rider in the water from which the other monks dredge the long-dead monk, who they naturally think has drowned.

Although both tales are episodic, the relationship of their scenes is different. *Aloul* is more linear, each episode flowing at random out of the previous one and into the next. In only one case is there backtracking, when the priest goes back to the wife in the fourth scene. Other than that, the locales and some of the incidental people change. In his fear the priest runs where he can; it does not really matter where, as long as he gets away. He has no plan from one episode to another. The first scene in the garden definitely sets up the second one in the bedroom, but none of the other scenes leads so neatly into the next ones. Not only is the action within most of the

scenes chaotic, the connection between the scenes is also chaotic. *Le Segretain Moine*, on the other hand, is structured on a principle that somewhat resembles the physical law of action and reaction. The monk comes from the abbey to Ydoine for the seduction; once killed he is returned to the abbey, from which he is returned to Ydoine, and so on. The monk visits almost every locale in the tale at least twice; he appears in a certain place, is taken away, only to reappear in that same place. Thus each scene prepares for the next one and leads into it almost inexorably. Each preparation is followed by a discovery, always of the same monk, but always in different circumstances or by different people. Thus while *Aloul* is a more flowing tale, *Le Segretain Moine* has more snap, each incident triggering the next, like boxers returning blows. The result is that *Aloul* lacks tension; the individual episodes do not play off the previous ones. Its structure is loose and limp; *Le Segretain Moine's* is firm and taut. *Aloul* has many merits, which my outline hardly does justice to, but I do think *Segretain Moine* is a finer story because of its firm structure. Even slapstick well done is neat and precise; it is the difference between Chaplin and The Three Stooges. But my principal goal is to show how any climactic action—and in these two tales we have multiple comic climaxes—needs careful preparation to set it off. There are plenty of surprises in *Aloul*, and it is easy to imagine what a fine farce it would make on the stage, but *Le Segretain Moine* would be even more satisfying because of the added pleasure in seeing those careful preparations fulfilled.

Well-placed obscenities can also be surprising or, rather, shocking. I have discussed this trait of the fables and have already given several examples, so further discussion here would be unnecessary.³⁴ In many fables of this type, the obscene word is the comic climax itself, some blunt, crude expression that contrasts with a previous refined tone, or, as Percy has argued, reveals

34. See above, pp. 55-57.

a change from illusion to reality as a euphemism is suddenly dropped to expose an obscenity.³⁵ In some fabliaux the obscenities are spread throughout, and hence the climax in these tales is not the obscene word itself but some other surprise. In this connection I might also mention that elsewhere I have discussed the potential for pornography in the fabliaux, a surprising number of which embody certain pornographic fantasies (which we usually think of as a more modern phenomenon). In these stories the fantasy is frequently fulfilled quite literally and fantastically, only to be destroyed in a climax that is a return to healthy normality.³⁶

Thus the surprise in the comic climax can take many forms and is prepared for in many ways. Almost all fabliaux have that kind of comic climax, and the exceptions are rare. Admittedly, a few of them lack the surprise in any significant sense of the word. *Le Vallet qui d'aise a malaise se met* (MR, 2:157) moves with a dull relentlessness until the story, like its hero's money, merely runs out. *Le Prestre qui dist la Passion* (MR, 5:80) lacks not only surprise but any literary merit at all. And it is questionable if some fabliaux are real stories; *Le Vilain qui n'iert pas de son hostel* has no authentic story line, and its editor is kind in calling it a "banale histoire."³⁷ One of the most famous fabliaux is Gautier le Leu's *La Veuve* (MR, 2:197), which has been called a *tableau de moeurs* rather than a tale.³⁸ I think that this fabliau has a story line—the widow goes from grief for her husband to reawakened sexual desire to another marriage and all the grief that comes with that—but it is reported and not dramatized, and what could have been an excellent comic climax is submerged. Finally, *Le Roi d'Angleterre et le Jongleur d'Ely* (MR, 2:242) consists entirely of dialogue, a debate

35. Percy, "Modes of Signification," pp. 163-96.

36. Thomas D. Cooke, "Pornography, the Comic Spirit, and the Fabliaux," in *The Humor of the Fabliaux*, pp. 137-62.

37. L.-F. Flutre, "Un Manuscrit Inconnu de la Bibliothèque de Lyon," pp. 2-5.

38. Bédier, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 480.

between the king and the jongleur.³⁹ Although no action takes place, a kind of climax of rhetoric does occur. At first the jongleur gives playful, dodging answers to the king, who believes that he is being frivolous, but then the jongleur spends the last half of the tale lecturing the king on the impossibility of pleasing all men and thus on the serious purpose behind his mode of answering.

All in all, then, only a handful of fabliaux does not have the characteristic comic climax, and it is possible that even those few mavericks could reveal some hidden or unrecognized climax. The typical fabliau, however, exemplifies perfectly the words of Chaucer's Pandarus: "Th'ende is every tales strengthe."

I would like to close this chapter with a brief account of one fabliau that I believe to be almost a parody of a comic climax. It is the only one in the whole canon that does so, and whether it is intentional or not, I have no idea. In my opinion, it is a funny tale, but its parodic humor is the type that gets its laughs by being nonsensical, like the quip that is funny precisely because it is totally inappropriate to the situation. In the case of this fabliau, there is a surprise ending, but it is too much of one. *Brifaut* is the name of a peasant who takes some cloth to market only to have a thief cleverly steal it from him. When he returns home and tells his wife what happened, she does not believe his story and curses him soundly. He swears to her that he is telling the truth and even prays that Death may take him if he lies: " 'Suer, si me puist Morz acorer, / Et se me doing Dieus male honte, / Se ce n'est voire que je vos conte' " ("My dear, may Death strike me down, and may God bring me to shame, if I'm not telling you the truth"). I am sure that any audience would be just as stunned as the wife by what then happens: "Maintenant Morz celui acore" (And immediately Death struck him down), MR, 4:152. That is ridiculous, so much so that it has its own unique

39. Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 57, says that this fabliau "n'est presque qu'un dit ou qu'une 'jangle!'"

humor, the humor of absurdity. It shows what can happen when an author takes only part of the unwritten artistic law of the genre and carries it to its logical extreme, an extension that proves the need for the law's boundaries. Not even the wife's curses that disease and death take him (ll. 62-70) can make up for the lack of connection between Brifaut's mishap at market and his sudden demise. Our hero's death is undeserved, inappropriate, and unprepared.



V. Humor in the Fabliaux



There is a tone of condescension in some critics' acknowledgment that the fabliaux are funny, as if that quality automatically drums them out of the ranks of worthwhile literature.¹ It is as though these critics assume that humorous stories have little significance and are nothing more than amusing diversions. But significance is not only on the side of serious and large-scale works; a simple fairy tale can have a theme similar to that of the fullest epic, or a ballad can offer a view of life that is the same as that found in a five-act tragedy. Admittedly they may not have the same impact, but they can have a comparable significance. Literary works that vary in size and seriousness can still share a similar archetypal pattern, or, in linguistic terms, the same deep structure. The principle behind these equations is analogy, which is more than simple comparison; it is a radical sharing of the same formal cause, the same informing determinant. Behind the humdrum settings and ordinary people of the fabliaux, beneath the piles of crude obscenities and the bizarre workings of the plots significance lies. That

1. Like this one: "Their [the fabliaux's] object is simply to raise a laugh, and they succeed by means that are usually fairly broad and may not stop short of coarseness." L. Cazamian, *A History of French Literature*, p. 39.

significance is crystallized in the climax, and therefore it is comic.

Comic meaning is not necessarily the same as thematic meaning, which is often thought of as an abstract statement of the point of a story. Some fabliaux do have thematic meanings, which occasionally are found in the moral tag at the end. When the narrator tells us at the conclusion of a fabliau that "He who is lost is a loser," he is giving us a statement of its theme. But knowing only that, are we satisfied that we have the essence of the story? Such a statement of the theme does not consider the most memorable aspect of the story, its humor. If the tale could be told without its humor, the theme could be the same, but not only would it be a different story, it would also thwart the reason for which it was told, its comic effect. The fabliaux are not told for the sake of any theme they might embody, no matter how meaningful and profound, but rather for their humor, which is not a factor added to them, but of their essence. Ultimately the thematic meaning and the comic significance can be related, and even identical, but the reluctance of many critics to grant any significance to the humor and the compulsion of others to find meaning only in the theme justify stressing the difference.

Comedy, as I mentioned earlier, is a mystery and dangerous to generalize about.² Even when concentrating on one genre, there are so many aspects of its humor that it would be misleading to say that one theory explained it all. Theorists disagree not only about the nature of comedy itself but also about the nature of the various forms comedy takes, such as satire, irony, parody, farce, and so on; so it is hardly surprising that they would disagree when applying theories of those forms to a genre. Too often the tales are forced to fit a theory rather than the other way around. There is some truth in each of the interpretations of the humor of the fabliaux, but none seems completely satisfactory in itself. From them and

2. See above, pp. 20-21.

from several general theories of comedy, it should be possible to form an idea of the complexity of the humor in the fabliaux. The eclectic method is unavoidable if one is to be fair to the material.

It is quite possible, of course, that some theories of comedy that are not discussed would be applicable to the fabliaux. Comedy as superiority, ambivalence, or the like, would undoubtedly be approaches to these tales that would add to our understanding of their humor. Because my study does not deal with all of those theories, I am not thereby excluding their possible validity; they simply would form another study, not this one.

Most critics and readers of the fabliaux note a strain of satire running throughout these tales; a few scholars have felt that they are primarily satirical. One of the clearest and strongest expressions of that view is the following statement by Charles Aubertin:

La poésie des fabliaux est l'expression la plus ancienne et la plus populaire de l'esprit satirique en France. . . . Le premier caractère, le trait le plus frappant de la poésie satirique primitive qui a pris la forme de contes et de récits, est de s'attaquer à toutes les conditions sociales et de n'épargner aucune classe, si puissante qu'elle soit.³

Aubertin then simply goes through the various classes and types of medieval people and cites fabliaux that serve as examples. Although the fabliaux do poke fun at just about every type in medieval France, the spirit of satire, or of attack, does not seem to be the force behind them. Most scholars today would agree with Joseph Bédier when he states:

Le rire des fabliaux n'est donc ni brice ni lâche; mais est-il décidément satirique? Non, si l'on donne à ce mot sa pleine signification, qui oppose satire et moquerie. La satire suppose la haine, la colère. Elle

3. Charles Aubertin, *Histoire de la langue et de la littérature françaises au moyen âge*. . . , 2:3-5.

implique la vision d'un état de choses plus parfait, qu'on regrette ou qu'on rêve, et qu'on appelle.⁴

His brief description of the fabliaux is a sensitive statement of their spirit:

L'esprit qui anime cette masse est fait de bon sens frondeur, gai, d'une intelligence réelle de la vie courante de monde, d'un sens très exact du positif. Pas de naïveté, mais un tour ironique de niaiserie maligne; ni de colère, ni, d'ordinaire, de satire qui porte; mais la dérision amusée, la croyance, commune à tous du moyen âge, que rien, ici-bas ne doit ni ne peut changer, et que l'ordre établi, immuable, est le bon: l'optimisme, la joie de vivre, un réalisme sans amertume.⁵

Bédier spells out, by exclusion, those characteristics that are frequently found in satire: the hatred of vices, the attack on those vices, the implied ideal behind the attack, and the refusal to accept or to live with vices. Almost all scholars now agree with Bédier, and the previous three chapters of this study clearly reaffirm his argument. For example, many fabliaux have a strain of anti-feminism in them, depicting women as unfaithful and shrewish, but their purpose is not to attack women. Even though the wife in *La Borgoise d'Orliens* has had her husband beaten while she enjoyed her lover, we certainly do not condemn her for that but rather admire her cleverness in pulling off such duplicity.

Irony takes many forms in literature: verbal, dramatic, narrative, and cosmic, and the fabliaux partake of these forms. There is the irony of introducing a story as though it is a courteous *aventure* only to have it turn out to be bawdy romp; the irony of describing a knight in chivalric terms, only to have him turn out to be crude and cowardly; some tales are ironic reflections on life, and many end with ironic morals.⁶ But as with the satiric moments

4. Joseph Bédier, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 332.

5. Bédier, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 340.

6. These are views expressed by several of the contributors to

in the fabliaux, irony is only occasional or partial. Morals, descriptions, and introductions may have an ironic relation to the tale, but the tale itself does not have a basically ironic structure. This is true even in those tales in which some reversal takes place. The typical victim is a husband who is cuckolded by his wife, but the reversal is usually not ironic because either the husband has no illusions about his wife's infidelity or no knowledge of it. And in many cases where he is operating under an illusion during the story, at its climax he knows the truth. Indeed, the climax in many of these tales is the breaking of the illusion.⁷ More important, these tales do not have a vision of life that could be called ironic since they do not concentrate on the conflict between appearances and reality that seems to underlie irony. They do, of course, see that things are not what they should be, but the dominance of the comic climax either transforms whatever irony underlies that view into a healthy acceptance of the way things are or it destroys the illusion.

There are, of course, many ways of looking at irony, and several of them almost describe the fabliaux. Northrop Frye's first phase of irony (which can sometimes be satire) comes close, as this account puts it:

It [the first phase of satire or irony] takes for granted a world which is full of anomalies, injustices, follies, and crimes, and yet is permanent and undisplaceable. Its principle is that anyone who wishes to keep his balance in such a world must learn first of all to keep his eyes open and his mouth shut. . . . Where gaiety predominates in such satire, we have an attitude which fundamentally accepts social conventions

The Humor of the Fabliaux: A Collection of Critical Essays, eds. Thomas D. Cooke and Benjamin L. Honeycutt. See the following essays: Benjamin L. Honeycutt, "The Knight and His World as Instruments of Humor in the Fabliaux," pp. 76-92; Per Nykrog, "Courtliness and the Townspeople: The Fabliaux as a Courtly Burlesque," p. 69; and Norris Lacy, "Types of Esthetic Distance in the Fabliaux," p. 110. I know of no scholar who argues that the fabliaux are predominantly ironic.

7. See above, p. 55.

but stresses tolerance and flexibility within their limits.⁸

So far, so good; the fabliaux heroes certainly are flexible within the limits of certain social conventions (for example, lecherous in an epoch of rigorously prescribed chastity), but it is impossible to apply the sense of an ending in this phase to the fabliaux. Here is Frye's description of that ending:

The sense of absurdity about such a comedy arises as a kind of backfire or recall after the work has been seen or read. Once we have finished with it, deserts of futility open up on all sides, and we have, in spite of the humor, a sense of nightmare and a close proximity to something demonic. Even in a very light-hearted comedy, we may get a trace of this feeling.⁹

Frye does not include the fabliaux as examples of this phase (nor anywhere in his book), and readers of those tales would realize that his description of the ending does not fit. Indeed, the endings of the fabliaux are satisfying and fulfilling, and those tales are actually closer to a certain phase in Frye's account of the mythos of comedy, as I will discuss shortly.

Bédier viewed the fabliaux as literature primarily intended for the bourgeois. No one questioned that opinion at length until Per Nykrog, who argued that they were primarily a courtly literature. He concludes the first part of his study with this summary: "Ainsi, sur tous les points étudiés jusqu'ici nous avons trouvé le point de vue du fabliau sur la société médiévale absolument identique à celui de la littérature courtoise."¹⁰ Although Nykrog has somewhat modified this statement more recently, his original viewpoint bears investigation not only because it set off a wave of interest in the fabliaux but also because it was an interpretation that demanded

8. Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, pp. 226-27.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 226.

10. Per Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 139.

a thoroughgoing reexamination of many facets of these tales.¹¹

Nykrog mustered a great many arguments to prove that the intended audience was courtly: some fabliaux begin with introductions that would have been addressed only to a courtly audience; some were compiled with romances in the same manuscripts, a fact that Nykrog argues surely indicates a courtly market; their frequently courtly attitude is evinced in the portrayal of many details from a daily life distinctly not bourgeois; and knights are always successful in love affairs, whereas the other classes, especially priests and peasants, are not so fortunate.¹² His main argument for an aristocratic audience is that the fabliaux are parodies of courtly literature: lays, epics, and especially romances. The lower classes would not have understood many allusions to those genres, and hence those allusions would have been pointless and wasted. The fabliaux do not, Nykrog argued, point their parody in the direction of courtly audiences and their literature but rather toward the lower classes, whom they depict as trying to imitate the refinements of a nobler culture. Here is Nykrog's summary of his study of parody in the fabliaux:

La réponse à la question posée à la fin du chapitre précédent doit donc être affirmative: la fabliau est très souvent une parodie de la courtoisie, mais loin de viser l'aristocratie, cette parodie se moque des classes qui lui sont inférieures. Le fabliau paraît donc être le genre par lequel les nobles s'amuse au dépens de la "courtoisie des vilains."¹³

11. The modification is found in the Postscript to the new edition of Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*. Interest was also heightened when his work first appeared in 1957 with the publication at the same time of two collections of fabliaux by R. C. Johnston and D. D. R. Owen, eds., *Fabliaux*; and T. B. W. Reid, ed., *Twelve Fabliaux*; and shortly thereafter with the appearance of Jean Rychner's *Contribution à l'étude des fabliaux*. Charles Muscatine's *Chaucer and the French Tradition* gave this interest its chief English expression.

12. Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, pp. 20-27, 91-93, 265-68.

13. Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 104.

Because it is so often a parody of the lower classes aping the courtly, Nykrog argued that the genre is primarily burlesque, "un burlesque courtois."

Scholars have generally accepted Nykrog's correction of Bédier's position that the audience was bourgeois, but they have not fully subscribed to his theory that it was courtly.¹⁴ The fullest critique is a two-volume work by Jean Rychner, who, after studying different versions of similar fabliaux, concluded that some of them were burlesques—and perhaps the original versions were thus intended—but that the others were not. In the two versions of *Bérengier au lonc cul*, for example, the husband is naturally cowardly in one because he is a peasant, but in the other the causes are more psychological. The ridicule in the first version is directed against a class, whereas in the second version it is against an individual.¹⁵ The change in the versions indicates a different audience for each, which means that not all fabliaux, not even those with an erotic theme, belong to "un burlesque courtois." Rychner finds no reason for excluding one version and

14. The following reviews raise objections to Nykrog's book. Robert Guiette (*Revue Belge de philologie et d'histoire* 38 [1960]: 452-55) believes that the lower classes could have had knowledge of the manners of their superiors and that all classes could have enjoyed the fabliaux. Charles H. Livingston (*Speculum* 33 [1958]: 310-16) also feels that the audience could vary and objects that Nykrog has excluded those tales which are not erotic as unimportant in trying to show that the genre is burlesque. Jean Rychner (*Romance Philology* 12 [1959]: 336-39) states that Nykrog does not distinguish between the "milieux courtois" proper and the "public littéraire en général," and that the latter could have appreciated the burlesque without being a member of the courtly class. Knud Togeby (*Orbis Litterarum* 12 [1957]: 85-98) makes the same objection as Rychner and also maintains that the fabliaux sometimes give the people's point of view, so that they really do not belong to any one class.

In a paper delivered at a colloquium Rychner raises another objection: Nykrog assumes a unity of style and content, but burlesque really comes from a contrast of style and content. Jean Rychner, "Les Fabliaux: genre, styles, publics," pp. 41-54.

15. Rychner, *Contribution à l'étude des fabliaux*, 1:64-65.

not the other, so that all are authentic *fabliaux*. He concludes:

De toute façon, même si les versions secondes ne répondent pas aux intentions des premiers auteurs du genre, il faut leur faire leur place dans l'histoire pour le simple raison qu'elles ont existé. A les exclure, on laisse échapper une bonne part de la réalité. Il faut donc les inclure et reconnaître ce qui est presque évident: la diffusion des *fabliaux* n'est pas restée limitée aux cercles dits courtois.¹⁶

There could be further objections to Nykrog's original argument. A clearer distinction should be made between those works that are essentially and radically parodies, such as those by Max Beerbohm, which have no meaning unless one knows the work being parodied, and those with only partial or incidental parody—not just of minor incidents, but of a major angle of the work as a whole, as in those by Alexander Pope. Although Nykrog's work is extremely valuable in unearthing levels of parody that had long been buried, the *fabliaux* can be appreciated without knowing the intent of their parody. Beerbohm's parodies make no sense at all unless we know what he is working against; the *fabliaux* do make sense in themselves without a knowledge of courtly literature. Most important, however, is that they are not absolutely dependent upon their parody for their humor. For example, I have already discussed *Aloul* with its multiple and farcical actions in the night. Nykrog's discussion of *Aloul* points out how the beginning of that tale is courtly and refined, bearing close resemblance to the style of Marie de France.¹⁷ But the delicacy of the style is soon broken by a crude note, and hence the opening really is parodic. Granted, but the rest of the tale moves so far and so long away from that parody that it can only be con-

16. Rychner, *Contribution à l'étude des fabliaux*, 1:146.

17. Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, pp. 72-73, and "Courtliness and the Townspeople," pp. 72-73.

sidered incidental. We do not need to remember the opening lines to appreciate the rest of the tale; indeed, it is unlikely that they could be remembered. It would be very different if the rest of the tale sustained the parody, but it does not.

A further point is that in most discussions of parody in the fabliaux, critics assume that people only parody others and not themselves. There is nothing in the Middle Ages, as far as I know, that would make it impossible or even difficult for a medieval audience, whether courtly, bourgeois, or peasant, to laugh at themselves. On the other hand, it is a common experience in the twentieth century to hear people tell ethnic jokes directed against their own nationality or race. The joke considered as such may ridicule certain traits (real or fantastic) of a group, but members of a group can often be heard telling and enjoying those jokes. And it has yet to be proved that in every or even in some instances this is reverse psychology or psychic masochism. It may simply be that members of the group enjoy the humor of the joke. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, we must assume that the parody in the fabliaux could be appreciated even by those being parodied.¹⁸

There is certainly a great deal of farcical action in the fabliaux, and recognition of that quality leads Clem Williams to suggest that they are essentially a type of farce.¹⁹ He sees in them the broad and elemental situations, the gross violations of decorum, and the exaggerated characters and situations that are usually found in farce. They

18. On this phenomenon see Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, pp. 111–12.

19. Clem C. Williams, Jr., "The Genre and Art of the Old French Fabliaux: A Preface to the Study of Chaucer's Tales of the Fabliau Type." For another discussion of farce in the fabliaux see A. Booker Thro, "Chaucer's Creative Comedy: A Study of the *Miller's Tale* and the *Shipman's Tale*," pp. 97–111. Thro sees the spirit of farce to be "destructive aggressiveness" (p. 99), and our delight in these tales is due to the "malicious glee" (p. 100) we feel when the unpleasant or wicked people are tricked. My reasons for disagreeing with Thro will become apparent in the next few pages.

also contain the basic farcical structure in the contrasting balance between the everyday, mundane settings and characters and the bizarre, fantastic, and occasionally supernatural actions. The combination of these two disparate modes results in a kind of mock-heroism, a quality always present in farce.²⁰ Earlier in this work I considered Williams's view of the climax, which the farcical action leads up to "like a fuse attached to a bomb." The result of that explosive ending, Williams finds, is a chaotic and fragmented order.²¹ Examination of the endings of several fabliaux leads him to make this important judgment: "And this rather simple trait, of unresolved or only speciously resolved disorder, is a characteristic of all the tales in the main body of the fabliaux, giving the world of each a final and unmistakably farcical stamp."²² I agree with many of Williams's comments about the farcical elements in the fabliaux but not with his judgment that they end in disorder or only specious order. His study is actually another attempt at a definition of the fabliaux, and his theory leads him to reject from the "main body" many which everyone else would accept. In a similar situation Rychner warned against bending reality out of shape to make it fit theory. There are simply too many fabliaux in which the main action ends in a complete and satisfying resolution for this theory to be acceptable. I cannot see anything left unresolved at the end of *Le Vilain qui conquist Paradis par plait, Les Deux*

20. Williams, "The Genre and Art of the Old French Fabliaux," p. 89.

21. Several theorists of humor believe all comedy has about it a drive toward chaos. See for example John Middleton Murry, *Jonathan Swift: A Critical Biography*, pp. 81-82; and Wylie Sypher, "The Meanings of Comedy," p. 47. Just as many scholars see its drive toward order: Sypher, "The Meanings of Comedy," p. 51; Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 171, reprinted in *Comedy: Meaning and Form*, p. 149. For related psychological theories grouped under the heading of "configurational theories" of comedy see Patricia Keith-Spiegel, "Early Conceptions of Humor: Varieties and Issues," pp. 11-12.

22. Williams, "The Genre and Art of the Old French Fabliaux," p. 30.

Angloys et l'anel, *Saint Piere et le jongleur*, and many others all of which find acceptance as fabliaux, except in the list of Williams. Even some that he uses as models to prove the unresolved situation, such as *Le Prestre teint*, have endings that adequately finish all the business at hand. But the most serious objection to Williams's theory is that it concentrates exclusively on the plot line of the fabliaux. Perhaps that is all that can be done in farce; if so, it is surely a limiting quality inherent in the genre. In the fabliaux, however, there is a satisfactory completion at the end that is present regardless of whether the story line ends in chaos or order. This structure varies, of course, from tale to tale, and I need only recall the differences between *Aloul* and *Le Segretain Moine* to affirm that principle. Those tales are surely two of the most farcical fabliaux, but both conclude with endings that leave an audience with a sense of fulfillment and harmony, which indicates that there was a resolution of the important conflict. Perhaps Williams's image of the bomb controls too much of his view. Although these tales frequently conclude explosively—what could be more violent and chaotic than the final scene in *Le Segretain Moine*, with a runaway horse ridden by a dead monk racing around in circles, knocking down at least one monk, somehow getting into the abbey kitchen, and breaking all of their cookware—the parts invariably fall neatly into place after that explosion. This is especially true in a story like *Le Segretain Moine*, since the lecherous monk has gotten his just desserts (with a vengeance he cannot appreciate), even ending up at the abbey from which he never should have strayed. The satisfaction that we feel is not only from the successful completion of the plot line but also in the fulfillment of the preparations for the surprise ending. Even if the fabliaux were to end in a chaotic finale, the explosion would be satisfying because we expected it, and hence it would be fulfilling, not destructive.

Scholars have considered the fabliaux as farce, parody,

and satire, but none of these theories is adequate in itself. They are partial explanations, and other theories of their humor can be given. For example, another source of the humor in many fabliaux is the triumph at the end.²³ The hero is victorious over an obstacle or opponent and finds himself in a newer and freer state. The comic pattern is structured on a movement of birth-life-death-rebirth, those steps usually being symbolic or spiritual, but the conclusion resulting in triumph and freedom. This is the structure of some of the loftiest works of art: Shakespeare's comedies, Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. This pattern hardly sounds like a description of the fabliaux, and yet many of them do indeed end with a triumph. Some would even qualify as high comedy. Here is the story of *Le Vilain qui conquist Paradis par plait* (MR, 3:209):

A certain peasant dies. As his soul departs from his body, no one is there to claim it, neither good angel nor bad. He had been a bit frightened that the bad angel would be there to snatch him down to Hell, so when he realizes he is safe, he is overjoyed. He looks to his right and sees Saint Michael leading a soul joyfully to Paradise, so he scampers after them and enters Paradise. Saint Peter sees him hanging around inside the gate and tells him that he can't stay without judgment, and, anyway, they don't want any peasants (*vilain*) here; they're not welcome in Paradise.

The peasant answers that no one was more of a wretch (*vilains*) than Saint Peter, who denied our Lord three times. He has been more loyal, so he should be allowed to stay.

Saint Peter goes off in shame. He meets Saint Thomas the Apostle and tells him what happened. Thomas says he'll take care

23. Thro, "Chaucer's Creative Comedy," pp. 99–100, sees the triumph in the fabliaux as something destructive and malicious.

of him, so he goes and snidely tells the peasant that they have no room for him since Heaven is filled with martyrs and confessors. But the peasant answers that he deserves to be there more than Thomas, since he never doubted our Lord.

Shamefaced, Saint Thomas leaves, meets Saint Paul and tells him what happened. So Paul goes to get rid of the peasant, who, however, reminds him of Saint Stephen, and so Paul is also put to shame.

The three saints then go together and complain to God that a peasant has entered Paradise. God then goes and tells him that no one enters there without permission, and, anyway, who does he think he is, insulting the saints like that?

Very respectfully but very firmly the peasant gives the reasons he should be permitted to stay: he always kept his faith in God, he led a pure life, he gave to the poor, he received the sacraments, and he assures God that He knows all that is true. Anyway, he is in Paradise, so God can't kick him out or He'd be breaking His promise, since He once said that no one who comes here would ever have to leave. God agrees with his argument, says he has spoken well, and allows him to stay.

Here is a triumph of the highest order, the personal salvation of a deserving poor man. This peasant is a sympathetic hero, one who undergoes trials and is victorious. His opponents, regardless of their sanctified state, fail to examine the merits of his case because of an explicit prejudice against his social class. Obviously the portrayal of Peter, Thomas, and Paul are caricatures of the real saints, but the prejudice against peasants was a prejudice that was felt by some to extend even to the inhabitants of Paradise. Here is what a contemporary satirist said: "Mais Dieu déteste les vilains et les vilaines; et c'est pour-

quoi il a voulu que toutes les afflictions pesassent sur eux."²⁴ But this peasant's defense cuts through that bias and centers instead on the only qualification for admission to Paradise, moral worth, which, he reminds them, they themselves did not always achieve in this world. His success in these three minor skirmishes—an unusual instance of comic repetition—leads inexorably to a climactic encounter with the Divinity. It is rather surprising to imagine God listening somewhat passively and thoughtfully as this eloquent peasant pleads his case. The tale is high comedy because the peasant's victory is based on his absolutely flawless and, in every sense of the word, impeccable argument. If his only argument had been the last one he had used—he's there, and so God must allow him to stay or violate His word—it would not have been a justifiable triumph, and if he had been permitted to stay in Heaven his salvation would have depended on a gimmick, a *Paradisus ex machina, non ex merito*. As it is though, the tale is a comic saint's legend commemorating not a canonized saint with his own feast day, but one of the legions who would be remembered only on All Saints' Day.

This fabliau is not so atypical as it might appear. *Saint Pierre et le jongleur* (MR, 5:65) offers a triumphant view of the afterlife in Hell (its comic theme being that gambling saves souls), *Le Vilain Mire* (MR, 3:156) depicts a clever and successful peasant doctor, and *Les Deux Angloys et l'anel* (MR, 2:178) moves from sickness to health, albeit through the medicinal nourishment of ass meat. Even in those fabliaux in which there is a love triangle, a just and fair triumph is occasionally the reward for the sympathetic hero, as it is in *Le Prestre qui fu mis au lardier* (MR, 2:24), in which the husband traps and

24. *Le Despit au vilain*, quoted in Edmond Faral, *La Vie quotidienne au temps de Saint Louis* (Paris: Hachette, 1938; reprinted 1968), p. 123. D. D. R. Owen also feels this *vilain* is unworthy. See his "The Element of Parody in *Saint Pierre et le Jongleur*," pp. 60-63.

punishes the lover. Stories of seduction can even be partially admirable triumphs: the young boy and girl in *La Gageure* (MR, 2:193) are in love, but there is opposition to their marriage. They are forced into proving their love by engaging in a deliberate "misdirected kiss," but the young man thwarts the opposition of his elders by turning the kiss into a seduction and thereby forcing them to give the girl to him in marriage.

The conflict in *La Gageure* between a young man who desires a girl and someone who blocks the fulfillment of his wishes is a very typical situation in the fabliaux. It is also the normal situation in most comedies. In his comprehensive study of the archetypal patterns of comedy, tragedy, romance, and satire, Frye describes the typical comic plot:

The plot structure of Greek New Comedy, as transmitted by Plautus and Terence, in itself less a form than a formula, has become the basis for most comedy, especially in its more highly conventionalized dramatic form, down to our own day. It will be the most convenient to work out the theory of comic construction from drama, using illustrations from fiction only incidentally. What normally happens is that a young man wants a young woman, that his desire is resisted by some opposition, usually parental, and that near the end of the play some twist in the plot enables the hero to have his will.²⁵

This passage would be an accurate account of the plots of numerous fabliaux. In *Auberée, la vielle maquerelle* (MR, 5:1), a young man has his heart set on a girl, but his father opposes the match; the girl finally marries another man, a rich but old widower. Still pining for the girl, the young man solicits the services of a go-between, Auberée, who arranges a tryst that is so successful that the young man is satisfied, the husband is convinced of his wife's fidelity, and she has the best of both worlds. In the end, "Tot .lll. fuerent en gré seri" (All three

25. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 163.

were well pleased), MR, 5:23. Here surely is a tale to suit Frye's description of the usual comic plot.

But of course it does not fit. There is a wide disparity between the humor in *Auberée* and the comedies that Frye has in mind, such as Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. The difference rests on another feature of comedy that Frye finds in the highest expression of that type. His quotation above continues:

In this simple pattern there are several complex elements. In the first place, the movement of comedy is usually a movement from one kind of society to another. At the beginning of the play the obstructing characters are in charge of the play's society, and the audience recognizes that they are usurpers. At the end of the play the device in the plot that brings hero and heroine together causes a new society to crystallize around the hero.²⁶

The resolution of comedy is, therefore, both an individual triumph and a social one; both are free and victorious at the end.²⁷ Here is the element missing from the fables. For the most part, there is no social triumph, no movement from a repressive society to a free one, and no social reconciliation. In the comedies that Frye uses as examples, the blocking character is often an older man, frequently the girl's father. In many fables, he is also an older man, but he is almost always the girl's husband. Frye points out that at the end of many comedies there is a wedding, one that actually unites the lovers, but one

26. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 163.

27. Frye has broken down comedy into six phases. The third phase, in which the hero triumphs over society, he views as the normal one in comedy, and it is that phase that I am using as a standard for comparison with the fables. I do not find that they belong in any of the other phases, such as the first, when restrictive society triumphs or remains undefeated (pp. 177-79), nor in the second in which the hero cannot change that society but flees from it (p. 180). Roy J. Percy's dissertation advances a theory of the conflict in the fables, which he bases on Frye's second phase of satire, but I find that this is also insufficiently comprehensive to be applicable to the fables as a whole.

that also symbolizes the social reconciliation. There are a few marriages (but no wedding ceremonies) at the end of some fabliaux, as in *La Gageure*, but in most there can be none since the young girl is already married. It is also a curious but completely understandable phenomenon that in the fabliaux there is no dissolution of the marriage bond—no separations, no annulments, nor even any instance of a wife's running off with her lover, or of a husband being murdered by wife and/or her lover.²⁸ Nor are there any attempts or even spoken desires to break up a marriage. The lover is satisfied with either an extramarital affair or just one fling with the girl. In *La Borgoise d'Orliens* (MR, 1:117) the student-lover continues his relationship with the wife until he finishes his studies and returns home, and in *Un Chivalier et sa dame et un clerk* (MR, 2:215) the lady allows her lover only one rather exhausting visit and then sends him away forever. Since the lovers are satisfied with a limited love, they are in a sense triumphant. Society, which is here represented by the institution of marriage, remains intact, even though it may have been a bit jarred. The adulterous relationship that rattles the marriage is not to be condemned simply because adultery is immoral. The fabliaux almost never consider the moral aspect of a deed. Frye says that the happy ending in the comedy inspires the audience with a feeling that it should be that way; if that response sounds like a moral judgment, "it is, except that it is not moral in the restricted sense, but

28. Only two husbands die in the fabliaux (*Brifaut* and *Le Trois Boçus*) but neither as a result of an amorous triangle. Some husbands have died prior to the opening of the story (*Celle qui se fist foutre sur la fosse de son mari* and *La Veuve*), and their wives recover from their grief with unusual haste. One would-be lover is killed in *Le Segretain Moine*, but his death is more of an accident than a planned murder. In spite of their reputation for violence, the fabliaux depict only some half dozen deliberate murders (*Estormi*, *L'Home qui avoit feme tencheresse*, *Le Pescheor de pont sur Seine*, and *Une Seule Fame qui a son con servoit .c. chevaliers de tous poins*).

social.”²⁹ The conflict between lovers and marriage has only a social, not a moral, dimension in the fabliaux. Their extramarital love, therefore, is a social fault. They achieve what they desire, but since society is not changed by their love these stories cannot fully qualify as comedies. The conflict provides the necessary agents for comedy, but their resolution does not fulfill that potential. As comedies, they are incomplete.

Fabliaux depicting successful extramarital relationships are typical of the genre, and hence their inability to qualify as comedies is sufficient to disqualify the whole corpus. Individual fabliaux do bring about a personal triumph that is also a social reconciliation. The peasant in *Le Vilain qui conquist Paradis par plait* not only wins justice and salvation for himself, but he also upholds the right of his class to receive the same divine treatment afforded to the establishment (his not having a name makes him more representative of the class). As one scholar observes, his victory is “une revendication piquante et hardie des droits des pauvres gens dans ce monde et dans l’autre, et une revanche des dédains que leur témoignait la société officielle. . . .”³⁰ The number of fabliaux, however, in which the personal and the social both end happily is rare. Indeed, the humor in *Le Vilain Asnier* (MR, 5:40) is the result of the difference between society and the individual. The fabliau is based on the comic assumption that what would be harmful for society is actually remedial for the ass driver. What revivifies and delights society brings him near to death, and what causes his rebirth would sicken society. The humor in this tale is that the personal triumph is not a social reconciliation but rather a social banishment.

Even though some fabliaux do fully qualify as comedies and some partially qualify, taken together as a genre

29. Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 167.

30. A. Joly, “De la condition des vilains au moyen âge d’après les fabliaux,” p. 479.

they cannot be considered as such. They certainly have something like the spirit of comedy—the acceptance of things as they are—but that spirit plays over material that rebels at being inspired to form itself along deep comic patterns. The reader sometimes experiences the feeling that the spirit of comedy hovering over the fabliaux does not really take those tales too seriously, and rather than impregnating them with its genius, it only is teasing them.

If the fabliaux, therefore, are not essentially satires, farces, burlesques, nor comedies, what are they? Where is their humor? The simplest explanation is that the fabliaux are a type of joke. Perhaps they could be considered as extended or narrative jokes. I do not think they are merely jokes—their length alone excludes that possibility—but they are of the family. Their ancestors might have been the “popular jokes which had been with the people for ages” and which “were suddenly put into poetic form at the close of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century.”³¹ Scholars have considered them as jokes. After excluding the possibility of other explanations, Bédier, with his customary brevity at such a point, says: “Les fabliaux ne sont que ‘risée et gabet.’ ”³² And in spite of his theory that the fabliaux are parodies, even Nykrog admits the same thing:

Ce qui a donné aux fabliaux leur popularité ‘as festes et as veillées’ est, en premier lieu, l’effet divertissant de leurs intrigues et des situations qu’ils dépeignent. Tout le reste—c.—à.—d. tout ce qui sera l’objet des chapitres suivants: effets plus ou moins parodiques ou satiriques, art narratif, etc.—n’est qu’accessoires, importants, certes, mais nullement fondamentaux.³³

Other critics agree with this view and no doubt have taken the hint for this interpretation from the fableors themselves, who occasionally refer to their stories by

31. U. T. Holmes, *A History of Old French Literature*, p. 201.

32. Bédier, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 311.

33. Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, p. 52.

words that can be defined as *joke* or *jest*, such as *gas*, *risée*, or *truffe*.³⁴ This view is apparent in the beginning of *Le Clerc qui fu repus derriere l'escrin*:

Unes gens sont qui anchois oient
 Une truffe et plus le conjoient
 K'une bien grande auctorité:
 Pour ce, truffe de verité
 Vous vorrai ci ramentevoir,
 Se c'om le me conta de voir. (MR, 4:47)

(Once upon a time a certain people heard a joke that they listened to with more pleasure than if it had been a lofty and serious story. Now I would like to tell it to you, just exactly as it was told to me.)

Even the characters within the story refer to their actions with these words. A certain count in *Le Vilain au buffet* promises his scarlet robe to whoever knows the best joke. It is won by a peasant who, having been insulted and struck by the count's seneschal, returns the blow with the explanation that a man who is churlish would not give back what was lent to him. The court laughs at this jest, and the count awards him the robe: " 'Tien / Ma robe qui n'est pas usée, / Quar fet as la meillor risée / Seur toz les autres menestrels' " ("Take my brand-new robe, for you've told a better joke than all the other minstrels"), MR, 3:206-7. Indeed, some fabliaux are nothing more than jokes, having no plot worthy of the name. As a genre, the fabliaux certainly are tales, but there are individual ones that have no real action. In *Le Sentier battu* (MR, 3:247) a lady and a knight hurl obscene proverbs at each other; nothing else happens in the story. An indication of the exclusive importance of the verbal play in that fabliau is that part of one of the pro-

34. For example: Gaston Paris, *La Littérature française au moyen âge*, p. 121; Louis Kukenheim and Henri Roussel, *Guide de la littérature française du moyen âge*, p. 89; T. B. W. Reid, ed., *Twelve Fabliaux*, p. xi; and Norris Lacy, "Types of Esthetic Distance in the Fabliaux," pp. 109-10.

verbs serves as its title. Several fabliaux are little more than dramatized puns, such as *Estula* and *La Male Honte*. In these tales the only action grows out of the conflict between the two possible meanings of the punning phrases, and hence they can be considered as narrative or extended puns. In *La Male Honte* (MR, 4:41), for example, a man named Honte dies and leaves his money to the king. When a friend seeks an audience with the king by holding up the trunk with the money and by shouting "La male Honte" ("Honte's trunk"), the king understands him to mean something else ("Vile shame"), and so he is insulted. The friend cannot understand the king's anger, and hence he keeps shouting, further infuriating the king. A member of the king's court finally clears up the misunderstanding to everyone's satisfaction. The dependence of the action in the story on wordplay undoubtedly reveals the origins of many fabliaux to be simple jokes. There are other fabliaux in which puns do not structure the conflict but which are a crucial part, sometimes a turning point of the story, such as *La Couille noire* (MR, 6:90) and *Le Prestre qui ot mere a force* (MR, 5:143). Alongside these are several fabliaux that are built around the use of some metaphor, usually obscene, and hence they too show their connections with mere wordplay. The stories in which naive young girls give metaphorical names to the erotic and sexual parts of their bodies, in order to protect the innocent, find their action completed by the assault on those metaphors by the appropriate counterparts that a young man easily names. Finally there are the fabliaux in which the only action is a verbal contest, the award going to the best answer to a question. The most startling example of this competition is *Le Jugement des cons* (MR, 5:109), in which three sisters vie with each other for the hand of a knight. The question put to them is obscene, but unblushingly they respond in kind; the last and youngest sister gives the best and most obscene answer.

Consideration of these fabliaux strengthens the inter-

pretation of the whole group as a type of joke. There is, however, a more convincing proof of that kinship. None of the critics who state that the fabliaux are jokes develops at any length the deep family resemblance between the two, which can most noticeably be seen in the most prominent feature in that family's profile: its conclusion.

A joke is characterized predominantly by its punch line. It may be a word, a phrase, or a sentence, but in whatever form it takes, it does not merely bring the joke to a conclusion, it also explains, reveals, and solves everything else within the joke. Everything leads up to the punch line, and everything exists for it. Although we may laugh at incidental things along the way, a joke's success depends entirely on our laughter at its ending. The force of the punch line comes from the accumulated power of all the rest of the joke, which is released in a flash at the end. The punch line must not be seen beforehand, but everything else must lead up to it. But the preparations in themselves are meaningless without the punch line. If the punch line were omitted (or botched), the joke would not exist (or would be ruined). Consequently the punch line forms and governs all. Its most dominant characteristic is surprise, the sudden realization of what the rest of the joke means.³⁵ The brevity of most jokes is not accidental; the jokester cannot allow his audience time to realize what is going to happen. If the punch line is seen coming—or if it is in any way botched—the joke is ruined.

This description of the punch line could stand verbatim for the climax of the fabliaux. Although they are closely related, I hesitate to call them identical. Some of the fabliaux that are predominantly verbal in their humor seem almost like long jokes, but most fabliaux have a climax that is a narrative action, unlike the typical joke. The punch line of a joke is usually spoken by one of the characters in the joke, rather than acted out, as

35. Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama*, p. 286.

the climax is in most fabliaux. Hence the narrative quality of the fabliaux would seem to make them more like a cousin to the joke, rather than a brother. But the blood ties between the two are such that a clear distinction at times would be difficult to make.

Why, however, are they funny? This surely is the important question to answer, but it has remained unanswered by most critics who view the fabliaux as jokes. Once they have excluded other explanations of the humor, such as satire or parody, they evidently feel it is sufficient to reduce their explanations to the simple statement that the fabliaux are jokes. That, of course, still leaves the matter open. Like all other forms of humor, the fabliaux have a comic import, which may or may not be the same as their thematic meaning. In some, like *Le Vilain qui conquist Paradis par plait*, the theme and the humor are identical, but in just as many they are not. A good indication of the possible dichotomy between theme and humor can be seen in those fabliaux structured on puns. Basically a pun is a joke built on a coincidental ambiguity.³⁶ Words or phrases (such as *male honte*) are homonymic, and when used in the fabliaux one meaning is intended by one character, the other is understood by a second character. A pun may or may not be the lowest form of humor, but it cannot have any meaning as such since it is based on a confusion (though it may have a subsidiary or accidental meaning). Even though it is a form of ambiguity, it is only a coincidental one, and therefore its significance is negative. But a pun can be humorous, and hence its comic meaning is not necessarily identical with thematic meaning, which

36. "The pun is the bisociation of a single phonetic form with two meanings—two strings of thought tied together by an acoustic knot. Its immense popularity with children, its prevalence in certain forms of mental disorder ("punning mania"), and its frequent occurrence in the dream indicate the profound unconscious appeal of association based on pure sound." Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, pp. 64–65.

comes from the action underlying the pun in the fables that are structured on puns.

One of the causes of the humor in the comic climax is the surprise. There is, of course, something about a surprise that is in itself delightful, and when the word is used as a substantive—a surprise—it generally means something good (unless qualified by some negative word such as *unpleasant* or when it is used ironically). In its positive sense, surprise not only represents something delightful, it is also given as one of the major explanations of the nature of comedy, by such eminent theorists as Quintilian, Descartes, Kant, Fielding, William Hazlitt, Coleridge, and Arthur Koestler.³⁷ I do not think that all comedy can be explained merely as surprise, nor even that it is one of its necessary features, but it certainly is found in many forms of comedy. Laughter, at any rate, frequently (but by no means always) breaks out suddenly like the surprise of a punch line.³⁸ Why this happens and why surprise can be comic is, however, a mystery. We experience it, but I know of no satisfactory theory that explains why. A partial reason might be that just as the good in its many forms is the resting place of comedy, so a good suddenly received or perceived would be even more welcome. We experience a great deal of joy in unexpectedly receiving something or learning something. When something good comes upon us that way, it comes almost like an act of mercy, which by its nature is unmerited and hence always comes as a gift, even as a surprise. And so the most startling thing about a surprise is

37. Summaries and bibliographical data on theories dealing with comedy as surprise can be found in the following: J. Y. T. Greig, *The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy*, pp. 225-79; and in Jeffrey H. Goldstein and Paul E. McGhee, *The Psychology of Humor*, pp. 9-10.

38. As I mentioned in my introduction, I am not trying to explain the nature of laughter in the fables but only taking it as one possible indication of the presence of comedy. Both Greig and Goldstein and McGhee discuss laughter and list other theorists who also discuss it.

not its suddenness, which is merely a temporal and hence accidental quality, but its unexpectedness, which is intrinsic and essential.

But surprises can take different forms, even essentially different ones. Some are in no way foreseen—the rich relative we did not know we had who dies and leaves his fortune to us—but there are also ones that are in some fashion or another prepared for—we know we are going to receive gifts at Christmas, but we do not know what those gifts will be (occasionally, anyway). It would be futile to say that one form of surprise is superior to the other, or even that one is more surprising than the other. But certainly the two are different. In those that are prepared, a sense of completion and fulfillment accompanies the surprise. A completion of this kind is experienced with exaltation and joy. A scientist who has been searching for the solution to some research only to find it suddenly and unexpectedly will feel great joy—and a sense of justified completion. He might even laugh out of joy. Or a child who has just put the last piece of a puzzle in place, so that he can finally see the whole picture, will also feel joyful and perhaps laugh. If one could always put a puzzle together dramatically, that is, holding out the keystone piece until the final move so that no clear picture would emerge until that piece was in its place, then one would have the kind of aesthetic feeling that is experienced at the end of the fables. Intrinsic to the feeling of joy at completing the puzzle is the awareness that the final piece fits, that it belongs. Although the completion cannot be separated from the appropriateness, that union still combines two radically different forces. In order to work, the two must be different, yet they must be united.³⁹

Our appreciation of this type of humorous story de-

39. I hesitate to say what the nature of the relationship between these two forces is. I have avoided using such terms as opposites, dichotomies, or polarities, because they are laden with associations that might have interfered with my discussion of the fables. The term that comes closest is *configuration* as discussed by Keith-Spiegel in *The Psychology of Humor*, pp. 11–12.

depends on seeing the relationship between the surprise and the preparation. The words that we occasionally use to express our appreciation of such stories reveal the real source of this admiration. It often happens after a joke that the delighted listeners will show their approval with such comments as "Oh, that's great!" or "Beautiful!" or "Clever!" These words almost never describe the people or the incidents in the joke, since they may well have the opposite qualities, but rather they express admiration for the joke's artistry. The same is true with our appreciation of the fables. Although some of their characters are clever, they are rarely beautiful, and their actions certainly lack greatness. Ultimately our admiration is for the cleverness of the artistry in arranging for the appropriate comic climax. We appreciate the artistry in all works of art, but in the fables it must be for the artistry since any thematic meaning that they have is subservient to the comic one. This is not to say that the artistry of the fables is an abstraction, but only that our appreciation of the story is primarily in its form, not its content. Those fables that fuse form and content, comedy and theme, are the most satisfying; those in which they are split are less satisfying, but it is a mark of their skill that they are still immensely enjoyable.

It is generally agreed that the characters in the fables are types. One of the reasons for that limitation is the prominence of form in the story. The characters are figures in a pattern upon which they are dependent for their every move. The author cannot allow them to be more than types, for if he did, that is, if they became three dimensional, they would break out of the pattern. The ethnic joke depends upon this limitation, since it makes fun of foibles or characteristics that are actually or mythically shared by all members of a race or nationality. Indeed, the point of the ethnic joke is precisely that the people of the same race or nationality are exactly the same. In a similar fashion the characters in the fables are subjected to a pattern.

In completing the pattern of the fabliaux, the comic climax gives the tale an artistic symmetry.⁴⁰ The exact proportions of that symmetry in these tales cannot be generalized; although it must be stated as an equation (this preparation leads to that climax), it is not experienced in those proportions, since the climax takes up into itself all the preparation, and it is doubtful if the relationship would ever be that equal.⁴¹ But it is significant that our delight in the climax is in recognizing the almost mathematical symmetry of the pattern. In fact, laughter often occurs not only at the exact point when the proportion between the preparation and the climax has been established, it also occurs because it has been established. One fabliau, *L'Enfant qui fu remis au soleil* (MR, 1:162), which I have alluded to briefly before, perfectly illustrates this symmetry:

Once upon a time a merchant went on a business journey for two years. While he was gone his wife took a lover, became pregnant, and gave birth to a son. When the husband returned, he asked her where the child came from.

She answered: "Sire, one day I was standing up there on our high balcony, and it was a cold winter's day, snowing, and as I

40. Compare Keith-Spiegel's discussion of configurational theories in *The Psychology of Humor*, pp. 11-12.

41. Bédier noticed this equational element in the fabliaux: "Cette forme, machinée comme une élégante combinaison d'echecs et qui nous procure le plaisir d'une équation finement résolue, est évidemment sortie d'un seul jet de l'esprit du premier inventeur. C'est la forme-mère." See his *Les Fabliaux*, p. 246. This equation, I might add, can take many forms and be built on many needs. In one instance it is built on a biological need. *Les Quatre Sohais Saint Martin* (MR, 5:201) tells of a couple who is granted four wishes, only to have the wife ruin them all by using the first wish to request that her husband be all covered with penises. The husband's use of the second wish satisfies the needs of all those organs by requesting that the wife be covered all over with vaginas. When their third wish that all those penises and vaginas disappear is literally fulfilled, they must use the last wish to get back to their original and normal state.

watched the snowflakes fall, a little fell into my mouth, which I swallowed. From that I got pregnant, and this child is the result."

The husband told his wife that he believed her and that they should be grateful to God for such a wonderful miracle. But in his heart he didn't believe her.

Fifteen years passed, and all that time the husband brooded about the child. Finally he decided to get rid of the boy, and so he told his wife that he had to take the lad on a business trip in order to teach him the family trade. His wife was reluctant, but she had to consent.

The husband took the boy south to Italy and sold him into slavery. After finishing all his other business, he returned home, and when his wife saw him without the boy she was distraught and begged her husband to tell her what happened.

"Lady," he said, "one day the boy and I went for a walk. It was a hot summer's day, and we went up on a very high mountain where the sun burnt brightly. Well, it was so hot that your snow baby just melted right away!"

Our appreciation of this tale is primarily for the symmetry. Not only does the husband get rid of the son who is not his, paying back injustice with injustice, he also echoes his wife's lie with his own: for her high balcony there is his tall mountain, and for her cold winter day, there is his hot summer one. Her lie, in fact, was the inspiration for his, and hence his, although a surprise (to us as well as to the wife), is the most appropriate climax possible. It is perfect justice, perfect symmetry.

Recognition of those qualities as the source of the humor cuts deeper than other explanations. *L'Enfant* is somewhat satiric in its anti-feminism, but the conflict that forms the satire rests on a more fundamental structure, the harmony of the artistic pattern. Satiric and

ironic works often involve moral or poetic justice, some foolish or wicked deed bringing down upon itself some appropriate punishment. Although many fables end with the kind of justice found at the conclusion of *L'Enfant*, I do not think their authors are primarily concerned with moral or poetic retribution. By its very nature, justice, as opposed to mercy, is symmetrical. Good deeds demand rewards; bad deeds punishments. Our sense of justice is violated if, say, a crime goes unsolved or unpunished. Just so, an incomplete pattern cries out for completion. Moral justice in the fables is only ancillary to artistic symmetry. In *L'Enfant* there is both justice and symmetry (though the justice is a bit rough). And we laugh not when the husband sells the child into slavery (which the author rightfully passes over quickly), but when he matches wits with his wife; our laughter is not for what he does to the child but for his clever excuse. Many other fables, such as *Les Trois Boçus*, have symmetry only and no justice at all, especially the many tales in which deceitful wives completely fool their foolish husbands.

Even those tales that are crude and farcical depend upon symmetry and order for their humor and artistic value. *Joulet* (MR, 4:112), for example, is very crude, but that in itself is not the cause of its humor. A minstrel named Joulet tricks a bridegroom named Robin into eating a large quantity of pears on his wedding day. Instead of enjoying his nuptial bed that night, poor Robin suffers a bad case of diarrhea. But he has his revenge; six times during the night he has to get up to defecate, and each time he does so strategically: at the head of Joulet's bed, at the side, in his pants, in the fire that Joulet will have to tend in the morning, in his drinking bucket, and in his knee chaps. When dawn comes, we await Joulet's discoveries, one by one, of each pile of Robin's revenge. Crude and farcical as it is, its humor depends upon seeing the equation completed. There is, after all, nothing humorous about defecation in itself, and in *Joulet* the

humor rests on the purpose to which it is put, so that even when Robin is laying his plan, whatever laughter we experience then is purely in anticipation of what will happen in the morning. We are confident that the minstrel will have to experience all six indignities, and we even have a good idea of how it will take place, but Jouglet does not, and so we share, at a safe aesthetic distance, each of his discoveries. A real person would have caught on after the second or third time, but we do not want a real person in this case. Indeed, if Jouglet would happen to miss one of them, we would feel cheated. He is locked into a pattern and exists only for the sake of its completion, and we would not want it any other way. In this tale there is a moral justice, and we do exalt in that righteousness, but our appreciation is primarily for the symmetry. *Jouglet* bears comparison to another medieval French story, *Audigier*, which also is replete with defecations.⁴² Not a fabliau, it is hard to classify, but its adventures are a scatological parody of romances. Scholars have heaped abuses on it, as well they should, not for the excessive number of defecations—one modern translator refers to it as a “veritable *chanson de merde*”—but rather because the defecations do not lead anywhere or prepare for anything but instead just lie there.⁴³ In the best farce, regardless of whether it is silly or scatological, everything serves a purpose.

The fabliaux are small brief moments in the history of literature. Short, bawdy, and rough, they cannot be counted among the literary masterpieces. Yet there is something in them that is analogous to great works of art. At the end of several of Shakespeare’s comedies there is a reunion of lost relatives. The final scene brings them face to face for the first time during the play. These meetings are deeply moving episodes because of the joy that is

42. Omer Jodogne, ed., “*Audigier et la chanson de geste, avec une édition nouvelle du poème*,” pp. 495–526.

43. Paul Briens, trans. and ed., *Bawdy Tales from the Courts of Medieval France*, p. 69.

felt at the recognition. We have watched the characters racing through the scenes, looking frantically for each other, and now that search is over. The loose threads of the plot are tied together, the pattern is completed and all is at peace. The joy that is felt at the discovery is intensified because it invariably takes place as a surprise, but that surprise is, of course, one of recognition.⁴⁴

I believe that our experience at the end of the fabliaux is similar to that. On a much smaller scale, in a much more limited fashion, the humor of the fabliau is one of recognition. At the climax of the tale we now see clearly the full significance of something we saw only vaguely before, and which is actualized here. Like the perfect surprise gift, the climax in the fabliaux is something we really wanted all along but never really dreamed of receiving. Indeed, one of the characters in the fabliaux supplies us with a clue to this reaction. At the end of *La Male Honte*, the king finally recognizes the verbal misunderstanding that has structured the tale, and his reaction shows us how we should attend the fabliaux: "Li rois l'entent, sa cuise bat / De la joie qu'il ot eüe, / Quant la parole ot entendue" (When the king heard that, he slapped his thigh out of sheer joy, because he understood), MR, 4:45-46.

This sense of recognition in the fabliaux suggests something analogous, a likeness to something that medieval man would have realized at once as being supremely satisfying. I mentioned earlier that the surprise in the comic climax was akin to mercy and that the symmetry, which is a result of the preparation, was akin to justice. The combination of mercy and justice, according to medieval thought, was the force that led to another recognition. Like the comic recognition in the fabliaux, it was

44. "This rediscovery of what is familiar is pleasurable, and once more it is not difficult for us to recognize this pleasure as a pleasure in economy and to relate it to economy in psychical expenditure." Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, p. 120. See also Roy J. Percy, "Structural Models for the Fabliaux and the *Summoner's Tale* Analogues," pp. 103-13.

essentially a vision of the good, although this time it would be one of transcendent good. And that recognition would not only be joyful, it would be beatific. Although our delight in the fabliaux participates in that recognition in only the smallest way, it still is of the same essence. Little wonder, then, that in spite of the simplicity and coarseness of the fabliaux, they are deeply satisfying.



VI. Chaucer's Fabliaux



Among the twenty-one completed stories in the *Canterbury Tales* there are six fabliaux, more than a quarter of the total number.¹ One of the three unfinished stories, "The Cook's Tale," is a fragment of what no doubt would have been a fabliau. No other genre is as frequently represented in Geoffrey Chaucer's major work. His enthusiasm for the fabliaux is even more unusual since there is scant evidence that other English writers took much interest in them; although no definitive canon of English fabliaux has been established, estimates of the number outside Chaucer's vary from a mere handful to some two dozen.² But Chaucer's fabliaux are important not only in frequency but also in position. The first *Canterbury* tale is a romance, easily the most dignified and respected of medieval secular genres, and that is followed by two successive fabliaux (three if the unfinished

1. The canon and order of *The Canterbury Tales* is that in the edition of F. N. Robinson, *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*. All citations from Chaucer in my text are to this edition, which will be referred to in the body of the paper, according to fragment and line numbers.

2. I know of no attempt by scholars to establish the definitive canon of English fabliaux. Miscellaneous references point to about two dozen such tales, scattered over some three centuries. See John Edwin Wells, *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English: 1050-1400*, pp. 177-80. See also Rossell Hope Robbins, "The English Fabliau: Before and After Chaucer," pp. 231-44.

"Cook's Tale" be included). These are followed by a pious tale and another romance and then come two more *fabliaux*. They in turn are followed by an allegorical *exemplum* and then another *fabliau*. Thus, half of the first ten tales are *fabliaux*.³

More important, however, than the frequency or position of Chaucer's *fabliaux* is their excellence, especially when compared with the Old French *fabliaux*. Although no extant French tale seems to be the immediate source for Chaucer's *fabliaux*, the genre is still generally regarded as the ultimate inspiration for his.⁴

As good as those French tales are, we do feel that their authors could have done somewhat more than they actually did in developing the potential of their material. Chaucer, at any rate, must have felt that way, for develop them he did. It would be impossible to discuss adequately all of his *fabliaux*, but an examination of three of them does give, I believe, a clear picture of his handling of the genre. "The Shipman's Tale" is very similar to the French *fabliaux* in its economy and symmetry; "The Miller's Tale" develops as fully as possible all the potential in the *fabliaux*; and "The Merchant's Tale" takes the genre beyond its self-imposed limits. Two general differences exist between Chaucer's *fabliaux* and the Old French ones: the narrative framework of the Canterbury pilgrimage and the resultant dramatized narrators who tell tales against one another.⁵ Those differences will not

3. A good review of Chaucer's *fabliaux*, and a bibliography of important criticism of them, can be found in D. S. Brewer's "The *Fabliaux*," pp. 247-67. See also Albert C. Baugh's *Chaucer* (Golden-tree Bibliographies).

4. Just how close Chaucer's *fabliaux* are to the French can most readily be seen by examining the analogues in W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster, eds., *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*.

5. Nykrog does include some tales that are found in collections, such as the five *fabliaux* (*La Femme qui charma son mari*, *Le Velous*, *L'Espée*, *La Piere au puis*, and *La Vieille et la Lisette*) in the *Disciplina Clericalis*. But the dramatization of the narrators in the *Disciplina Clericalis* is minimal and completely didactic, and the tales themselves have no dramatic relationship to each other.

enter into my discussion because some aspects of them are debatable, because they are only a dimension of the tales, and finally because that dimension in no way affects my observations.⁶

Although the "Shipman's Tale" has no known source, readers generally agree that it comes closest in both style and content of all of Chaucer's fabliaux to the French.⁷ It is not much longer than the average French fabliau (434 lines to 250); its setting is the small French town of Saint-Denis (the only French setting among Chaucer's fabliaux, most of which are set quite firmly on English soil). The beginning lines read almost like a translation of a typical French fabliau: "A marchant whilom dwelled at Seint-Denys / That riche was, for which men helde hym wys. / A wyf he hadde of excellent beautee; / And compaignable and revelous was she" (8.1-4). That brief introduction is all the description we are given of the very typical merchant and wife, and that typecasting is underlined by their being left nameless, a usual omission in the French fabliaux but not in Chaucer. The other central character, however, is named: Sir John, the monk, a typical lecherous religious. The few minor characters in the tale are not only nameless but also so purely functional as to be more like objects than people. Also typical in the story is the plot: Responding to Sir John's advances, the wife promises him her sexual favors in return for one hundred francs, which the monk then goes and borrows from her husband. One day while the husband is away on business, Sir John comes, gives the wife the money, and the two consummate their bargain. The monk returns to his monastery, where the hus-

6. The scholarship dealing with the relationship of the individual tales to their tellers and of both to the narrative framework is too vast to list here. Many of the individual critical works cited in this chapter deal with this aspect of the tales. See also R. M. Lumiansky, *Of Sondry Folk: The Dramatic Principle in the Canterbury Tales*; and Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*.

7. William W. Lawrence, "Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*," p. 56.

band later stops on his return from business. When the husband politely asks the monk to pay back the money, Sir John tells him that he has already returned it; he gave it to his wife. The husband goes home, and that night in bed he asks his wife why she did not tell him of that transaction. She very neatly gets out of her dilemma by telling him she thought it was a gift to her for all the hospitality the monk had received at their home. Further, she tells him she has spent the money on clothes, but only so he would be proud of her. She promises, moreover, that she will pay him back the best way she knows how, by bestowing her favors on him in bed.

In setting up not just a tryst but also a bargain with Sir John, the wife cleverly combines sexual fun with financial profit. But when she is trapped by the monk's betrayal, the audience waits to see if she will be clever again. On the one hand she must not admit to the sexual transaction, while on the other she must explain the money that came to her as a result of that transaction. She engineers her escape with admirable persuasion. Although she begins hesitantly, she quickly establishes her confidence with a flattering speech to her husband:

For, God it woot, I wende, withouten doute
That he hadde yeve it me bycause of yow,
To doon therewith myn honour and my prow,
For cosynage, and eek for bele cheere
That he hath had ful ofte tymes heere. (7.406–10)

The wife's promise to pay her husband back in bed even extends to granting him the power and authority to take it out on her hide if she doesn't fulfill her promise: "For I wol paye yow wel and redily / Fro day to day, and if so be I faille / I am youre wyf; score it upon my taille, / And I shall paye as soone as ever I may'" (7.414–17). The word *taille* in Chaucer's time meant a tally stick on which debts were notched, but it could also be a pun on the word that, in medieval as well as modern English, signifies a certain portion of the human anatomy, a word

that, at both periods, has well-known sexual connotations.⁸ The financial meaning of the word is appropriate for a situation in which monetary restitution should be made, but the sexual one is also suitable since the wife redeems her lack of hard cash with a softer sell. Although the wife's clever answer is a surprise, it is also a fulfillment. It completes the equation that her initial bargain began, and it states in a double entendre the dual value system that her bargain established. That value system is the equation of sex and money, and it forms not only the overall structure of the story but also shapes many of the individual scenes and even some of the rhyme schemes of the verse. For instance, when the monk first declares his intentions to the wife, they are together one morning in the garden. The scene develops naturally; the monk slowly revealing his interest as he feels it is safe to do so. This wooing takes place, however, while the husband is in his countinghouse. Whatever awareness we have of the merchant poring over his accounts in the background while his wife bargains her way into a liaison with Sir John is not for the sake of creating sympathy for the husband, for whom we never grieve, but rather for the sake of establishing the value system that forms our judgment of the affair, the value system in which money and sex are natural bedfellows.⁹ That value is emphasized immediately afterwards in the very rhymes that bind the couplets in which the bargain between wife and monk is sealed. Before she agrees to grant him her favors, the wife tells Sir John that she owes a hundred francs that she must pay before next Sunday, and if he will only lend her the

8. Claude Jones, "Chaucer's *Taillynge Ynough*," p. 570; Robert A. Caldwell, "Chaucer's *Taillynge Ynough*, *Canterbury Tales*, B²1624," pp. 262-65, objects that *taillynge* is not properly a pun but rather a double entendre.

9. This equation has been explored by many scholars, but not with conclusions identical to mine. A thorough discussion of sex and money in the story is by Janette Richardson, "The Façade of Bawdry: Image Patterns in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*," pp. 303-13. See also the chapter on "The Shipman's Tale" in her *Blameth Not Me: A Study of Imagery in Chaucer's Fabliaux*, pp. 100-122.

money, why then she would gladly allow him to take his pleasure with her. Here is the couplet in which she specifically asks for the money: " 'Daun John, I seye, lene me this hundred frankes / Pardee, I wol nat faille yow my thankes' " (7.187-88). Sir John agrees, and his part of the bargain is sealed by word and deed in this couplet: " 'For I wol brynge yow an hundred frankes.' / And with that word he caughte hire by the flankes" (7.201-2). The balanced rhyme of the wife's "francs" and "thanks" with the monk's "francs" and "flanks" captures in visual and aural imagery the equation of sex and money that is the story's very structure and theme. Like the Old French *L'Enfant qui fu remis au soleil* the structure of the tale is perfectly symmetrical.¹⁰ That structure could be stated in the following equation: In order to win the wife's favors, the monk must give her one hundred francs; in order to pay her husband those same one hundred francs, the wife will grant him her favors. Although the wife's response to her husband is a surprise—we do wonder how she will get out of the trap—it also is the story's most logical ending, since it is the perfect complement to and conclusion of her initial bargain with the monk. Unlike the symmetry of *L'Enfant*, however, there is no justice in the "Shipman's Tale." And hence its symmetry of structure reveals, I believe, that our appreciation is rather for its form, a form whose perfection of symmetry comes upon us in the sudden brilliance of the wife's obscene but marvelously appropriate pun. Indeed, the narrator emphasizes the importance of that pun by repeating it in a prayer—here turned blasphemous—that concludes the story: "Thus endeth now my tale, and God us sende / Taillynge enough unto oure lyves ende. Amen" (7.433-34).

In spite of the many merits of the "Shipman's Tale," it is still shrugged off critically for its flat characteriza-

10. On balance in the tale see also Michael W. McClintock, "Games and the Players of Games: Old French *Fabliaux* and the *Shipman's Tale*," pp. 112-36, especially p. 127.

tion and lack of moral tone (though some recent criticism has attempted to defend it on precisely those grounds).¹¹ It suffers, no doubt, in comparison with Chaucer's best known fabliau, "The Miller's Tale," which invariably receives high marks for its well-developed characterization and even for its moral tone. Nowhere in any of the fabliaux, French or English, is there such a rich cast of characters. The careful delineation of John as a superstitious, proud, foolish, and gullible old husband; the portrait of Alisoun (the longest in Chaucer¹²) as fresh, eager, and most desirable; the simply but richly suggestive designation of Nicholas as "hende"; and the transformation of the crude and virile blacksmith of the analogues into the fastidious and ineffectual Absolon, are all characterizations that round out and enliven the typical flat personae of the genre.¹³ Chaucer even takes the time (the "Miller's Tale" is two and a half times as long as the average French fabliau) to add minor characters: Jill, Robin, and Gervase, who are more than merely functional. But Chaucer's development of all the characters in the story is not merely the creation of interesting portraits, it also serves as a relentless preparation for the comic climax.¹⁴ He tells us, for example, that

11. On characterization in the tale see McClintock, "Games and the Players of Games"; and Richardson, *Blameth Not Me*, pp. 115-20.

12. Ian Robinson, *Chaucer and the English Tradition*, p. 94.

13. Among the many studies devoted to characterization in the "Miller's Tale" I found the following helpful: Paul E. Beichner, "Absolon's Hair," pp. 222-33; Beichner, "Chaucer's Hende Nicholas," pp. 151-53; Earle Birney, "The Inhibited and the Uninhibited: Ironic Structure in the *Miller's Tale*," pp. 333-38; Janet Boothman, "'Who Hath No Wyf, He is No Cokewold': A Study of John and January in Chaucer's *Miller's* and *Merchant's Tales*," pp. 3-14; and Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, pp. 223-30.

14. On preparation for the climax in the tale see the following: Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, pp. 225-26; Robert M. Jordan, *Chaucer and the Shape of Creation*, pp. 189-90; Morton W. Bloomfield, "The Miller's Tale—An UnBoethian Interpretation," p. 208; and James T. Bratcher and Nicolai D. von Kreisler, "The Popularity of the *Miller's Tale*," p. 329.

Absolon is somewhat delicate about certain bodily functions: "But sooth to seyen, he was somdel squaymous / Of fartyng, and of speche daungerous" (1.3337-38). This couplet concludes the 27 line portrait of Absolon and hence might seem to be another instance of Chaucer's use of a slightly bawdy detail, added solely for the sake of a concluding laugh. The couplet hardly seems memorable. We no doubt do not remember it when Absolon is tricked into kissing Alisoun's naked "ers," but we surely do remember it when Nicholas lets fly his "thunder-dent," and we then realize with hindsight the preparatory value of those lines in the portrait of Absolon.

Characterization in the "Miller's Tale" creates well-rounded fabliau types, but they remain, nonetheless, types and never break out of the fabliau mold in which they have been cast and have become lifelike human beings.¹⁵ That limitation is perhaps truest of John, the husband, who suffers the most indignities in the story but who never evokes our sympathies for his pains. When he falls and breaks his arm at the story's climax, Chaucer carefully controls our reaction to his plight by directing our attention away from him and focusing it rather on the neighbors, who, he tells us three times, laugh at John's fall and its causes. It is also significant that when the "Miller's Tale" is over, Chaucer matches the neighbors' reaction with that of the pilgrims. The characterization of John, and the story, ends with his fall, and hence nothing is said about the real-life consequences of the evening's escapades, none of the pain, the angry questions, nor the embarrassed lies.

Because the characters in the Old French fabliaux are portrayed not as real human beings but rather as comic types, the authors usually do not comment on the morality of their actions. Just as the authors of tales of fantasy easily abstract their material from the laws of physical reality, an abstraction for which we willingly sus-

15. On the artistic necessity of such limitation in the "Miller's Tale" see D. S. Brewer, *Chaucer*, pp. 119-20.

pend our disbelief, so too the authors of fabliaux abstract their stories from any moral concern for the sake of humor. Yet in the "Miller's Tale" the characters are so nearly human that Chaucer flirts with the moral implications of their actions. Readers of the tale have long noticed various religious allusions that give the story a "moral edge," but more recently scholars have been finding enough religious allusions to force that moral edge into the center of the story.

One such allusion is the name of Absolon, which suggests the biblical character and the traditions of vanity and effeminacy that came to be symbolized with that name.¹⁶ Allusions are also made to the popular medieval mystery cycles as when Nicholas frequently compares the impending flood to the Deluge and plays on John's pride by convincing him that he will be another Noah and "lord of all the world for all his life" (1.3581-82).¹⁷ Furthermore, some of the adulterous scenes are laced with biblical material: Absolon's wooing of Alisoun while she lies in bed with Nicholas is filled with fragments of the mystical and transcendent Song of Solomon. Less well known, and admittedly controversial, are some allusions in the bawdiest scenes. The misdirected kiss that Absolon bestows upon Alisoun could be a subtle allusion to a perverse form of adoration that allegedly worshippers of Satan bestowed upon him, referred to in modest theological Latin as the *osculum in tergo*. The gift that Nicholas later grants Absolon could be an allusion to another tenet of demonology: because Satan was frequently seen as the blasphemous counterpart of the Trinity, the only way he could match the Holy Spirit as vitalizing breath was with his own putrefying flatus. And finally, just as the Holy Spirit, as symbolic fire, purified the Virgin Mary at the moment He begot Christ in Mary,

16. Beichner, "Absolon's Hair."

17. Kelsie B. Harder, "Chaucer's Use of the Mystery Plays in the *Miller's Tale*," pp. 193-98.

just so Absolon sought with a hot coulter to purify Alison in a blasphemous anal impregnation.¹⁸

Comparison of one religious allusion in the "Miller's Tale" to a similar one in an Old French tale will demonstrate the difference. The allusion comes when Nicholas and Alison are in bed making love: "And thus lith Alisoun and Nicholas / In bisynesse of myrthe and of solas, / Till that the belle of laudes gan to rynge, / And freres in the chauncel gonne synge" (1.3653-56). Because of our knowledge of Chaucer's artistry we feel that he is not merely using the church bells to indicate the passing of time but also to pass judgment on the lovers. The author of the French *fabliaux*, *Auberée, la vielle maquerelle*, indicates the passing of time during an adulterous relationship in an allusion almost identical to Chaucer's: "Onques de veillier ne finerent, / Tant que les matines sonnerent / A Saint Cornil en l'abaïe" (They got no sleep that night until Matins were sounded in the abbey church of St. Cornelius), MR, 5:15. But this is the only such allusion in the tale, and thus we cannot be sure that it is not merely a coincidence. It is possible that the passage was meant to give *Auberée* a moral edge, but one religious allusion seems to be a very weak attempt in a seven-hundred-line *fabliau*.

Although the validity of some of the individual allusions in the "Miller's Tale" is surely tentative, there is persuasive external evidence for granting them. For example, the purification of the Virgin, mentioned above, was undertaken in the Chester cycle of the blacksmiths.¹⁹ Taken singly, of course, these and the many other re-

18. For these last three allusions see Beryl Rowland, "Chaucer's Blasphemous Churl: A New Interpretation of the *Miller's Tale*," pp. 43-55. Worship of the devil was perhaps not as extensive as Professor Rowland assumes. Keith Thomas, in his *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 444, states that only three allegations of deliberate devil worship have survived from the fourteenth century, and all three were "special cases."

19. Rowland, "Chaucer's Blasphemous Churl," p. 51.

ligious allusions in the story do not a moral make, but the cumulative effect is compelling.²⁰

The precise nature of that effect is, however, a matter of some debate. Some readers are so overwhelmed by the extent and force of the religious allusions that they feel those allusions take over and are the chief source of not only the tale's meaning but also of its merit. D. W. Robertson, Jr., argues that "the scriptural ideas in this story in no way detract from its humor; on the contrary, the humorous as opposed to the merely farcical element in it is due entirely to its theological background."²¹ Such a judgment, however, forces a split in one's reaction to the story that seems unnecessary (and at any rate may be impossible). In fact, Chaucer has so perfectly fused the religious and the profane that our enjoyment results not from our awareness of the presence of different materials, sacred and bawdy, but from our awareness of the artistry of the author in bringing those materials together so neatly and appropriately. For instance, Absolon's use of fragments of the Song of Solomon in his wooing of Alisoun works on several levels:

"What do ye, hony-comb, sweete Alisoun,
My faire byrd, my sweete cynamome?
Awaketh, lemman myn, and speketh to me!
Wel litel thynketh ye upon my wo,
That for youre love I swete ther I go.
No wonder is thogh that I swelte and swete;
I moorne as dooth a lamb after the tete.
Ywis, lemman, I have swich love-longynge
That lik a turtel trewe is my moornynge.
I may nat ete na moore than a mayde." (1.1698-1707)

20. For some other recent discussion of this moral edge see the following: Beryl Rowland, "The Play of the *Miller's Tale*: A Game Within a Game," pp. 140-46; Thomas J. Hatton, "Absolon, Taste, and Odor in *The Miller's Tale*," pp. 72-75; Samuel McCracken, "*Miller's Tale* [I (A) 3384]," p. 283; and Daniel P. Poteet, II, "Avoiding Women in Times of Affliction: An Analogue for the 'Miller's Tale' A 3589-91," pp. 89-90.

21. D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer*, p. 386.

Comparisons to honeycombs, cinnamon, turtledoves, pleas with the beloved to awake and speak, and complaints of suffering and longing for the beloved are all materials from Solomon's sensuous and rhapsodic song. But some of the same and similar expressions can be found in the mouths of courtly lovers, usually virile and successful knights. Unlike those knights, however, Absolon is so inept that he fails to say it right, for he is probably the only lover in the Middle Ages who attempts to win his beloved by telling her that for her sake he "sweats wherever he goes." The scriptural gleanings in the passage serve as an ironic condemnation of his adulterous wooing, but the mishandled courtly words ridicule him for speaking so pretentiously.²²

There is, however, another dimension to the passage that is perfectly suitable for Absolon, while still underscoring the lame and silly nature of his wooing. We need not refer to the discoveries of modern psychology to realize the implications latent in all the imagery Absolon uses in addressing Alisoun: he refers to her as cinnamon and honey; he tells her that he longs for her as the lamb does for the teat; and finally that he yearns for her so much that he can eat no more than does a girl. We recall also that the account of Absolon's preparation for this wooing depicts a well-scrubbed, scented, and itching mouth. His ineffectual wooing, therefore, not only condemns him as adulterous and ridicules him as a ninny, it also is the most effective and delightful preparation for the oral indignation he is about to suffer. Although these different strains are distinguishable in the passage, they harmonize so well that they actually support and reinforce one another. Far from dividing our laughter into sacred and profane, the ending of the story unites them all into a comic climax.

That climax is not only the high point in the "Miller's Tale," it just well may be the best comic climax in all the

22. R. E. Kasse, "The *Canticum Canticorum* in the *Miller's Tale*," p. 497.

fabliaux, French as well as English. Readers have given it high marks, as in this judgment by Tillyard: "The surprise, the sudden union of the two themes, is sublime."²³ Our admiration at the ingenuity of the ending, Tillyard says, is attended by "feelings akin to those of religious wonder." The reasons for that feeling are several. For one, the comic climax in the "Miller's Tale" is complex, actually a series of climaxes, including a misdirected kiss, a flatus, a branding, and a false flood. Complex and manifold climaxes are not unusual in the Old French fabliaux, but nowhere are they united so inevitably as here. One climax here leads inexorably into the next, almost as though they were obeying the physical law of action and reaction.²⁴ I say almost, because the actions and reactions are not quite equivalent, for each reaction is more grievous than the action that triggered it, and consequently there is a growing crescendo that culminates when John cuts his moorings. All of the reactions come as a surprise, but the last is, appropriately, the most surprising since slumbering John has been removed from the focus of our attention in both time and space. But although the reactions are all surprising, they are also carefully prepared for so each one seems inevitable. Nicholas's cries, when he is burned with the hot coulter, for "water, water," inevitably waken John with thoughts of the alleged flood and cause him to cut the ropes. In more than one way John had to fall, or otherwise the story, as John himself, would have been left hanging.

The surprises received by the three men are also just. The overly delicate and vain Absolon is treated coarsely; the sensual Nicholas is scalded; and the proud John takes his fall. Some readers of the story find that its humor resides in that moral justice, but that view inevitably leads to an attempt to deal out justice to Alisoun also. Some of these attempts are ingenious, but it is revealing that they have been progressively moving further and further

23. E. M. W. Tillyard, *Poetry Direct and Oblique*, p. 90.

24. As John Lawlor observes in *Chaucer*, p. 117.

away from any form of concrete punishment in the story. Tillyard fits Alisoun into the general pattern of justice by claiming that she suffers "the anticipatory punishment of being married to a jealous old husband."²⁵ Further removed is the justice meted out by Janette Richardson who says that Alisoun's "nature is her punishment."²⁶ (A punishment, I dare say, not a few would be willing to suffer.) Furthest removed is the justice given by Ian Robinson who says that "Alisoun's desert is to have that story attached to her."²⁷ (A fame, I dare say, many would be satisfied with.) But perfect justice does not function in this story.

Indeed, what moral justice there is can best be seen as ancillary to the structure of the story. Justice is, after all, an equation: do this good deed and receive this reward, or do this bad deed and receive this punishment. Or to put it another way: every moral action demands an equal and opposite moral reaction. Now there is a balance between action and reaction in the story, but it is aesthetic and structural, not moral; if it were moral, Alisoun would have to be punished, but she isn't. Because justice is imperfect in the story, our appreciation is rather for the artistry in which moral justice happens to play a part.²⁸ Robert Jordan, commenting on Tillyard's praise of the tale's wondrous conclusion, says: "A kind of miracle has been accomplished, but it is primarily an aesthetic achievement, not a moral one."²⁹ Besides the manifold ways in which Chaucer has prepared for this most surprising of endings, the miraculous nature of

25. Tillyard, *Poetry Direct and Oblique*, p. 91.

26. Richardson, *Blameth Not Me*, p. 164.

27. Robinson, *Chaucer and the English Tradition*, p. 97.

28. Some other helpful discussions of justice in the tale are: Paul N. Siegel, "Comic Irony in *The Miller's Tale*," pp. 114-20; Birney, "The Inhibited and the Uninhibited," pp. 333-38; Paul A. Olson, "Poetic Justice in the *Miller's Tale*," pp. 227-36; T. W. Craik, *The Comic Tales of Chaucer*, pp. 1-29; Bloomfield, "The *Miller's Tale*," pp. 205-11; Richardson, *Blameth Not Me*, p. 163; and Constance B. Heatt, ed., *The Miller's Tale*, pp. 18-19.

29. Jordan, *Chaucer and the Shape of Creation*, p. 196.

the climax is due also to the perfect fusion of its different comic strains. Burlesque of courtly romances, farce in the crude actions, and the hint of satire in faults made fun of all reside in the same actions. Absolon's kissing of Alison's bottom is at one and the same time a parody of courtly love, slapstick, and ridicule of his pretensions. Because of the biblical allusions already discussed, it is also an action with a moral dimension, so it is secular and bawdy all at once. Attempts to separate the different comic elements and to claim that the humor of the story is found primarily in one element or on one level is to rip apart what Chaucer has fashioned together so neatly, and with no seams showing.³⁰

The changes that Chaucer renders in the "Miller's Tale" fulfill its potential as a fabliau. In the "Merchant's Tale," however, we are, according to some readers, confronted by a "fabliau that refuses to stay within the confines of the fabliau world."³¹ We do not know, of course,

30. The richness of Chaucer's use of different comic forms can be found in the numerous articles devoted to those forms. See the following: Charles A. Owen, Jr., "Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: Aesthetic Design in Stories of the First Day," pp. 49-56; Gardiner Stillwell, "The Language of Love in Chaucer's Miller's and Reeve's Tales and in the Old French Fabliaux," pp. 693-99; William C. Stokoe, Jr., "Structure and Intention in the First Fragment of *The Canterbury Tales*," pp. 120-27; George R. Coffman, "The Miller's Tale: 3187-3215: Chaucer and the Seven Liberal Arts in Burlesque Vein," pp. 329-31; Harder, "Chaucer's Use of the Mystery Plays in the *Miller's Tale*," pp. 193-98; D. S. Brewer, "The Ideal of Feminine Beauty in Medieval Literature, Especially 'Harley Lyrics,' Chaucer, and Some Elizabethans," pp. 257-69; Kaske, "The *Canticum Canticorum* in the *Miller's Tale*," pp. 479-500; E. Talbot Donaldson, "Idiom of Popular Poetry in the *Miller's Tale*," pp. 116-40; Helen Storm Corsa, *Chaucer: Poet of Mirth and Morality*, pp. 108-15; Craik, *The Comic Tales of Chaucer*, pp. 1-29; Boothman, "'Who Hath No Wyf, He is No Cokewold,'" pp. 3-14; A. Booker Thro, "Chaucer's Creative Comedy: A Study of the *Miller's Tale* and the *Shipman's Tale*," pp. 97-111; and Rowland, "Chaucer's Blasphemous Churl."

31. Michael D. West, "Dramatic Time, Setting, and Motivation in Chaucer," p. 173. Some other scholars who deny it is a fabliau are: Maurice Hussey, ed., *The Merchant's Prologue and Tale*, p. 33; G. G. Sedgewick, "The Structure of *The Merchant's Tale*," p. 337.

whether Chaucer was trying to write a fabliau or whether he was trying to transform that genre into something new in the "Merchant's Tale." And in a sense we do not need to know his intentions, for the outcome is the same. The "Merchant's Tale" as we have it builds on and resembles a well-known fabliau plot and yet it lacks some of the limitations that the fabliaux usually exhibit. (Its very length may indicate its lack of restraint: it is almost five times as long as the average French fabliau.) If Chaucer intended to take this story behind those restraints and to fashion a new form, he had to make some sacrifices to do so.

Although the central characters are the typical fabliau types—the jealous old husband, the faithless young wife, and the lecherous young squire—Chaucer made one initial addition that removes them some distance from almost all other fabliaux characters: he gives the husband and wife allegorical names, January and May. Further, January has two counselors who also bear allegorical names, Placebo and Justinus. Although the names only heighten their natures rather than changing them, the presence of allegory does tempt one to treat the story somewhat seriously and to view it almost as an exemplum. Unlike the religious allusions in the "Miller's Tale" that allow the moral issues to lurk just behind the characters somewhat out of sight, the allegorical names here force the morality face to face with the reader.

Chaucer brings about another type of change in two other characters in the story. During the seduction scene in the garden, the action is watched by two characters who have a direct influence on the outcome, Pluto and Proserpine, the classical divinities whom Chaucer has here reduced to a more appropriate role as king and queen of "Fayerye" (4.2227).³² When the blind old hus-

32. On the role of these two see Mortimer J. Donovan, "The Image of Pluto and Proserpine in the *Merchant's Tale*," pp. 49–60; Karl P. Wentersdorf, "Theme and Structure in The Merchant's Tale: The Function of the Pluto Episode," pp. 522–27; and Marcia

band, January, is made a cuckold, King Pluto restores his sight so he can see his faithless wife in the act, but Queen Proserpine, in order to aid her fellow woman, grants May an alibi that will convince January that he was deceived in what he saw. Pluto and Proserpine are moved to bestow their miraculous favors on the mortals not from supernatural pity but because of their own marital bickering. In none of the known analogues to the "Merchant's Tale" are the gifts granted for such a reason.³³ In several of those analogues the roles of Pluto and Proserpine are taken by Saint Peter and God (in others it is Christ and Peter, or Jove, and in a Russian analogue it is the czar, czaritza, and God). When Peter asks God to restore the husband's sight so he can see the wrong being done to him, God agrees to Saint Peter's request but warns that the woman will still be able to think of some excuse, a warning that understandably turns out to be infallible. Chaucer's substitution of Pluto and Proserpine for God and Peter was inspired, no doubt, by his acknowledged reading of Claudian's *De Raptu Proserpinae*, in which he would have found that Pluto, like January, was old, wanted marriage for solace and offspring, fell in love before he decided on a mate, and had two brothers who counseled him. Chaucer would have also read in Claudian that Proserpine, just like May, was much younger than her husband, attractive, and an unhappy bride.³⁴

Chaucer's substitution is, therefore, ironic, since the supernatural beings mirror the mortals and play favorites in granting their blessings. But the tale also gains a rather ominous tone, one unusual for a fabliau. Even though Pluto and Proserpine are not supernatural Christian beings, nor even their original selves as classical divinities,

A. Dalbey, "The Devil in the Garden: Pluto and Proserpine in Chaucer's 'Merchant's Tale,'" pp. 408-15.

33. Bryan and Dempster, *Sources and Analogues*, pp. 341-56.

34. Donovan, "The Image of Pluto and Proserpine in the Merchant's Tale," pp. 49-60.

they still hold controlling power over the earthlings in the story and miraculously influence them. Supernatural beings, such as God, the saints, and Satan are found in the Old French *fabliaux*, but their activities, though comic, usually reflect orthodox Christian thought. But in the "Merchant's Tale," the portrayal of the controlling supernatural powers as petty and quarreling adds a slightly despairing note. We can accept the possibilities of comic strife here below if there is a possibility for unbiased justice and mercy above. There is little to laugh at if all are flawed.³⁵

Chaucer also transforms the central setting of the story, the garden in which the main action takes place. Gardens are a setting in other *fabliaux*, such as the Old French *Lai d'Aristote* and Chaucer's "Shipman's Tale," but in each case they are mere physical locales, even though they may be quite lush and beautiful. January's garden, however, is compared to so many other literary ones that it becomes a wilderness of meanings and significance. Allusions are made to the garden in the *Roman de la Rose*, the *hortus conclusus* in the Song of Solomon, Eden, Parnassus, the garden in the *Miroir de Mariage*, the garden where Susannah was taken by the lustful elders, and the garden where Pyramus and Thisbe met.³⁶ The effect is not the same with each allusion. With most it is ironic, as when January tells May to rise and come with him to his garden that "is enclosed al aboute," an attempt on his

35. Some recent commentary on "The Knight's Tale" has argued that the ruling powers in that tale—Venus, Mars, Diana, and Saturn—are so petty and partial and that the suffering of Palamon and Arcite is so illogical and the outcome of the tale so arbitrary that the story is virtually a medieval precursor of the modern theater of the absurd. Two such views fail to take into account certain factors—especially the actual and symbolic role of Theseus—but the conclusions they reach would, I believe, be much more suitable to "The Merchant's Tale." See Elizabeth Salter, *The Knight's Tale and The Clerk's Tale*, pp. 9–36; and A. C. Spearing, ed., *The Knight's Tale*, p. 79.

36. For a convenient summary of the scholarship dealing with the garden see Gertrude M. White, "'Hoolynesse or Dotage': The Merchant's January," p. 398.

part to compare his walled garden to the *hortus conclusus* of the Song of Solomon. Considering that the *hortus conclusus* had become a symbol of the fertile virginity of Mary and considering that January uses that image in order to be able to engage in his senile lust, his attempt seems almost sacrilegious. On the other hand, because of January's "antique lust," the comparison of his garden to Susannah's is quite appropriate.³⁷ The total effect, however, of all the allusions is to transform January's garden into one in which, contrary to the usual horticulture, the rank weeds that grow there are endangered by transplanted flowers. The two qualities that stand out most in the gardens alluded to are physical and spiritual beauty. Thus all the allusions emphasize the ugliness of January's decrepit lust and Damian's crude seduction. They bewail the perversion of nature in the match between stooping age and vibrant youth and at the same time condemn the immorality of the adultery.

But the principal transformation Chaucer brings about is in the character of January.³⁸ Without making him a noble or admirable person, Chaucer makes him a sympathetic one, contrary to the unwritten law of the fabliaux. Without eliminating his foolishness, lust, distortion of reality, jealousy, or pretensions, Chaucer also allows us to feel pity for January. It is ironic, for example, that he is concerned for his favorite squire, Damian, who has become lovesick, but it is also a sincere concern. It is ironic in the garden that January who had led such a

37. Alfred L. Kellogg, "Susannah and the *Merchant's Tale*," p. 278.

38. The complexity of January has evoked many conflicting opinions. See for example the following representative scholarship: John C. McGalliard, "Chaucerian Comedy: The *Merchant's Tale*, Jonson, and Moliere," pp. 343-70; Germaine Dempster, *Dramatic Irony in Chaucer*, pp. 57-58; Albert E. Hartung, "The Non-Comic *Merchant's Tale*, Maximianus, and the Sources," pp. 20-25; Corsa, *Chaucer*, pp. 156-66; Hussey, ed., *The Merchant's Prologue and Tale*, pp. 16-21; E. Talbot Donaldson, "The Effect of the *Merchant's Tale*," pp. 42-45.

riotous life before his marriage should now counsel his young bride to be faithful, for, he tells her, in doing so she will win the love of Christ and man, but his counsel is acceptable wisdom. And although it is something of a bribe for him to add that she will win all his inheritance if she is faithful, it is a generous bribe nonetheless.

Even if we initially find it difficult to feel sympathy for January in that little sermon, May's reaction to it helps us. She responds in two ways. She promises her blind old husband that she will be faithful, and at the very same time she signals Damian to climb the pear tree and wait for her there. Whatever sympathy we have felt for her up to this point—and the scenes of her wedded torment have made us pity her—now shifts toward January because of her hypocrisy. Later, when May tells January she would like one of the little green pears up in the tree, he laments that he cannot fetch one for her and wishes he had a knave at hand to get one for her. But he is more than willing to do whatever he can, even in his state, to help her fulfill her desires, and so he stoops over and allows May to climb on his ancient back up into the tree. Once May is up in the tree, the unlovely seduction quickly takes place.

All of the sympathetic feelings that these scenes have built up for January culminate in his spontaneous gesture once his sight is restored. The first thing he looks for is his wife: "And whan that he hadde caught his sighte agayn, / Ne was ther nevere man of thyng so fayn, / But on his wife his thoght was evermo" (4.2357-59). The statement is simple and unambiguous. There is no hint in it that January's motive is suspicion or possessiveness but only a simple and heartfelt desire to share his joy with his wife. Then he sees her and his favorite squire crudely joined in intercourse, an act that, in this instance, is done without any hint of tenderness, affection, or even, as is usually the case in the *fabliaux*, fun. The pathos of the story is at its height here, and it cannot remain there long. Consequently, in the lines immediately following Janu-

ary's seeing May, the pathetic tone begins to dissipate itself: "And up he yaf a roryng and a cry, / As dooth the mooder whan the child shal dye" (4.2364-65). Comparing the anguish of January to that of a mother whose child is dying, although appropriately ironic in view of the age difference between January and May, is extreme and unwarranted. The pathos here descends to bathos.

Such a descent might have been deliberate. By exaggerating January's grief, Chaucer might have been attempting to push the pathetic tone toward a comic one in order to prepare for what should be the comic climax of the story, May's response. In the analogues to this tale, the wife's answer is indeed comic. Although the husband in those analogues has been duped, he is not portrayed with any real feelings but is only playing a role. Chaucer no doubt sensed that it would be impossible for the audience to laugh at January if he were a pathetic figure and so tried to dissipate our sympathies by blowing them out of proportion, by making us too sympathetic. It was, I believe, a futile attempt.

In her response May tells January that for a long time she had wanted to restore his sight but was told that the only way to bring about that restoration was for her to struggle with a fellow in a tree. Read in a certain way, or with a bit of editing and different emphasis, May's answer can raise a laugh.³⁹ Unlike the duped husbands in the analogues, January finds May's answer hard to accept, and so Chaucer keeps our sympathies for him alive, which makes it difficult for us to find May's answer comic. That is not to claim that we do not laugh at all; it is rather to recognize that our laughter is not as simple and straightforward as in the other fabliaux.

The lack of ambiguity in the other fabliaux comes not only from the simple, typical characters but also from the finality of the climax: when that moment occurs, as

39. As it always does in Nevill Coghill's delightful musical version of *The Canterbury Tales*, which I have seen on a number of different occasions.

in the "Miller's Tale," the story (and hence frequently the adultery) is over. But in the "Merchant's Tale" after January finally accepts May's answer, she warns him that since he has just recovered his eyesight, his vision will be blurry like someone just waking up, and so he may again be deceived in what he sees. The story ends, therefore, not with the delightful finality of a comic climax but with the sobering realization that the tale has been reversed and taken back to that pathetic moment, now extended indefinitely, right before the comic climax when January's suffering was at its most severe.

The numerous ironies in the "Merchant's Tale" drench it in a tone that readers have found to be "savagely and cynical," "full of menace," "bitter," "sinister," "nasty," "corrosive," and "malign."⁴⁰ The ironies are so many that they seep into the very imagery, rhetoric, allusions, and dialogue of the story; they are found in almost every utterance January makes, and they form the structure of the tale. The irony, for instance, of January's wanting a young bride so he will not be tempted to adultery; the irony of January's desire for a young bride so he can mold her like warm wax, only to have that young bride use warm wax to make her lover a key to January's garden; the irony of January's fears that marriage will be such an earthly paradise that he might not qualify for the heavenly one; the irony of this old man fearing that his nuptial lovemaking will be too overwhelming and hence painful for his young and tender bride; or finally, the deep thematic irony of the morally blind old man going physically blind, then having his eyesight restored, only to persist in his moral blindness. The effect of the ironies mentioned—and they are only a fraction of the

40. George Lyman Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry*, p. 202; Hussey, *The Merchant's Prologue and Tale*, p. 11; Richardson, *Blameth Not Me*, p. 146; Robinson, *Chaucer and the English Tradition*, p. 172; Nevill Coghill, *The Poet Chaucer*, p. 126; Norman T. Harrington, "Chaucer's Merchant's Tale: Another Swing of the Pendulum," p. 29; and Robinson, *Chaucer and the English Translation*, p. 179.

total—which cannot be matched in any other fabliau that I have ever read—is to burden the tale with such a vision of the foolishness and falsity of the central characters that the light and carefree tone of a fabliau struggles, stumbles, and finally collapses under the burden. Under such a weight, it is little wonder that a comic climax exists in any state.⁴¹

Whatever Chaucer's intent in this tale, the final result is confusion at worst, ambivalence at best. There is other evidence in the story that his artistic intent was not single minded. Chaucer does things here that break down the barriers of not only the fabliau as a genre but also of fiction itself. For one, Chaucer allows a fictional character in a story told by a pilgrim to refer to another pilgrim. In his lecture to January on marriage, Justinus refers to the Wife of Bath's views on the subject: "The Wyf of Bathe, if ye han understonde, / Of mariage, which we have on honde, / Declared hath ful wel in litel space'" (4.1685-87). Even granting that the character referred to, the Wife of Bath, is just as fictional as the character who makes that reference, it still is breaking down an acknowledged barrier. Chaucer may here be taking the ultimate liberty, stepping over the boundaries of fiction, in a story in which he has pushed so many other things to the limit and beyond. Or it may be that he himself is ambivalent toward a story that he has allowed to work at cross purposes with itself.⁴² One other passage

41. Most of the articles already mentioned discuss the ironies in the tale but see especially the works of Dempster, Harrington, and Richardson. Other important studies are: Thomas A. Kirby, "A Note on the Irony of the *Merchant's Tale*," pp. 433-35; C. Hugh Holman, "Courtly Love in the *Merchant's* and the *Franklin's Tales*," pp. 241-52; J. A. Burrow, "Irony in the *Merchant's Tale*," pp. 199-208; Paul A. Olson, "Chaucer's *Merchant* and January's 'hevene in erthe heere,'" pp. 203-14; George B. Pace, "The Scorpion of Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*," pp. 369-74; and Robert J. Blanch, "Irony in Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*," pp. 8-15.

42. Referring to Justinus's mention of the Wife of Bath, Raymond Preston makes a similar point: "It is another piece of four-

reveals an attitude that could be either playful boasting or an artistic apology. It is the scene in which the narrator tells us about the lovesick Damian: "Now wel I speke of woful Damyan / That langwissheth for love, as ye shul heere; / Therefore I speke to hym in this manere: / I seye, 'O sely Damyan, allas' " (4.1866-69). Those lines, which are built on the three subjects and predicates of "Now will I speak . . . Therefore I speak . . .," and "I say," really declare in effect, "Now look what I can do." They could either be the author's self-conscious attempt to establish distance between himself and his story that somehow went astray or it could be like the ultimate self-confidence of the athlete who tells us precisely what feat he will perform and how he will perform it and then does exactly that.

Even if we were to attribute that passage to the Merchant as narrator and not to the author, the result would still be to disengage us from the story. Unlike the narrators in Chaucer's other *fabliaux*, the Merchant deepens the cynical tone by his admission in the Prologue that he is an unhappily married man and by his lengthy ironic digression at the beginning of the tale proper on the joys of marriage. Consequently, the narrator, like all the characters in the tale, is suspect.⁴³ The result is understandable: unlike the light tone of the typical *fabliau*, the "Merchant's Tale" is a mordant satire. The effect of the satiric tone is to crush the humor of the comic climax, which consequently leaves us not laughing but gasping. The climax is still a moment of recognition, but in this story it is hellish rather than blessed. And it is significant that Chaucer does not record any laughter by the Canter-

teenth-century freedom: like the second player, in the play within a play, appealing to an imaginary friend of his author in the stall." See Raymond Preston, *Chaucer*, p. 266.

43. Harrington's article, referred to note 40 above provides a good summary of important articles or the role of the Merchant as narrator. See also Martin Stevens, "'And Venus Laugheth': An Interpretation of the *Merchant's Tale*," pp. 118-31.

bury pilgrims at hearing this tale, but only the Host Harry Bailly's reiterative condemnation of wives.

Interpretations of the "Merchant's Tale" have swung back and forth so regularly that one recent article could quite justifiably be entitled: "The Merchant's Tale: Another Swing of the Pendulum."⁴⁴ No one should, of course, presume to try to bring the pendulum to rest, a presumption that would demand an authority none of us has, and I hope that my comments suggest why the pendulum will probably always be in motion. The central action of the "Merchant's Tale" is a fabliau, but the accretions to that action are so numerous and profound that its fabliau shape is all but indistinguishable. We shall never know Chaucer's intention in altering his material. If he were trying to transform the crude and coarse fabliau genre into a silken one, then the "Merchant's Tale" would reveal to us Chaucer the artist at his most versatile and daring. But if he were trying to keep within the fabliau bounds and allowed his interest in real human issues and real human characters to transgress those bounds, then we perhaps could say that Chaucer the artist could never really forget Chaucer the man.

44. Harrington, "Chaucer's Merchant's Tale," pp. 25-31.



VII. Conclusion



One of the recurring dangers of scholarly criticism is the temptation to evaluate literature with preconceived artistic principles. Instead of yielding himself to the work at hand, the scholar sometimes applies criteria that are invalid instruments for measuring the work's value. The resulting judgment may seem very learned, but it has not done justice to the unique nature of the work. This approach is more of a temptation with literature from a previous age. Even though a work has survived and even though external evidence indicates it was popular in its day, the scholar may still have difficulty in assessing it fairly. Sometimes such a survival is attributed to chance rather than merit, and a work's popularity is seen as an indication of effete tastes. The scholar's task is to ascertain the peculiar merits of a work of art that justified it in its own times and make it deserving of lasting consideration. In a paper devoted to this problem, Eugène Vinaver discusses the unfair treatment that medieval romance has received from scholars who have approached it with modern criteria for unity that do not do justice to the unique structure of medieval romance.¹ Instead of facing the romances directly some scholars have judged them inartistic because they do not live up to current

1. Eugène Vinaver, "Critical Approaches to Medieval Romance," pp. 16-27.

theories of unity. Vinaver rejects this approach and turns instead to medieval culture where he finds certain phenomena that help to explain the particular quality of medieval romances. They have, he discovers, a unique and fascinating unity. Their artistic merit is the genius of their own being.

By all rights the fabliaux should be afforded an important place in the ranks of medieval literature. Those in French, taken together, total almost exactly forty thousand lines, and Chaucer's constitute the most frequently represented genre in *The Canterbury Tales*. It is not just their numbers, however, that calls for recognition but rather their literary merit. The artistry of Chaucer's has long been recognized, but the French ones still fail to receive their full due: one can still find disparaging remarks about them in critical studies, and their omission from scholarly anthologies indicates their low ranking among critics. One of the historical reasons for this attitude is undoubtedly the bawdy nature of many fabliaux, and even with the current change of standards some of them still shock. Scholars who find them too upsetting have frequently ignored them, and those who have examined them in depth have excused the ribaldry but faulted them for lacking literary graces. It is one of the oddities of medieval studies that the romances, with all their literary refinements, have been slighted for lacking unity, whereas the fabliaux, which are characterized by a tight structure, have been condemned for the absence of certain niceties.

Because of their insistence on excluding anything that might sidetrack the audience from an appreciation of the comic climax, the fabliaux have limited the range of the fabliau world. Never in the fabliaux do we get a picture of a whole society, or even a whole city, town, or village. Even when a great many people are involved in a story, as in *Saint Piere et le jongleur*, which celebrates the liberation of all the damned souls in Hell, our attention is not directed toward them but rather toward the

two or three main characters. Never do we get a universal picture of mankind, as we do in some other literature, as that a certain event happened "when the whole world was at peace," or that another event "brought death into the world, and all our woe." Even individual characters of magnitude and importance are reduced in size and significance; God and Satan being restricted to a comic role. The settings are also cramped and narrow. Lacking is the sweep of the epic universe and the extensive travels on long journeys in the world of romance. When the cowardly knight of *Bérenghier au lonc cul* goes out on adventure, he goes no farther than the woods behind his home, a geographical limitation that suggests a psychological one. The specific locale is often a very small place: a bedroom, a monastic cell, a closet. Indeed, it may be more than coincidental that characters in the fabliaux are frequently hiding or being stuffed into confined quarters: trunks, tubs, baskets, and the like. And in spite of the number of fabliaux, the actions in one can be found in many. No better indication of the similarity of events in the fabliaux exists than the ease with which they can be classified according to types, rather broad ones at that: about two-thirds or them, for example, deal with an adulterous triangle. And even if we were to examine the quality of those events we would find them to be quite restricted. In the erotic triangles, for example, there is little if any tenderness, sensitivity, refinement, or delicacy, as there is in the romances and lays. (The range of emotions of the usual fabliau character involves lust, carnal pleasure, and fear, frequently in just that order.)

The limitations of the elements in the fabliaux do not, however, argue for artistic inadequacy but rather for artistic control. Over all the characters, settings, and actions the authors cast a comic value system. If they were to allow certain refinements or complexities to enter into the story, there would be confusion. The student in *Un Chivalier et sa dame et un clerk* behaves too much like a true courtly lover for him to be so easily satisfied with

one night of love. Chaucer's January becomes too human to be a comic dupe. These are instances that indicate, in being stretched too far, the limits of the fables. Brilliant and fascinating as these two tales are, they are at cross purposes with themselves.

If we were to consider each fable individually, we would not have an extensive picture of medieval society. Taken together, however, the range is so far as to be almost comprehensive. Those forty thousand lines contain someone from almost every state of life and age. There are infants, children, adolescents, young adults, young lovers, honeymooners, married couples, middle-aged couples, widows, the aged, and the dead (cadavers play an active role in several fables); there are carpenters, dyers, servants, innkeepers, merchants, butchers, students, philosophers, thieves, procurers, prostitutes, deacons, priests, monks, friars, nuns, prioresses, bishops, soldiers, knights, princes and princesses, counts, queens, kings, emperors, saints, Jews, pagans, Satan, and God. (Even the animal kingdom is well represented: cats, mice, cows, horses, rabbits, lambs, donkeys, a ram, and a pig.) Such a list might tempt us to reevaluate the fables as a collective medieval epic. They do form, in fact, a human comedy of epic proportions. But we can never forget that it is a comedy, whether taken together or taken individually. No matter how inclusive one or all the fables are, the purpose of their existence is single minded: humor. No better examples of that exist than two of the French tales that I have discussed several times, *Saint Pierre et le jongleur* and *Le Vilain qui conquiert Paradis par plait*. Let these two tales stand for the fableers' vision of the next life, and we know what kind of vision the fables embody. Instead of the Hell of eternal loss and unimaginable torments, there is a place where a damned soul is so threadbare that the eternal fires serve to warm him, and, just as though he were still in an earthly tavern, where he can gamble away all that is entrusted to his care. Instead of the Heaven of unchange-

able and unspeakable joy and delight, we see instead a place that more closely resembles the hall of a king, where a peasant can plead his case and put to shame three important saints, and even talk God into allowing him to stay simply because he is already there. Here, indeed, is the *Inferno* and *Paradiso* of the fabliau would. It is sometimes said that the comic vision can best be expressed in the saying, "Homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto." If that is an accurate summation of the comic vision, then we have in these two tales its perfect embodiment. The Heaven and Hell in the universe of the fabliaux ignore the theologians and are made to exist comfortably and easily within the understanding of mankind, like court and tavern.



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