

Medieval Hermeneutic Pedagogy: Teaching with and about Signs
in Several Didactic Genres

Christopher A. Lee

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2012

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation explores the central place of semiotic interpretation in the instruction of several medieval genres—Latin and vernacular religious drama, French fabliaux, and Spanish exempla—encompassing both the lesson that is taught and the method for teaching it. It is my contention that teaching the proper way to interpret signs is the didactic focus in these genres and that their authors were also deeply concerned with scrutinizing their own use of signs in conveying this instruction.

As medieval sign theory finds its origin in Augustinian semiotics, Chapter 1 of my dissertation raises key considerations in Augustine's discussions of *signa* that would continue to inform later treatments of interpretation. I establish the intrinsic connection between teaching and the interpretation of signs in his writings as well as his frequent ambivalence on the subject. For the Bishop of Hippo, the proper understanding of sacred signs is the paramount lesson of Christian instruction, with misreading Jews as the primary emblem of faulty interpretation. Signs are also a concern for the pedagogical process (*doctrina* in its second sense) because the success of any lesson is dependent on the effectiveness of its signs to communicate. Yet, Augustine also places the burden of understanding squarely on the learner who must labor with interpretation and attain personal enlightenment. Augustine clearly admires the pagan classics and acknowledges

the dominant role of words in instruction, but, for him, the falsified verbal signs of fiction have no value for teaching. Moreover, non-verbal communication—through inner inspiration and visually apprehended signs or *res significandi*—is vastly superior to fallen language in transmitting meaning as well as creating memory of what is learned. Yet, Augustine also evinces a suspicion of sensory data. These ideas, including doubts about vision and the value of learning through fictive works, would continue to inform the instruction present in later medieval texts.

Chapter 2 examines the persistence of Augustinian concepts in medieval religious plays from early church drama through the Middle English cycles. These texts are mainly concerned with teaching the proper interpretation of sacred *signa*, following Augustine, particularly through the characterization of Jews who fail to read signs correctly. Medieval religious drama also endorses the value of non-verbal communication—through a reliance on individual faith as a precursor to comprehension and through dramatic *res* such as setting, gesture, and costume—both in conveying semiotic instruction and rendering it memorable. Jewish characters are further portrayed as working against these ideas, representatives of a failure to learn by seeing and believing, who seek instead to force interpretation through violence.

Chapter 3 examines a genre in which the presence of doctrinal instruction is debatable, the French fabliaux, and identifies a consistent emphasis on the risks of interpretation across the vast corpus. All signs, verbal and visual, are potentially insufficient in constructing meaning and open to manipulation, emblemized primarily by the actions of deceptive women. Fabliaux evince a self-consciousness about their ability to present these hazards both because they do so through the medium of poetry

and because they must rely on signs to make their point. However, the genre ultimately flaunts the insufficiency of its own signs as part of its message, using laughter and mnemonic imagery to promote understanding.

Chapter 4 extends the findings on fabliaux to the Spanish *Libro de los engaños*, a text of questionable didacticism that also emphasizes the role of women in manipulating signs. The practical wisdom derived from the collection—its interest in good counsel and prudence—can likewise be simplified to the need for careful interpretation of signs in a post-lapsarian world. However, through the didactic insufficiency of its tale-telling enterprise, it ultimately affirms the limits of teaching using signs.

My dissertation concludes by examining the persistence of many of these ideas in twenty-first-century pedagogy. Recent emphasis on equipping contemporary students with the tools for interpreting signs in an increasingly image-based culture and on promoting the expanded use of visuals in the classroom reiterate longstanding concerns of *doctrina*. Assessing the instructional role of signs first raised by Augustine and its reconsideration in medieval texts thus sheds new light on didactic content and purpose that continue to inform our endeavors as teachers today.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Professor Patricia E. Grieve for her patient understanding and long-standing guidance as dissertation advisor and sponsor. Thanks go as well to my other committee members, Christopher Baswell, Susan Crane, Eleanor Johnson, and Jesús Rodríguez-Velasco. My sincere gratitude goes to Professor *emerita* Sandra Pierson Prior, as well, who graciously read each of my chapters and communicated her suggestions with great thoroughness. I am also grateful to my other early readers: Paul Creamer, who offered comments on the Old French fabliaux, and Robert Hanning, who offered advice on the chapter addressing religious drama. Finally, I owe special thanks to Joy Hayton and Virginia Kay in the Department of English and Comparative Literature, who fielded my various and sundry administrative questions throughout the entire writing process, and to Catherine La Sota in ICLS who worked with me during the defense proceedings.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my *wyf*, Candice, who offered her love and consistent encouragement through the years of its development. Candice read all of the content, often in multiple iterations, and always listened with interest to my ideas even when we were supposed to be on vacation.

INTRODUCTION: REASSESSING MEDIEVAL DIDACTICISM

Without question, the hegemonic view of literature during the Middle Ages was one that privileged the presence of didactic content.¹ Drawing on the *Ars poetica* of Horace (called the *Poetria* in the university curriculum), medieval literary theory judged works that possessed recreational content alone inferior to those that combined entertainment with edification. The foundation upon which this idea rested was Horace's statement, "omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci" ("he who mixes the useful and delightful wins every point"), taken as a standard to assess the success of poetic compositions (l. 342). The equally influential commentary *On the Thebaid*, a sixth-century work falsely attributed to Fulgentius, likewise describes how poets should balance profit and pleasure, presenting an entertaining façade that conceals an edifying foundation. Worthy poets should not just aim to amuse, pseudo-Fulgentius notes, they have to present content "instructive and serviceable, for the building of habits of life, through the hidden revealing of their allegories" (239). The reigning notion that didacticism must be present in medieval texts has persisted for more than a millennium and a half. During the late nineteenth century, the great Spanish critic Menéndez y Pelayo, in his "self-styled vocation as keeper of the national values," would zealously affirm the hidden didactic value of the humorous *Libro de los engaños* lest admission of its recreational nature jeopardize Spain's "crusade for national dignity" through

¹ Medieval and ancient commentators tend to refer exclusively to "fabulae" or the efforts of "poetae" when discussing written works of artistic invention. However, use of the term "poetry" may conjure inappropriately limiting connotations for us, though in ancient and medieval literature, verse was indeed the primary medium for literary creation. Observations and proscriptions on poetry can be (and were) applied to prose works like secular exempla as well. Therefore, I use the more general term "literature" to denote creative endeavours whether or not they employ meter. "Fabula," a term discussed further in Chapter 1, is generally used to refer disparagingly to the falsehood of literature, a sense best conveyed by my use of the term "fiction" whenever the untruth of such works is emphasized.

establishing a respectable literary canon (Resina 679). And, most famously, in the 1960s, D.W. Robertson would not only identify the exact nature of veiled didactic content in medieval texts as Christian doctrine derived from Augustinian biblical exegesis but also affirm that all medieval literature, no matter how secular, contained religious indoctrination on an allegorical level.²

As might be expected, such a sweeping “monolithic approach” to medieval works generated considerable opposition, as for every genre like religious drama that seems to evince an emphasis on spiritual indoctrination, a number of others appear little concerned with Christian instruction on any level (Olson 31). Both Glending Olson and John Esten Keller later sought to make a case in response to Robertson that providing recreation was itself the end of some genres like the Old French fabliaux and the Spanish exemplum collections.³ Though neither perspective is generally accepted today, what these works have to say about their own instructional value still needs ironing out. As Catherine Brown has observed, “in medieval texts...teaching is an intensely active and intensely self-aware (one might even say self-theorizing) activity,” (10). After all, the Latin *doctrina* “means first of all the act of teaching or instruction; secondarily, and by figural transfer of meaning, ‘the knowledge imparted by teaching’,” a connotation made clear in Augustine’s *De doctrina christiana*, which is as much a teaching manual as it is about specific exegetical readings (Catherine Brown 9). Medieval didacticism thus extends well beyond the transmission of information, encompassing strategies for the pedagogical process itself. Looking for this self-theorizing aspect of *doctrina* is critical to fully comprehend the didactic complexity of religious drama, a genre with clear Christian

² Sturges quotes Robertson’s remark that “medieval Christian poetry...is always allegorical” (36).

³ See Olson’s *Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages* and Keller’s “The Literature of Recreation: *El libro de los engaños*.”

doctrinal content as much as it for those like the fabliau and vernacular exemplum where it may be difficult to locate Christian allegorical content. There is didacticism in these works, just not the sort proposed by Robertson nor the sort that excludes the possibility of entertainment.

To examine the nature of this instruction, it is necessary to return to Augustine's *doctrina*. As "maximus post Apostolos ecclesiarum instructor" in the words of Peter the Venerable (qtd. in Sticca 2), Augustine's ideas, either direct or filtered through intermediaries, were "persisting and influential throughout the Middle Ages," permeating virtually all aspects of culture, including artistic, musical, and literary theory (Hahn, "Visio" 190, n. 5).⁴ It is therefore not surprising that his consideration of teaching should exert a profound impact on medieval didacticism as well. Having served as professor of rhetoric at Carthage and at Rome, Augustine was well aware of the requirements of instruction, writing several major works—the *De magistro*, *De catechizandis rudibus*, and *De doctrina Christiana*—on the subject of Christian teaching that were known during the Middle Ages.⁵ These ideas on pedagogy, as E. Michael Gerli notes, "formed one of the three main currents of thought leading to the development of a [medieval] rhetoric of preaching" ("*Recta voluntas*" 504). It is my contention that, in particular, the role of signs in the teaching process, originally raised in Augustine's

⁴ *Mediaevalia* 4 (1978) is a special issue dedicated to the wide-ranging influence of Augustine during the Middle Ages.

⁵ The reception of the *De doctrina* during the Middle Ages is the subject of *Reading and Wisdom* while the influence of Augustine's *De magistro* is apparent in Aquinas' work of the same name as well as Bonaventura's *Christus unus omnium magister*. The *De catechizandis* exists in a number of medieval MSS as well (see Wilmar, *passim*).

discussions of instruction, remains a central preoccupation in the didacticism present in genres as diverse as Christian drama, fabliaux, and Spanish exempla.⁶

It is not coincidental that Augustine's educational philosophy finds its fullest expression in works that also contain his most extensive consideration of semiotic theory, though the interconnectedness of the two has not drawn much critical attention. As I will discuss in Chapter 1, for the Bishop of Hippo, *doctrina* in its second sense as "the knowledge imparted by teaching" can be assimilated to the correct interpretation of scriptural signs, with misreading Jews as the primary symbol of faulty interpretation. Moreover, any consideration of how to teach—the first sense of *doctrina*—involves semiosis, for "teaching cannot be demonstrated without signs" (*De magistro* 10.30) and "one cannot even teach what teaching is" without them (Stock, *Augustine* 153). Thus, Augustine melds his teachings on how to interpret signs with an examination of how signs can be used to communicate meaning, a combined focus that informs medieval didacticism as well. The instructional focus of religious drama and secular works such as the fabliaux and Spanish exempla alike is not drawn primarily from Augustine's biblical exegesis but are concerned with ideas voiced in his views of pedagogy and semiosis: these works are not so much interested in teaching Christian morals as they are with teaching the interpretation of signs as well as exploring how best to teach using signs.

Chapter 1 further examines the intrinsic connection between *signa* and *doctrina* throughout Augustine's works. I will first address his ambivalence concerning the didactic value of verbal signs present in fiction, an ambivalence that continues in medieval literary works claiming instructional content. By contrast, for Augustine, the

⁶ I have chosen these genres because they are often perceived as being situated along a didactic continuum of sorts with religious drama containing obvious Christian instruction, the exempla ostensibly presenting secular wisdom that is sometimes questionable, and the fabliaux having no serious didactic value.

signs of Scripture teach truthfully and can be understood by the pious student who receives illumination from the Inner Teacher who is Christ. This process, which I will elaborate in Chapter 1, calls attention to Augustine's often overlooked privileging of non- or extra-verbal communication, especially for the purpose of teaching. While Augustine acknowledges the dominant role of words in instruction and evinces a certain suspicion of sense data, his view of signs places considerable value on the communicative power of visual signs outside the metaphor of inner vision, encompassing items as disparate as textual imagery, gestures, and objects apprehended by the eye, all forms of *verba visibilia* that are more easily understood and remembered than words.

This emphasis on the visual would seem to elevate the dramatic medium, but the theater, as a fictive endeavor, was worthless for Christian instruction in Augustine's eyes. However, the didactic potential of the stage would not be lost during the Middle Ages. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the development of medieval religious drama "to instruct the populace in those truths essential for their salvation," particularly correct typological interpretation (Tydeman 18). Within sacred drama, instruction in proper biblical hermeneutics continues to include the Augustinian conception of blindly misreading Jews.

As I will demonstrate in Chapter 2, the generalized "Judeus" of church drama and the various Jewish torturers who appear in late-medieval Passion plays reiterate Augustine's semiotic theory in teaching audiences how not to interpret "like Jews." Medieval religious drama also endorses the didactic value of non-verbal signs—and thus the dramatic enterprise itself—through the use of *res significandi* like setting, gesture, and costume, both to convey semiotic instruction and render it memorable. Another

essential element of the drama is its Augustinian emphasis on inner inspiration as the key to learning. One does not merely look at the spectacle on stage but must look on in faith to fully comprehend. Jewish characters are further portrayed as resisting these ideas, representatives of a failure to learn by seeing and believing. By the fifteenth century, however, we find a countercurrent in the *Treatise Against Miraculis Pleying* where the fictionalized treatment of religious truth on stage is seen as impeding proper interpretation and resulting in a literalism that is not coincidentally figured as Jewish.

Yet, right reading is not a skill limited to doctrinal application. In a secular context, the practical interpretation of signs is also the main didactic focus of Spanish exempla and Old French fabliaux. Analyzing these genres in this fashion, as I do in Chapters 3 and 4, goes a long way toward explaining the prevalence of thematic elements centered on deceit, misunderstanding, and misperception, as well as the pedagogical motivation of the tales in general. Doubts about the value of the lessons derived from these works are allayed when the tales are examined through this lens.

Viewed from the vantage point of semiotics, fabliau plots become negative exempla, not against the surface issues of adultery, clerical corruption, and other sinful behavior, but about the practical need for careful interpretation of signs in a world where meaning is never absolutely determinable. The manipulators in fabliaux, particularly deceptive women, thus serve as emblems for fallen signification, showing that all signs are potentially false. In considering even visual signs to be tainted, a notion most apparent in narratives that emphasize mis-seeing, the fabliaux differ considerably from medieval drama. As I will also demonstrate in Chapter 3, this shifting perception of signs is attributable to the growing influence of Aristotelian nominalism in the thirteenth

century in which referents do not have separate ideal existence, countering Augustine's Neoplatonic view on the possibility of discovering truth through *rationes aeternae*.

Informed by this nominalist *zeitgeist*, fabliaux evince a self-conscious concern about how they teach the hazards of interpretation not only because they bear the stigma of being fictive but because they must rely on signs to make their point.

Within a nominalist worldview, the humor present in the genre registers as the *Schadenfreude* of those made aware of the dangers of interpretation, ridiculing characters who have not been so enlightened, who have failed to negotiate a world of deceptive signs. Laughter at the fabliaux is thus of an absurd or existential quality, a sign of understanding, the only possible response to the stark world where true meaning is nearly impossible to locate. Nonetheless, the presence of minimalist settings juxtaposed with violence, graphic sexual description and obscenity in the genre point to a continued faith in the mnemonic efficacy of visual imagery. This continues to reflect a concern with how best to create understanding in the audience.

The resemblance of Spanish exempla to fabliaux, a comparison made explicit in Alan Deyermond's characterization of the *Libro de los engaños* (also on the basis of a shared misogyny) as "the first substantial collection of fabliaux in Spanish," raises the possibility that the Spanish tales are similarly invested in teaching about signification (*Literary History* 98). John Esten Keller dismisses the didacticism of the *Libro de los engaños* on account of its useless misogynist lesson, a finding he extends to other Spanish collections of exemplary tales. But, if the misogyny of the *Engaños* is symptomatic of a larger cautionary lesson on the importance of negotiating deceptive signs, here also created by women, then it does furnish "sabiduría práctica" useful for

effective rule (Lacarra 192).⁷ As I discuss in Chapter 4, the findings for fabliaux pertain equally to the more circumscribed collection of tales in the *Engaños*. Many of the qualities for good governance prescribed in the work—perspicacity, prudence, deliberation and consideration of advice before taking action—can also be assimilated to instruction on proper semiotic interpretation. However, the tales in the collection go farther than their French predecessors in raising the possibility that any teaching that involves signs is likely to fail.

My study concludes by examining the persistence of Augustine's ideas and their medieval reworkings in twenty-first-century pedagogy. The recent emphasis on equipping students with the tools for interpreting signs in an image-laden culture and on promoting the expanded use of visuals in schools recapitulates longstanding concerns. Considering the role of signs in teaching therefore sheds new light not only on medieval didacticism but on issues that still inform our endeavors as contemporary educators. Equipped with this perspective, it we can explore the roots of this *doctrina* in Augustine's semiotics.

⁷ The apparent misogyny of the *Engaños* thus reiterates the patristic perception of Eve as manipulator of verbal signs, an accusation extended to all women.

CHAPTER 1: AUGUSTINE'S *DOCTRINA* OF SIGNS

Augustine and the Despoiling of Literature

The central preoccupation with semiotics in Augustinian thought has been widely documented;⁸ the specific importance of understanding or interpreting signs for learning is apparent in Augustine's treatment of biblical exegesis, as the most basic tool the Christian reader needs to teach or learn the truth of Scripture is knowing how to read its signs correctly. In essence, every Christian also needs to be a hermeneutician (De Looze, *Manuscript Diversity* 115). When finding ambiguous or otherwise difficult words, phrases, and larger narrative passages (textual signs) from the Old Testament, one must be able to recognize the depth of their signification beyond the literal, historical meaning, to read on an allegorical or typological level. The latter, also referred to as spiritual reading, represents the highest form of understanding available," as it involves a greater awareness of the plenitude of divine meaning present in the text (Pendergast 273).⁹

While Augustine does not discount the literal meaning of biblical texts, without the ability to read Scripture beyond this level, an exegete is blind to the richness of spiritual truth, prone to misreadings that can lead to sin or heresy. One can misunderstand, as the Arians did, the concept of the Son as begotten by and lesser than God the Father or interpret Old Testament events as simply a matter of historical record, overlooking their typological relevance to the life of Christ, an accusation Augustine

⁸ The seminal studies are the articles by R.A. Markus as well as Darrell B. Jackson's "The Theory of Signs in St. Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*."

⁹The opposing phrase "literal reading" has dual connotations, aptly symptomatic of what I will later discuss as the nature of human language after the Fall. It can indicate the project of defining or translating unknown terms in Scripture and understanding historical events depicted therein, in which case it is free of negative associations. But when these activities are performed at the exclusion of pursuing a deeper understanding, the term "literal" does take on the connotation of being antithetical to spirituality. See Pendergast 270.

(among others) levels against Jewish exegesis. This purported Jewish inability to recognize instances of figurative signification in the Old Testament is judged “a miserable kind of spiritual slavery to interpret signs as things,” leading to nothing less than a blind rejection of Christ’s divinity (*De doctrina* 3.5.9). By contrast, the exegete skilled in the interpretation of verbal signs who is faced with the unfamiliar term “bos” in Luke (2.10.15) would realize that beyond its literal meaning of “ox,” it figuratively signifies a “worker in the gospel” and would likewise recognize Noah’s ark as prefiguring the Church (*Contra Faustum* 12.14-16) or the rock anointed by Jacob as prophetic of Christ on the cross (*Contra Faustum* 12.26).¹⁰ These are *signa translata*, signs that are meant to be interpreted as more than themselves as opposed to *signa propria* (*De doctrina* 2.10.15).

To master interpretation of biblical signs, it is necessary to appropriate pagan learning, likened to the Hebrews “despoiling” the Egyptians (*spoliatio Aegyptiorum*) of gold and silver in Exodus (*De doctrina* 2.40.60), a metaphor first popularized by Origen in the third century.¹¹ Much of the *De doctrina* is spent detailing the importance of a broad-based educational program as a tool for comprehending the depth of signification

¹⁰ Augustine’s example of *bos* appears to be an intentional one, made because both of its significations perfectly describe the exegete himself who is also “a worker in the gospel” and engaged in labour like an ox. The struggle to discover meaning is figured in terms of labor, specifically of an agricultural kind, represented by Adam’s plowing and sowing, both of which are products of the Fall (See *DGCM* 2.5.6 and Jager 59, 73).

Paula Fredriksen has also asserted in *Augustine and the Jews* that Augustine’s expanded conception of *signa data* in the Old Testament presents a revolutionary positive perception of Jews not found in other patristic writings. Specifically, Augustine held that “[n]o less than Jewish scripture,” even Jewish practices like circumcision and animal sacrifice constituted typological signs (245). Thus, though the practitioners remained unaware of the Christological connection, “traditional Jewish practice truly conformed to divine intention” (244).

¹¹ There is, to my knowledge, no proof of Augustine’s familiarity with Origen’s “Letter to Gregory,” in which the *spoliatio* metaphor first appears. It is generally held that “Augustine was influenced by Origen both indirectly, through other writers who were dependent on him, and also directly by using Latin translations of his work” (Hammond Bammel 342) but exactly when and which works is open to question. The concept of *spoliatio* may have been known widely enough to be general knowledge, at least in patristic circles.

in Scripture, a conceptual framework that does not exclude studying “branches of pagan learning . . . appropriate to the service of the truth” (2.40.60) like music, astronomy, natural science and above all *grammatica* since the exegete “must understand the structure of signification” (Irvine 181).¹² Learning these disciplines is suitable within Augustine’s distinction between *fructus* or enjoyment and *usus* or use.¹³ Things can be enjoyed for their own sake (*fructus*) or used as a means of obtaining higher truth (*usus*), but the only things rightfully to be enjoyed are “the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and the Trinity that consists of them” (*De doctrina* 1.5.5). Therefore, pagan writings and disciplines of study are only acceptable if they are read in terms of some transcendent usefulness for understanding Scripture and ultimately, God.¹⁴

Consistent with this distinction, the *De doctrina* itself despoils classical philosophy and rhetoric, creating a meld with Christian theology that contributed to its later appeal for medieval exegetes like Thomas Aquinas, whose *Summa theologiae* most famously quotes Augustine on seizing the truth latent in pagan philosophy “as from unjust possessors,” while drawing on numerous non-Christian sources, most conspicuously Plato and Aristotle (Aquinas 1.84.5).¹⁵ The tradition also appears frequently in the Middle Ages, such as in the twelfth-century Victorine school, encompassing Hugh of St. Victor’s defense of profane knowledge and Andrew of St.

¹² Irvine deems the *De doctrina* “clearly . . . a Christian *ars grammatica*” (182).

¹³ See the *De doctrina* 1.3.3 and *Conf.* 4.11-12.

¹⁴ Of course, treating the Old Testament as an intrinsically Christian document for which pagan works are despoiled ignores the fact that typological interpretation is itself very much an act of “spoliation,” reshaping Jewish content for Christian use. Typical of the supercessionist view of Judaism promoted by the medieval Church, the Jewish people are reimagined in the guise of the Egyptians with Christians as the new Israel, just as they are Esau to the Christian Jacob or Hagar to Sarah.

¹⁵ St. Jerome also discusses how Christians should draw usefulness out of pagan texts, using a different metaphor of the “captive woman” from Deuteronomy 20.10. However, Jerome was less frequently cited in the Middle Ages as a proponent for reading secular literature than he is co-opted into the camp of medieval anti-humanists opposed to the study of literature (See Meersseman *passim*).

Victor's interest in Hebrew and Talmudic interpretation for purposes of Christian exegesis.¹⁶

In the context of the medieval desire to reconcile veneration of classical *auctores* (and from roughly the twelfth-century on, a growing humanism) with Christian belief, *spoliatio Aegyptiorum* also served to justify the didactic worth of pagan literature exclusive of its instrumentality for biblical exegesis. The Italian monk and legal scholar Gratian, writing circa 1140, borrows Augustine's metaphor to describe "the gold of wisdom or the silver of eloquence" found in pagan poetry, which has intrinsic value if turned "to the profit of salutary learning" (qtd. in Hardison *Medieval Literary Criticism* 24). Discovering the "silver of eloquence" is the main rationalization for the inclusion of poetry in the medieval university curriculum, in imitative exercises designed to build rhetorical skill. The strategy of mining classical literature for the "gold of wisdom" not only assigns it an inherent educational value independent of its usefulness for biblical interpretation, but it does so by co-opting the allegorical method of reading Scripture from the *De doctrina*.¹⁷

The acceptability of reading pagan literature is justified by Augustine's notion that the allegorical meaning of *signa translata* can be drawn or "despoiled" from a given work. Augustine's *Confessions* themselves appear to draw heavily on Virgil's *Aeneid*; indeed, as McCarthy notes, "The whole structure of the *Confessions* may be understood as resembling the great Roman epic. In pursuit of his destiny, the hero wanders from place to place while endangered by snares, tempted by pleasures, graced with divine aid,

¹⁶ *Reading and Wisdom* contains four articles on the impact of Augustine at St. Victor, two on Hugh (Sweeney; Zinn) and one on Andrew. There is also an article on Aquinas.

¹⁷ A particularly interesting appropriation of the *spoliatio* concept occurs in the *Cité des dames* of Christine de Pizan, who parallels her enterprise of revising the male clerical tradition (Boccaccio and Augustine) to Dido's sneaking gold out of Phoenicia disguised as worthless items to found Carthage (Pike 157).

and led by occasional visions” (458-59). Thus, Augustine “despoils” a pagan poem to devise the text of his conversion, “transforming what is for him the unreality of the *Aeneid* into spiritual nourishment for fledgling Christians” (Ramage 55).¹⁸

On a basic level, the similarity between the interpretive technique Augustine provides for understanding biblical signs and the major strategy for reading the signs of literature during the Middle Ages appears a likely one, as the objects of both critical enterprises share a common nature as verbal artifacts comprised of linguistic signs in need of decoding. Augustine himself suggests the substitutability of this interpretive principle in the *De catechizandis rudibus* where he urges grammarians to employ the same careful method for Scripture that they use in assessing “the fables of the poets . . . fictitious creations and things devised for the pleasure of the mind” (6.10).

This process would frequently be undertaken in the literary criticism of the Middle Ages. By the twelfth century, “a new sense of importance of poetry and poetics” (Wetherbee 44) prompted a defense of fictive narrative, or *narratio fabulosa*, by thinkers like William of Conches for its philosophical value, its veiled “speculations about man and his place in the universe” (Dronke 2). From Fulgentius’ Christianized reading of the *Aeneid* itself to the *Ovide moralisé* and Boccaccio’s *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods*, hidden edification consistent with Christian morality was found within pagan literature, available to those who read carefully beneath a surface level. Taken to its furthest extent, the view that literature could contain deep spiritual truth granted prophetic power to poets as vessels of a divine will that enabled them to fill their work with secret meaning. Such

¹⁸ The passage in *The Confessions* reads “Nam versum et carmen etiam ad vera pulmenta transfero”: “I will convert verses and poems into real sustenance” (my translation) (*Conf.* 3.6.11). *Pulmentum* refers to the staple food of Roman soldiers, today *polenta*. For another discussion of the relationship between *The Confessions* and *The Aeneid*, see Ó’Meara, *passim*.

inspiration was attributed to virtuous pagans of the past who were granted visionary glimpses of Christian truth, most notably Virgil for his messianic Fourth Eclogue.

Augustine and the Didactic Uselessness of Literature

The medieval invention of Augustine as champion of literature in the service of Christian didacticism is an adroit maneuver considering the negative opinion the Bishop of Hippo actually held on pagan letters, an opinion also known during the Middle Ages and largely responsible for the need to justify literature in the first place. Despite similarities between the interpretative approaches and levels of meaning relevant to both literature and Scripture and despite his personal use of the *Aeneid*, Augustine is ambivalent on the value of fictive works. He did not perceive them as having any intrinsic didactic value; rather, he describes “the thousands of fictional stories and romances, which through their falsehoods give people great pleasure” (‘mendaciis homines delectantur’) as “superflua instituta” (*De doctrina* 2.25.39). In this regard, he is writing firmly in the Platonic tradition that discounts the value of poetry.

Augustine’s focus on the pleasure-giving surface content of literature returns to the *fructus/usus* distinction and is often cited as his main objection to poetry. The pleasing literal content featured in fiction invites an inferior love of worldly things that should only be used, thereby impeding spiritual growth (“impeditur cursus noster”) (*De doctrina* 1.3.3). In other words, the same mix of pleasure and profit that makes fiction suitable for didacticism on the authority of Horace (and falsely, of Augustine) is what actually disqualifies it for instruction.¹⁹ The *locus classicus* for this view is the famous

¹⁹ By this standard, Augustine certainly disagrees with the thirteenth-century commentator on Ovid’s *Amores* who observes that the “work’s usefulness is delight” (*utilitas est delectatio*) (qtd. in Olson 30). Yet,

description in the *Confessions* of Augustine's misplaced emotional investment in the death of Dido at a time when he should have been weeping for his own degraded spiritual condition. Looking back on his former reading habits after his conversion, Augustine asks, "what is more miserable than a miserable man who pities not himself; one lamenting Dido's death, caused by loving of Aeneas, and yet not lamenting his own death, caused by not loving of thee, O God. . .?" (*Conf.* 1.13.21). Immersion in the literal plot of the *Aeneid* distracted Augustine at the expense of his spiritual development.

The problem of *fructus* in profane works seems easily remediable by applying the rule of *spoliatio Aegyptiorum* in either its original or medieval context to yield content useful for biblical studies or, at least some hidden lesson consonant with Christian morality. And, in the second extended passage from the *Confessions* where pagan poetry is the subject, Augustine provides what would be for Gratian an example of proper *usus*: reading Homer so that "words are learned" and "eloquence is attained" (1.16.26). Nevertheless, finding "the silver of eloquence" in classical poetry, a central facet of the liberal arts education taught to Augustine himself, is rejected outright as a suitable use, negated by the greater likelihood of learning a detrimental lesson from the text.²⁰

Homer presents the image of an adulterous Jupiter, euhemeristically "attributing divine qualities to wicked mortals," in such a way that the poet seems to be providing an "authority to imitate true adultery" (*Conf.* 1.16.25). Augustine supports his contention

while Augustine disallows blending fictional enjoyment with instruction, he does not deny the role of pleasure in instruction, observing that enjoyment of learning can facilitate remembrance (*De doctrina* 2.6.7).

²⁰ Augustine, as "a reformed rhetorician," is ambivalent concerning the study of rhetoric: it is clearly useful when disciplined for Christian teaching, though not to be an end in itself (Vance 45). The *De doctrina* maintains that while one can garner stylistic lessons from pagan works (though not from literature), it is better to imitate the words of a Christian speaker like Paul, which originate with God (4.6.10). Augustine holds a negative view of dedicating oneself to long study of rhetoric in general, remarking that "I do not rate it so highly that I would wish people's mature or advanced years to be devoted to learning it" (4.3.4).

that the moral learned from art can be deleterious with an instance from Terence's *Eunuchus*, where the protagonist uses a mural of Jupiter's seduction of Danae to justify his own rape of a virgin.²¹ Augustine is here not so much pointing out the dangers of visual representation but warning more generally against literary art ("verba quae...scripta sunt"), like the Terentian play itself, which can teach real individuals to enact immoral behavior (*Conf.* 1.16.26). What is more, a reader does not have to believe that a fictional crime is acceptable to be guilty of real sin; he or she is guilty merely in gaining enjoyment while reading about it. As Augustine puts it in the *De civitate dei*: "delectari tamen falso crimine, crimen est verum" ("to be pleased by a fictitious crime is a true crime") (18.12).

While drawing the most apparent negative lesson from pagan literature is necessarily a product of surface reading, literature simply cannot be read otherwise in Augustine's estimation. Given their plenitude of meaning, "[t]exts about the true divinity alone have justification for their obscurity, and they alone warrant, and indeed require, the application of a scriptural hermeneutics" (Ando 47). Fiction is categorized alongside stylized dance and visual art as an institution completely without the potential to be mined for useful meaning (*De doctrina* 2.25.38). Literature is superfluous for Christian instruction and should not be read because it is without this *usus*.

How then could Augustine base *The Confessions* on the *Aeneid*? The answer, as Michael McCarthy has discussed, may lie in how the work juxtaposes the presence of Virgil with that of the Psalms, which are the second major influence in the work. The

²¹ The lines are as follows: "Encouraging: Here was a god/Long ago, who'd played almost the same game—disguised himself/(As a man) sneaked under another's roof (right down the chimney)/And seduced a woman. And not just any god, but the one/Who makes the heights of heaven bound/And flounder at his thunder's sound. /I might be only human, but couldn't I do the same? /And so I decided to do it" (*Eunuchus* 188-9).

contrast of these two influences “epitomizes the clash Augustine felt between a culture dominated by the ancient classics and a new one formed by scripture” (McCarthy 454). *The Aeneid* is presented as a stylistic and rhetorical model in the text, one Augustine initially imitates, but one that cannot be embraced without also accepting the pagan cultural context of which it is a part” (McCarthy 463). Ultimately, then, Augustine’s conversion in the text also marks his movement away from Virgil and toward the ideal of the Psalms. Paradoxically, *the Aeneid* is only “despoiled” to raise the point that it must be rejected for *usus*.

This reading notwithstanding, contemporary critics continue to identify literature as part of the pagan past that can be subject to *spoliatio* probably because Augustine himself seems to be ambivalent on the issue, and this uncertainty continued to haunt medieval debates on the instructive value of fictive works.²² Medieval humanists adapted Augustine’s principle of *spoliatio* in their favor while his refusal to acknowledge such a possibility for poetry provided just as much ammunition for opponents of literary study, particularly in the thirteenth century (Meersseman 2).²³ These antithetical appeals to Augustine’s authority reflect continued anxieties about literature at the time, which also manifest in the fabliaux and the *Libro de los engaños* (both thirteenth-century works). These invoke claims of edification while simultaneously evincing deep-seated concerns over their own didactic insufficiency as fictional works. This resulting literary “split personality” has contributed to modern critical doubt concerning their didacticism.

²² Ramage (55) discusses Augustine’s *spoliatio* of literature, while Hahn (“*Visio*” 174) places it alongside art in the “middle ground” among works that may be adapted.

²³ “En général c’est S. Augustin que les humanisants font plaider en faveur de leur thèse . . . mais le contraire arrive également. »

The Incommunicability of Fictional Signs

An essential part of Augustine's rejection of Virgil as a model involves distancing himself from a kind of classical rhetoric that produces a "fictional order, on which the speaker is emotionally dependent," one that makes a man weep for an invented character when he should be engaged in spiritual pursuits (McCarthy 266). In essence, the reader is trapped by lies. Augustine excludes fiction as a source of knowledge helpful for biblical exegesis because the possibility of penetrating the opacity of its signs to arrive at a useful Christian message is superseded by the much greater likelihood of becoming ensnared in its fabrications.

One of the innovative aspects of Augustine's view of interpretation in the *De doctrina* is his conception of exegesis as a bipartite process, comprised of "the process of discovering what we need to learn, and the process of presenting what we have learnt" (1.1.1). In this regard, Augustine also differs from classical rhetoricians, as he shifts the burden of creating understanding from the maker of textual signs, in this case, God, to the reader or interpreter, who must "produce an account of their meaning" for himself and then for others using "effective use of language, of *signa*" (Copeland 158). This understanding of interpretation as fundamentally incomplete without the ability to communicate truthfully for the purpose of education is a direct product of Augustine's Christianity. Christ's original commission in Mark 16.11 to "go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation"—to spread the nascent religion by teaching its truths to vast numbers of people, either by preaching or through written works like the *De doctrina*—precludes remaining silent about one's knowledge of biblical meaning. Educating others about the meanings of Scripture and teaching

exegetical method to empower others to perform their own interpretation is as important as the act of exegesis itself. The desire to give and receive instruction about Scripture through *communicatio* is the essential means of creating worldwide Christian *communitas*, forming human bonds based on a newly shared realization of sacred truth. Successful transmission of understanding is the *sine qua non* of scriptural exegesis if conversion of non-believers, and therefore complete human salvation, is to take place.

The importance of communication for Christian community is also mirrored in the inclusion of a human presence in Augustine's semiotic theory of interpretation. Earlier Stoic writings on signs spoke only of the sign and its referent, with "no stress . . . laid on the subject or interpreter to whom the sign means or stands for its object," but the Christian educative goal requires makers and receivers of signs (Markus, "St. Augustine" 74). One can talk abstractly about a sign and what it signifies without explicit mention of the sign maker or reader, but it is impossible to discuss the communication of meaning by signs without incorporating the presence of a teacher and student(s).²⁴ Toward the same end, the *De doctrina* focuses only on given signs (*signa data*), like words, as opposed to natural signs or symptoms (*signa naturalia*), such as smoke or a footprint, precisely because the former are inseparable from the communicative intent of a sign maker, of human beings who wish "to show, as much as they are able (*quantum possunt*) . . . anything that they have felt or learnt" (1.2.3). Agreeing on the meaning of "signa data" then creates a form of community based on the shared understanding (Markus, "Signs, Communication, and Communities" *passim*). In a simple sense, every act of showing what one has learnt is implicitly pedagogical or, as Augustine puts it in the *De magistro*,

²⁴ The innovation of a three-term sign system can also be seen as a reflection of the Trinity, anticipating the project of the *De trinitate* to identify the omnipresence of the triune God in the world.

“We seek nothing by speaking except to teach” (1.1). The Christianized view of signs presented by Augustine holds that educative communication is paramount.

Although he upholds an optimistic view of global conversion, Augustine recognizes that the transmission of Christian truth is limited by teachers’ abilities (“quantum possunt”) and may very well fail. The *De doctrina* is only necessary as a manual for successful teaching because a real potential for the opposite exists, stemming from a teacher’s inability to “avoid all words that do not communicate” (10.24.66). This caveat is more easily recommended than accomplished, and the *De catechizandis rudibus* acknowledges the non-communicative nature of verbal signs as a common frustration experienced even by Augustine himself: teachers “with an ardent desire to effect what is of profit to our hearer” (2.3) and an aim to “express ourselves to him exactly as our intellectual apprehension is at that time” find that there is a dichotomy between the meaning one seeks to teach and the “noise of words coming far short of representing it” (10.14).

These anxieties about language reflect Augustine’s larger perception of words as never able to fully convey thoughts or intentions in a fallen world. Only in the prelapsarian paradise described in *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* did human beings have the capability of understanding God and each other with absolute certainty, on an intuitive level without the need for verbal signs. Prior to the first sin, the soul received meaning directly, as if from “an interior spring, speaking to its intellect, so that it did not receive words from the outside” (*DGCM* 2.4.5).²⁵ We can imagine this as a kind of telepathy where thoughts or “states of soul” were completely and perfectly communicable (*DGCM*

²⁵It is unclear from Augustine’s writings whether God spoke to Adam without using words at all or using words but speaking directly to Adam’s mind to permit perfect understanding. The former view is suggested in the *De Genesi ad litteram* (Jager 54).

2.21.32). With the loss of Paradise, man “dried up by his sins, has need of . . . human words,” which can be unfamiliar, polysemous, or ambiguous and always inadequate to the task of conveying meaning (*DGCM* 2.5.6). The loss of meaning that comes with the imperfect metamorphosis of concept into speech is both a type of fall and reflective of the Fall.

Essentially, then, the task of despoiling a non-Christian text for purposes of exegesis involves an initial act of interpretation, though it would seem less difficult to draw useful meaning out of a finite pagan treatise than to unravel the plenitude of God’s word in Scripture. If we conceive of a secular work not as a passive object whose signs must be analyzed but as actively communicating meaning on behalf of an absent author, it must transmit its hidden value effectively in order for it to teach something useful. For Augustine, literature is superfluous because it is uniquely unable to communicate the educational message of its creator.

Reconsidered in terms of (in)communicability, literature, comprised of verbal signs and produced in a sinful, fallen world, is encumbered with all the obstacles to communication inherent in human language. These deficiencies by themselves are not enough to render literature any more useless than other secular institutions that employ verbal language. But, consistent with Augustine’s well-known emphasis on intention, what makes literature ineligible as a medium for Christian truth is its purposeful play with language—its engaging in puns, speaking in metaphor, and aiming to convince readers that its invented universe is real. Deceptive and antithetical to truth, literary invention recalls the original act of linguistic manipulation perpetrated by the serpent in

Eden and perpetuated by Eve's corrupted transmission of God's command as a prohibition not even to touch the forbidden tree (Jager 31ff).

Because literature is fictive, it is allied with the demonic, with sin, with the verbal trickery of women leading to the Fall, and thus with heresy, an association made clear through a shared stigmatic designation as *fabulae*.²⁶ Very early in his career, in the year of his baptism (387), Augustine had defined *fabula* as a "lie composed for use or pleasure" ("ad utilitatem delectationemve") retaining a mixed view as to the possibility of profit in literature (*Soliloquia* 2.11.19). However, even in the *Soliloquia*, Augustine does not discuss the usefulness of fiction for Christians, but its confusing blending of truth and lies, a problem expanded on in his mature writing. Quoting Paul in the *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, Augustine describes the Manichees as having turned themselves "a veritate . . . ad fabulas" (2.26.39). Likewise, the fables ("falsis fabellis") that delighted Augustine in childhood and the "fabulosissima" Manichean doctrine that seduced him later in life are two faces of the same coin.²⁷

When the lies of literature are patently obvious and appear in works designated exclusively for entertainment, they are most benign, though to be avoided as a source of inappropriate *fructus*. But, according to the *De mendacio*, Augustine's understudied treatise on lies, invented stories that purport to offer edification, like those celebrated in medieval literary criticism, are far worse because they create a mixed bag of truth and fabrication, making it difficult to distinguish what is and is not deserving of belief. Using "a false story" for the beneficial purpose of teaching a positive lesson, for example so that

²⁶ The term would, however, lose its stigma among some twelfth-century thinkers among whom it came to mean a "myth" or beast fable with moral value (Dronke 5). Boccaccio, as part of his medieval defence of secular literature, would later attempt to rescue the "fabula" from its negative connotation by inventing a neutral etymology in *for/faris*, "to speak" (14.12).

²⁷ Compare *Conf.* 1.10 and 6.5.

an individual “may be restrained from the act of lust,” is no less detrimental, for the invented fiction may be accepted by the interlocutor as true (*De mendacio* 8.11).

Unveiling this misconception in turn raises the question of what else in the text may be false, discrediting what may really be true: “When regard for the truth has been broken down or even slightly weakened, all things will remain doubtful, and unless these are believed to be true, they cannot be considered as certain” (*De mendacio* 10.17). The perpetual uncertainty of truth-value results in the impenetrable opacity of fiction. Augustine expresses special frustration over the coexistent truth and falsehood of drama in the *Soliloquia*, as an actor like Roscius can be a true man (*verus homo*) and a true tragedian (*verus tragoedus*) but simultaneously a “falsa Hecuba” or a “falsus Priamus” (2.18). In order to do away with confusion “all falsehood should be completely removed from . . . all discourses uttered for the purpose of teaching religion, both when it is taught and when it is learned,” effectively eliminating literature as a reliable medium for instructive content (*De mendacio* 10.17). To satisfy the Christian educative goal of knowing “God and the soul” (*Soliloquia* 1.7), one “must seek that which is true, and not something that presents two faces which contradict one another so that it might be true on one hand and false on the other” (*Soliloquia* 2.18).

Perhaps more than any other medieval genre, the fabliaux reflect Augustine’s fears concerning the confusing truth claims of literature. Fabliau poets make notorious claims of literal truth for their clearly fictive narratives, like “Ja de mot ne vous mentirai,” (“Les trois Boçus [V, 47:3]), “Ce dist Guerins, qui pas ne ment” (“Du Chevalier qui fist les Cons parler” [III, 15 :12]), or “En lieu de fable dire veuil/Une

aventure qui est vraie” (“Les Perdris” [IV, 21:2-3]).²⁸ At the same time, their verisimilitude is highly questionable; this creates a conflict that affects how the genre presents instruction.

For example, fabliaux manifest an ambivalence surrounding their didactic status through a thematic interest in what Howard Bloch calls the “scandal of their own production,” that is, in the way poetry manipulates the meaning of verbal signs (*Scandal* 35). Bloch does not make it clear why fabliau poets would purposely foreground the semiotic deficiencies of their own literary enterprise. Following the long-standing assumption that the fabliaux lack instructive aims, one can attribute their self-consciousness to an ambivalence surrounding their shortcomings in terms of *usus*. Knowing that their output is intended solely for delight, fabliau poets manifest two antipodal reactions: they either invent superficial didactic claims, or, accounting for Bloch’s findings, they flaunt their defiance of a hierarchical system of literary criticism that values didacticism. But if the fabliaux really do contain educational value, then laying bare the communicative shortcomings of words becomes a didactic call for wariness in interpreting signs. The fact that this point on the incommunicability of verbal signs has itself been overlooked extends the paradox of the argument even further; however, medieval listeners “normalement très entraînés au décodage,” in a culture where allegorical understanding had salvific stakes, would have been less likely than modern critics to miss it (Edeline 208).

The consistent reiteration of educational purpose in the *Libro de los engaños* offers a more convincing argument for didacticism than the several lines of prefatory or

²⁸ Such claims are not unique to fabliaux. Marie de France, for example, states that “Eliduc” is a true tale (“vus dirai, si cum jeo entent/la verité. . .” [lines 3-4]), though her statement can be read either as a claim for historicity or simply for truthful *sens* or allegorical meaning.

concluding verse alleging didactic motivation in many fabliaux.²⁹ As is true of the major Spanish exemplum collections as a whole, the *Engaños* does not shy away from using a variety of secular material for the purported aim of instruction, including beast fables and humorous fabliau-like tales, many derived from Arabic sources. This overt mixture of fiction and edification led the Council of Salzburg to oppose the use of exempla for preaching on the grounds that audiences might be lured by the *fructus* of surface entertainment rather than by their hidden instruction (Keller, “The Literature of Recreation” 199 *n.3*). In this regard, the *Eñganos* is also inappropriate for instruction from an Augustinian perspective. And, like its Old French counterpart, the *Engaños* evinces a pessimistic view concerning the unreliability of its verbal signs, most obviously through the two competing versions of truth offered by the narratives of the king’s wife and his counselors, neither of which successfully convinces.

The existence of medieval religious drama in a kind of middle ground between fiction and Scripture makes its didactic status particularly interesting within an Augustinian framework. The common dramatic practice of using humorous passages designed for audience entertainment and the interpolation of scenes and characters not present in Scripture, from the dialogue of Adam and Eve in the *Ordo representationis Ade* to the entirely extra-biblical *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*, are only a few examples of creative license that make religious drama quasi-fictional. Arguably, the very act of dramatizing the Bible fictionalizes it. Yet, such plays may remain a medium for truthful instruction because they are also closely based on Scripture, which, for Augustine, is exempt from the danger of miscommunication.

²⁹ Still, Johnston and Owens note that “of those fabliaux which contain a moral about seventy-five per cent express it . . . as a compact lesson appended to the tale by the author” (xiv). A number of others make a short opening declaration of purpose, making surface claims of instruction quite extensive in the genre.

The Communicability of Scriptural Signs

Unlike the flawed authors of fiction, the “Spirit of the Lord that teaches humankind cannot lie and is not false,” making Scripture a reliable venue for edification where literature is not (Augustine, *Tractatus in epistolam Ioannis* 4.2). As Brian Stock notes in his seminal *Augustine the Reader*, for the Bishop of Hippo, reading the verbal signs of sacred texts “lies at the root of our ability to acquire salvific knowledge” (197). Nevertheless, despite its absolute truthfulness, the Bible remains a verbal artifact, and as such continues to embody an inherent risk of miscommunication by virtue of its linguistic composition. Indeed, the limits of “conventional signs in speech are applicable to scripture, which consists of verbal signs given by God and revealed to us in the transcriptions of men” (Stock, *Augustine* 197). Scripture is, by Augustine’s own admission, not immune to the fragmentation of language and the ensuing loss of unified human communication following the Tower of Babel (*De doctrina* 2.5.6). The exegetical goal to “simply...find out the thoughts and wishes of those by whom [the Bible] was written down and, through them, the will of God” seems far from simple, especially because it involves discovering infinite meaning through the fallible medium of words, which is more than what is required of literature (*De doctrina* 2.5.6). Therein lies a conundrum: it appears impossible ever to comprehend or completely express the fullness of God’s truth given the insufficiency of verbal language, yet there exists “a need for teaching and disseminating the true word of God to a wide audience for the sake of furthering the cause of the Church (i.e., conversion and protection from competing heretical readings of the Bible)” (Pendergast 275). Augustine’s views of fallen language reveal that scriptural ambiguity is a self-perpetuated norm whenever finite words seek to

contain infinite truth and are then subjected to imperfect understanding. How then does one teach the faith with clarity in the face of this obscurity?

Augustine solves the problem by resorting to the “Rule of Faith” (*Regula fidei*) as old as Christianity itself: if a would-be learner is a believing Christian with faith in the redemptive power of Christ and approaches the text with “pious diligence,” he or she will receive divine revelation concerning its true sense (*DGCM* 2.2.3). All interpretations can be true if pursued with “latitude of charity,” that is, with love of God, even if they are not intended by the writer (Irvine 269). The struggle with meaning, the need to study and broaden one’s background knowledge, is *pro forma* evidence of conscientious progression, moving “at each step to new levels of knowledge, with God as ultimate knowledge” (Pendergast 275).³⁰ This labor of interpretation is “divinely predetermined, so that pride may be subdued by hard work and intellects which tend to despise things that are easily discovered may be rescued from boredom and reinvigorated” (*De doctrina* 2.6.7). God recognizes that comprehension earned after hard work is more exciting and better retained in memory than knowledge effortlessly gained.

The necessity of toiling at exegesis is also explained in Augustine’s second treatise on lies, the *Contra Mendacium*:

Those things are veiled in figures, in garments as it were, in order that they may exercise the mind of the pious inquirer, and not become cheap for being bare and obvious. Although we have learned their meaning stated openly and plainly in other places, still, when they are dug out of obscurity, they are somehow recreated in our knowledge and thus become sweet. A student is not hindered because they are shrouded in this way. On the contrary, they are rendered more acceptable: for

³⁰ See *De doctrina* 2.7.9 ff. on Augustine’s notion of a three-stage progression to knowledge .

being desired they are more ardently desired, and for being desired they are more joyfully discovered. (11)

This is a convenient means of justifying the difficulty of interpreting verbal signs in biblical texts. Under the operation of grace, any interpretation discovered by the pious exegete after such labor is guaranteed to be true. As Augustine asserts in the *Confessions*, if one “tries to understand in Holy Scripture what he who wrote it understood,” whatever he discovers will be as true an understanding as the biblical author had “even if [the evangelist] whom he reads did not understand this, as he understood a true thing though not the same one” (*Conf.* 12.18.27). The validity of diverse readings is not acknowledged without qualification, however; one must discern that the interpreter was a Christian worthy of receiving revelation before accepting a particular reading, an interpretative judgment that presumably can be made only by one who has also deserved to be enlightened. Even so, for those who “search out the secrets of [biblical] words, without finding fault and making accusations, but investigating with reverence . . . [the truth] would be given to those who ask, and those who seek would find, and it would be opened to those who knock” (*DGCM* 2.2.3). The obscurity of Scripture ensures that only believing individuals will penetrate its secrets since only believing individuals can. A pedagogical solution is already built into Augustine’s interpretative theory, one that has especially profound implications for the didactic method of medieval sacred drama, where belief is also promoted as a key to proper understanding.³¹

³¹ This mechanism does not, however, do away with (or address) the potential “semiotic anxiety” created by multiple acceptable readings and a “limitless chain of interpretations” that never arrives at a single authoritative truth (Irvine 205).

Learning without Words

Because biblical exegesis is, in the proper hands, freed from errors of interpretation, critics have not hesitated to attribute to Augustine a belief in the redemption of words through Scripture, or more generally through the Incarnation. Colish's *Mirror of Language* is predicated on the claim that Augustine's semiotic theory and that of his medieval inheritors "rests on the view that signs are fundamentally verbal in nature" (viii). She asserts furthermore that "St. Augustine, and most medieval epistemologists, tended to see signification as a whole in primarily verbal terms" (*Mirror of Language* viii). The enfleshing of the Word does initiate the parallel incarnation of God's word in the writing of the Gospels and the revelation of previously hidden meaning in scriptural signs, that is, in new typological readings of the Hebrew Bible; yet, to label these developments proof that "through the Incarnation, God has privileged . . . human language (through the *uttered* word of Christ, and the *written* word of Scripture)" is misleading, for this claim overlooks the subtle distinction between redeemed language and redeemed understanding of language (Bergvall260). Both the primacy of the scriptural text in Augustine's thought and his ultimate appeal to Christ the Word as an unchallengeable, authoritative source of true knowledge are archetypically logocentric from a Derridean standpoint. It is important to remember that *logos*, both in *Of Grammatology* and for Augustine, does not refer to the privileging of conventional human language, but to a transcendent, unimpeachable form of language immune to all criticism.

From the perspective of faith, there is no question that divine words present only true information. In regard to the transmission of sacred truth by human beings, there is

no such guarantee, and both Augustine and medieval thinkers knew this. Augustine concentrates on *verba* as the chosen medium for Christian education only by default, out of convenience because they maintain “an altogether dominant role among humans in signifying the ideas conceived by the mind that a person wants to reveal” (*De doctrina* 2.3.4). Quite simply, words are the most popular way of transmitting information, though certainly not the most reliable.

The nature of words has not changed since the Incarnation within the framework of scriptural study or the work of interpretation would no longer be necessary and all who read Genesis would immediately and completely comprehend the range of its meanings. Total certainty of truth is achievable in exegesis only if perfect understanding is granted at the behest of God and exclusive of human language, communicated on an interior level that transcends words to recuperate the pre-verbal comprehension possible before the Fall. Augustine describes this complex process of learning through the metaphor of irrigation. Reading Scripture becomes a spiritually hygienic activity that prompts a “return to the inner spring so that [the exegete] does not seek rain externally” (*DGCM* 2.5.6); truth is discovered through internal inspiration, not external words. Augustine’s interpretative theory presents not a redemption of words but a redemption *from* words.

Even the instance often cited as proof of the redemptive potential of language, a conversation between Augustine and his mother in the *Confessions* that rises to heavenly vision, is a singular and fleeting occurrence. “We just barely touched [Eternal Wisdom] with the whole effort of our hearts,” Augustine writes, “Then with a sigh, leaving the first fruits of the Spirit bound to that ecstasy, we returned to the sounds of our own tongue, where the spoken word had both beginning and end” (*Conf.* 9.10.24). Sturges sees this

exchange as evidence that “the human speech of Augustine and Monica is fully adequate to its object, bringing them into the presence of that of which they speak, eternal Wisdom,” but this is not the case (6). The glimpse of divine knowledge initiated through Augustine and Monica’s linguistic exchange rises above speech and quickly falls back into the finite limits of *verbum*. The divine knowledge they briefly experience takes place in the absence of words, in absolute silence and through an inner process of the heart, not the mouth. As Augustine prays at the end of *De trinitate*, “Deliver me, O God, from the multitude of words which I suffer from inwardly in my soul” (“Libera me, Deus, a multiloquio quod patior intus in anima mea”) (15.28.51).

Augustine surmises that only if all worldly noise ceased would the divine *logos* be heard, again explicitly outside of human language, “non per linguam carnis, neque per vocem angeli,” but on an interior level that restores the transparent communication of Paradise (*Conf.* 9.10.25). Augustine looks even further back to the Beginning, before Eden when he reads the description of Creation in Genesis as the allegorical representation of a “caelum intellectuale.” Then all was understood at once, “non ex parte, non in aenigmate, non per speculum; sed et toto, in manifestatione, facie ad faciem” (*Conf.* 12.13.16). The same paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 13.12 appears in *DGCM* to describe the restoration of complete comprehension that will come at the end of time when language will be “superseded by a signless, transcendental grammar” (Irvine 271). This will only happen on a universal scope “when we all shall rise again,” after the Last Judgment, symmetrically connecting the beginning and end of Christian history through the perfect intellectual comprehension characteristic of both occasions (*Conf.* 9.10.25).

Before Judgment Day, the closest one can come to wordless understanding is the inner inspiration experienced by Monica and Augustine, which takes place during successful learning. In the *De magistro*, Augustine specifies that this perfect insight is not just limited to biblical interpretation. Reaching the final conclusion that no teaching through words is possible, he rescues pedagogy from complete skepticism by asserting that successful comprehension of anything, from biblical meaning to a geometrical proof, depends entirely on the worthiness of a student to consult an interior source, to receive personal revelation from an “Inner Teacher” (*intus magister*) who is Christ (*De magistro* 12.39).³² This concept, drawn in part from Matthew 23:10 (“Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ”) marks “a turning point in [Augustine’s] consideration of language” (Stock, *Augustine* 161), remaining a firm tenet of both his early and late pedagogical philosophy; it is echoed some eighteen years later in the refrain “interior ergo magister est qui docet, Christus docet, inspiratio ipsius docet” (*In epistolam Iohannis* 3.13).

Inspiration from the Inner Teacher functions every time one is able to grasp a notion being taught and whenever one intuitively discerns its truth value, the latter crucial in determining the validity of polyvalent scriptural readings taught by others (*De magistro* 13.42). In the *Confessions*, Augustine imagines a hypothetical conversation with Moses where communication with the prophet is potentially hindered regardless of whether or not the two men share a common language. If Moses taught Augustine what he knew of God using familiar Latin, his words still would not indicate that what he said

³² Though not limited to religious matters, the selectiveness of inspiration is discussed primarily within the context of *sapientia*, the ability to understand divine truth, not to *scientia*, or knowledge of temporal things. See Nash (8) on the distinction. Pagans and evil individuals thus have the ability to gain incomplete *scientia* without inner inspiration though they are barred from deeper knowledge of divine truth.

was true. Not “Hebrew, nor Greek, nor Latin, nor barbarian language” can provide this information; only something intangible within Augustine himself, revealed “without the mouth or the tongue, without the noise of syllables, would say ‘he speaks the truth’” (*Conf.* 11.3.5). Verbal signs are helpful in presenting ideas however imperfectly, but whether students absorb them or not is part of an internal, nonverbal mechanism; as Augustine explains, “Regarding each of the things we understand . . . we don’t consult a speaker who makes signs outside us, but the Truth that presides within over the mind itself, though perhaps words prompt us to consult Him” (*De magistro* 11.38). A central tenet of Augustine’s view of learning then is that “the objects of knowledge are always present and that the responsibility for ignorance lies solely with the mind” (Bubacz 124).

As part of Augustine’s “famed interiority,” knowledge is formed entirely within the person if he or she is able to consult the inner teacher, and the exterior teacher does not factor into one’s final comprehension (Bubacz 31). The way teachers use words, to provide “aids and admonitions,” is likened to the role of a farmer who waters the trees in his orchard while their Creator maintains their form and growth from within (*In epistolam Ioannis* 3.13). Those students who do not deserve to be irrigated by the “inner spring,” “they whom the Holy Spirit within does not teach, go back untaught” (*In epistolam Ioannis* 3.13). All teachers can do is pray for success in their endeavors, asking as Augustine does at the end of the *De doctrina*, “that they themselves should present [their lessons] effectively and that those to whom they present it may absorb it effectively” (4.30.63).³³ Such a concept would become particularly relevant to the

³³ The absence of any epistemological discussion of teaching methods in the *De catechizandis rudibus* and Book Four of the *De doctrina*, both of which focus directly on pedagogical methods, is perhaps an indication that there is no anxiety about failed communication in Christian instruction. Augustine chooses

didactic agenda of medieval religious drama where looking on with faith is a prerequisite to internalize fully what one sees on stage. And, within its exploration of the limits of education in the *Libro de los Engaños*, a similar principle operates, presenting the onus to learn squarely on the individual.

Learning and Remembering through Inner Sight

As Ando observes, Augustine “very early in his career [...] selects sight as the sense most closely related to the processes of the mind” (75). Even if cogitation commonly involves a mental conversation, which Augustine acknowledges, this is carefully distinguished from spoken *verba*. The former is described as *formata*, a term used in his discussion of vision in Book Eleven of *De trinitate*, as opposed to *articulata*, which is the word Augustine uses to describe verbal language (Sirridge 321). Thus, inner speech is also elided with inner seeing: “And yet, when we call thoughts speeches of the heart, it does not follow that they are not also acts of sight, arising from the sight of knowledge, when they are true. For when these things are done outwardly by means of the body, then speech and sight are different things; but when we think inwardly, the two are one” (*De trinitate* 15.10.18).³⁴ Before words themselves are spoken, they are first “sonorum...imagines” in the mind (*De trinitate* 15.10.19).

When inspired understanding occurs as a result of thought it is also best represented by the visual metaphors of “insight,” “seeing the truth,” or “illumination.”

instead to concentrate on matters of style and on practical considerations like whether one should provide learners with chairs for their comfort during a lengthy sermon (*De Cat* 13.19).

³⁴ “Nec tamen quia dicimus locutiones cordis esse cogitationes, ideo non sunt etiam visiones exortae de notitiae visionibus, quando verae sunt. Foris enim cum per corpus haec fiunt, aliud est locutio, aliud visio: intus autem cum cogitamus, utrumque unum est.”

This places Augustine's views firmly within the Platonic philosophy of light.³⁵ "When we deal with things that we *perceive* by the mind," Augustine explains, "namely by the intellect and reason, we're speaking of things that we *look upon* immediately in the inner light of Truth, in virtue of which the so-called inner man is illuminated and rejoices. Under these conditions our listener, if he likewise *sees* these things with his *inward and undivided eye*, knows what I'm saying from his own contemplation, not from my words" (*De magistro* 12.40, my emphasis). Though the listener initially receives information by hearing verbal signs, it is only subsequent inner vision that prompts learning. Put quite directly, "What is grasped with the intellect is within the mind: having it is nothing other than seeing" (*De utilitate credendi* 13.28).³⁶ What God allows the "oculum mentis" (*De doctrina* 3.5.9) to see are images held in memory, an assertion complicated by Augustine's simultaneously conventional and unconventional use of the term *memoria* to designate a storehouse containing "not only images of past experiences but also . . . innate ideas that correspond to the eternal forms" (Nash 66).

Memory in its conventional sense stores things that are learned or witnessed in the form of *imagines*, which are recalled as a frame of reference in the context of learning something new. New information is transmuted into mental pictures and stored in addition to being checked against other mental images already existent in memory, so that "nothing can come into memory without that mental picture" (*Epistola* 7.1).³⁷

Augustine's conception of memory as a visual faculty is not a new development but

³⁵ For an account of how "ocular metaphors dominate [Western] accounts of knowledge," see Biernoff 39-40. Indeed, they persist in Columbia's motto from Psalms 36:9, "In lumine Tuo videbimus lumen."

³⁶ "Quod autem intellectu capitur, intus apud animum est: nec id habere quidquam est aliud, quam uidere."

³⁷ In the same letter, Augustine actually argues that "in regard to some things at least," namely a concept like "eternity," there can be an exercise of memory without any image of the thing remembered being presented by the imagination" ("potest esse quarumdam rerum sine ulla imaginatione memoria") (*Epistola* 7.2). The mechanism by which a mental image does not occur is not entirely convincing.

reflects his rhetorical training in the classical *ars memoriae*. His description of *memoria* as a space, a vast treasure-house where “things that have been perceived by the senses are hoarded” as images, in which state they are also sought out and retrieved “ex eodem thesauro memoriae,” is consistent with earlier accounts such as that of Cicero’s *De oratore* (*Conf.* 10.8.14).³⁸ So too, Augustine cites mnemonic pictures in their traditional role as rhetorical training aids, enabling him to retain and recall a vast repository of information “by heart” as needed for Christian instruction.³⁹ Because the things retained as *imagines* include not just what has been seen, but things heard, smelled, tasted, or felt, Augustine holds that all sensory data is initially transmuted into a visual representation within *memoria*. In particular, Augustine describes the metamorphosis of fleeting verbal signs that pass “with a noise through the air and are no longer” into more permanent “images of the sounds by which these words were composed” in the process of storing mental information (*Conf.* 10.10.17).

The things themselves apprehended by the senses “are not introduced into memory, but only the images of them (“earum solae imagines”)...placed as it were into wondrous cells and drawn out miraculously when recollecting” (*Conf.* 10.9.16). Here, Augustine suggests the superior communicative value of visual signs in cognitive understanding: a visual image is chosen because its personal signification can be easily apprehended during the act of recollection. Augustine’s description of memory as divided into cells (“cellis”) in this passage and earlier as “wide palaces where there are treasure-stores of innumerable images” (“thesauri innumerabilium imaginum”) recalls the classical trope of the visual memory space (*Conf.* 10.8.12). Other discussions of

³⁸ Carruthers discusses Cicero’s architectural metaphor for memory in *The Book of Memory* 22.

³⁹ Augustine speaks of calling upon these inner pictures “whenever I need to recite something from memory” (“cum aliquid narro memoraliter”) (*Conf.* 10.8).

memory—like the later *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, which shaped thirteenth-century *artes memoriae*—maintain that words, abstract concepts, and things without corporeal existence can likewise be remembered most readily when consciously transformed into images of a vivid, bizarre, or otherwise striking nature.⁴⁰

Words too are transmuted into mental images to be remembered, and textual passages containing rich (or strange) visual imagery, like one from the *Canticum canticorum* where the Church is described as a beautiful woman with teeth “like a flock of shorn ewes,” are more readily learned than one in “planissimis verbis” (*De doctrina* 2.6.7). Here, Augustine may be drawing on the Roman rhetorical concept of *enargeia* or vividness whereby visual language was employed to stimulate the imagination and sway an audience (Cox Miller 32). Augustine again expands on this idea to consider the image within the particular context of how it helps one to learn, suggesting that striking visual images, whether in didactic texts or more generally presented before the eyes, may be a useful tool for instruction.

Playing a higher role in the mechanism of learning than conventional recollection is Augustine’s second visual process of understanding, which involves consulting the *rationes aeternae*. Described most completely in the *De diversis quaestionibus*, the *rationes* correspond to Platonic Forms, representing the archetypes or patterns for reality “eternal and existing always in the same state...contained in the Divine Intelligence” (46.2), which is accessible to the pure human soul; as such they are absolutely true and cannot be misconstrued. According to Augustine, who explains the mechanism rather vaguely, when a student grasps a concept being taught, it is because he or she gets a glimpse of its absolute form, pre-existent if deeply hidden in the soul. To complete the

⁴⁰ *Rhetorica ad Herennium* 3.16.28 to 3.24.40 is dedicated to the formation of memory images.

process, the learner must also be able to gauge the truth or falsity of an idea, again by unconsciously and instantaneously comparing it to its eternal equivalent. This is accomplished by non-verbal means, through the vision of the inner eye [“oculo...interiore”] and again by the grace of the Inner Teacher, who gives insight only to an eye that is “sound, genuine, and serene, like those things it attempts to see” [“oculum quo videntur ista, sanum, et sincerum, et serenum, et similem his rebus quas videre intendit, habuerit.”] (*De diversis* 46.2). To teach the nature of the Ideas in the same passage, Augustine draws on this very method of visual consultation: he dismisses the importance of naming [“vocaverint,” “appellet”] the Forms in order to learn them, but instead directs the reader to “see [“videamus”] the thing that above all we must contemplate and come to know” (*De diversis* 46.1). In this way, “illumination is ‘showing’ since realities are displayed directly” (Stock, *Augustine* 161).

Augustine’s rhetorical questioning of the cognitive process in the *Confessions* makes reference to the role of the Forms, asserting that memory images of things pre-exist the learning of them, Augustine asks “How, when [concepts] were spoken of,” he asks, “did I understand (*agnovi*) and say ‘it is true,’ if they were not already in memory, but so remote and concealed as if in secret caves, so that unless they had been drawn out by someone else, I would not have been able to think of them?” (10.10.17). Augustine’s reference to finding the Forms in the caves of memory alters the classical concept of the visual “memory space,” an imagined physical location created in the mind where one places objects to be recalled by “walking through” the space and “seeing” them. Here, the forms are visualized without conscious intent to recollect them; the “someone else” who

triggers unconscious consultation of the forms can be a human teacher using words as his impetus, but it is the Inner Teacher who allows access to the latent truths resident there.

Also unlike conventional recollection, in the case of the *rationes*, “not...the image, but the thing” resides in the mind (*Conf.* 10.9.16). Augustine’s statement that an imaginary student is “taught not by my words but by the things themselves (*ipsis rebus*) made manifest within when God discloses them” presents another way of looking at the *rationes aeternae* in terms of the *res/signum* relationship of the *De doctrina Christiana* (*De magistro* 12.40). Whereas generally “things are learnt through signs” (“*res per signa discuntur*”), Augustine’s use of “*ipsis rebus*” implies that the unmistakable truth of the forms originates in their quality as archetypal self-signifying *res*, able to directly communicate their own meaning without the intermediary of any other *signum* (*De doctrina* 1.2.2). In this regard they resemble the “‘natural language’ of Paradise that transcended bodily and temporal signs altogether” removing the possibility of misapprehension (Jager 54).

Learning through Visual Signs

If metaphors of vision are most appropriate to describe the process of inspired learning, the sense of sight conversely “has the greatest affinity to mental vision” (“*visioni mentis...vicinior*”) (*De trinitate* 11.1.1). Whereas Augustine is careful to distinguish inner speech during the thought process from its external counterpart, inner vision is more akin to external sight. From a certain perspective, Augustine’s threefold formulation of vision, enumerated in *De Genesi ad litteram*, can be seen as placing “corporeal vision in an inferior position, thereby promoting a general suspicion of all

experience or knowledge attained through physical seeing” (Stevenson 30). However, a look at the theory shows that, on the contrary, it raises the possibility of certainty in apprehending visual signs. Seeing first takes place on the sensory or corporeal level, and an image is then imprinted on the mind at the level of spiritual vision; this is the farthest that animals can go in terms of processing what is seen. However, human beings can access a third level, intellectual vision, wherein “if [what is seen] is symbolic of something, its meaning is either immediately understood by the intellect or sought out” (*DGAL* 12.11.22).⁴¹ This last stage involves consulting the eternal forms and the inspiration of the Inner Teacher and so can provide a true assessment of what is seen. As Margaret Miles has observed, there is necessarily a spiritual component in “the accurate ‘seeing’ of visual objects. . . . because it cannot take place without the soul,” without the involvement of inner illumination (“Vision” 139-40). And as long as visible objects are perceived in terms of their *usus*—as evidence of God—they will be understood.

Although removed from the ideal condition of the *rationes aeternae*, visual signs in the external world can also be self-signifying objects, partaking in their own kind of natural language with its concomitant benefits. Heavenly bodies, “the lands and the seas, and countless things begotten in them” are all examples of *res* that reveal their own qualities upon empirical observation, though they obviously bear no intent to educate (*De magistro* 10.32).⁴² Among human beings, however, “thousands of things . . . can be

⁴¹ Translation by Taylor. The Latin in *CSEL* reads “alicuius rei signum est, aut intellegatur continuo, quid significet, aut quaeratur” (12.11.19-20).

⁴² Augustine’s argument for a self-signifying natural language can be faulted for its assumptions concerning the apparent ease of distinguishing the attributes of a thing upon observation. The nature of the sun, for instance, is still not completely understood, though perhaps Augustine is not making a case for *complete* but for *sufficient* understanding. This criticism does not remove the fact that what we perceive of the sun (however incomplete or limited) is obtainable without recourse to outside signs. A case can be made either that the separate components of the sun—its brightness, heat, presence in the sky—are in fact independent signs that signify a sun, or inseparable from the whole, depending on one’s philosophical perspective.

exhibited through themselves rather than through signs: for example, eating, drinking, sitting, standing, shouting and countless others” (*De magistro* 3.6). One can intentionally teach something of what “walking” is by showing the act of walking itself or learn the nature of a bird catcher’s skills just by watching him at work.⁴³

Each of these examples continues to rely on some innate ability on the part of the viewer either to infer the whole of bird-catching from a limited set of observed actions or to discern the difference between “walking” and “hurrying,” for instance; their effectiveness in transmitting information indicates the proximity of visual education to the sign-less communication available before the Fall. The possibility of uncovering meaning by observing an object exceeds what can be learned through verbal signs to the point that one “doesn’t learn at all unless he himself sees what is described, where he then learns not from words but from the things themselves” (*De magistro* 12.39).

When visual signs are used to signify things other than themselves, they continue to evince the qualities of pre-lapsarian communication. In the *De catechizandis*, before Augustine addresses the anxiety of teachers whose thoughts run faster than the ability of words to express them, he discusses the superior communicative power of an angry face. If the phrase “iratus sum” makes sense only to Latin speakers, the meaning of an enraged look is universally comprehensible, conveying the same information with greater economy and efficiency (*De catechizandis* 2.3). As a rule, human beings can never “bring out those impressions which the intellectual apprehension stamps upon the memory and to hold them forth . . . by means of the sound of the voice, in any manner parallel to the clear and evident (“apertus et manifestus”) form in which the look appears” (*De catechizandis* 2.3)

⁴³ See *De magistro* 3.6 and 10.32.

Facial expressions do raise the question of whether they are signs issued with the desire to communicate or merely involuntary exterior manifestations of an inner “state of soul.” Augustine considers them a spontaneous by-product of emotion (“sine significandi voluntate sequantur motum animi”) and eliminates them from discussion in the *De doctrina* as being of minimal value for educative communication (*De doctrina* 2.2.3). Under some circumstances visual signs are clearly delivered with communicative intent—a nod of the head or a military banner for instance—in which case they are termed *verba visibilia* or “visible words” (*De doctrina* 2.3.4). Though fewer in number than words and used less often for purposes of signification, *verba visibilia* play an essential and foundational part in comprehension. In fact, facial expressions, bodily movements, and gestures are cited in the *Confessions* as the underpinnings upon which rest nothing less than the meaning of words themselves.

To associate the sound of a word—a vacant *flatus vocis* for one as yet without verbal language—with the particular thing it signified, the infant Augustine depended mainly on visual cues, the physical movement of his elders toward the referent: “From bodily movement [meaning] was apparent, by the natural language common to all peoples, expressed by the face and glance of the eye, by the action of other members, and tone of voice” (*Conf.* 1.8.13). In this construction, the verbal sign is empty until it is attached to an object by a procedure that hinges on visual identification, first in noticing that there is a *signum/res* relationship at hand, then in observing the characteristics of the referent.

An efficient means of creating awareness of a *signum/res* relation in the external world—the first step in teaching the meaning of any heretofore unknown verbal sign—is

to use gesture, particularly the act of pointing out with the finger. By pointing one can convey “with certainty” (“prorsus”) that a particular word should be attached to a specific referent, thereby imbuing the verbal sign with meaning (*De magistro* 3.5).⁴⁴ Gesturing for the purposes of indication does have its limitations since it can reveal nothing on its own about the nature of the referent. For this, a visual assessment of the object is necessary, allowing it to signify itself, to present to the viewing eye the particular attributes that characterize it. “Intentus digitus” can only serve as “a sign of the pointing-out rather than of any things that are pointed out” but this is true of all human teaching that merely directs; only the Inner Teacher reveals truth (*De magistro* 10.34). Jewish spiritual blindness illustrates that one cannot find meaning until one knows there is a situation that needs interpretation, an awareness that can be “pointed out.” Indeed, the parallel between teaching and indicative gesturing is made explicit in Augustine’s defense of his task as an educator, likened to pointing out the new moon or a faint star with a finger: if a student does not have the proper (in)sight not to look at the finger but what is aimed at there is nothing more the teacher can do to educate him (*De doctrina* “Prologus” 3).

And yet, “[d]espite his equation of verbal and visual” in the process of learning, Augustine “was very suspicious of visual signs and their value” (Hahn, “Purification” 72). Frequently cited as evidence of this suspicion is a passage in *De consensu evangelistarum* where Augustine describes how iconography showing Christ with St. Paul and St. Peter misleads pagan viewers to assume all three were contemporaries,

⁴⁴ In the dialogue, Adeodatus suggests that “omnia visibilia” can be exhibited by pointing, to which Augustine proposes the hand motions of the deaf as a counterexample of gesture used to indicate “not only visible things, but also sounds and flavors and other things of this sort” (3.5). But “sign language” works differently from what happens when teaching the relationship between words and things; hand signs used by the deaf do not generally point out a visible object allowing it to illuminate its own meaning as a sign.

martyred together (Peter Brown 28). Regarding this misreading of an image, Augustine remarks, “they thoroughly deserve to err who have sought Christ and his Apostles not in sacred books but in pictures” (*De consensu* 1.10.16).⁴⁵ Here, where Augustine is addressing a practical consideration of Christian learning, he seems to be urging a thorough knowledge of the context for such an image, a return to the original Scriptures as the primary source of instruction. Elsewhere, he similarly promotes the labor of interpretation that occurs when reading as more meaningful than merely looking at an image: “when you have seen a picture, to have praised it is the whole thing; when you see writing, this is not the whole, since you are reminded also to read it” (*Tractatus in evangelium Ioannis* 24.2). Here, where Augustine is again showing his Platonic roots, the self-evident nature of visual signs can also be their downfall, embodying “a lack of all spiritual potential” (Kessler *Spiritual Seeing* 151); not requiring an interpretation, they encourage “a resting in sense,” *fructus* rather than *usus* (Lerud, *Memory, Images* 58). One must therefore approach visual signs with caution.

However, this quality does not remove the value of images if the viewer already has a knowledge of that which is depicted. A Christian who comes to the image with the proper context will be led to recall its deeper meaning. Along the same lines, “in the case of pictures and statues and other such representations, especially those made by experienced artists, nobody who sees the representation fails to recognize the things which they resemble” (*DDC* 2.25.39). This hints at the mnemonic power of visuals in instruction as well as the need to consider the efficacy of visual signs in relation to words, topics with implications for visual art and, in my discussion, dramatic performance, during the Middle Ages.

⁴⁵ “non in sanctis codicibus, sed in pictis....” Also see Chazelle 146.

Despite the demonstrated efficacy of *verba visibilia* for instructive purposes, Augustine's vexed relationship with literature precludes his acknowledging the usefulness of theater—a primarily visual medium of actors and props physically present before the eyes of an audience—in communicating any truth. Augustine does admit at one point that, like things in the natural world, “the performances of men in all the theaters . . . display things themselves without a sign,” but never makes it clear just how an actor can indicate anything “sine signo” except perhaps the nature of acting itself (*De magistro* 10.32). And, even as Augustine posits that acting can convey information without serving as a sign for something else, he simultaneously expresses a wish to exclude it (“omittam”) from his discussion (*De magistro* 10.32).⁴⁶

The type of gestured acting Augustine refers to makes it more likely that he means something like “sine verbis” for “sine signo.” Richard Beacham describes the nature of Roman mime—bawdy, often satirical improvisations where “grimacing, gesticulation, and general expressiveness were an essential part of the performance,” which were, however, not delivered without words (130). What Augustine evidently refers to, both in its main reliance on *verba visibilia* and its inclusion of tragic plots, is Roman pantomime or *fabula saltica*, a “dumb show dance of mythological material [that] sought to present characterization, emotion and narrative entirely through the movements and gestures of the body, or parts of the body, of an individual performer who neither sang nor spoke” (Beacham 143).⁴⁷ This is precisely the special ability of actors described

⁴⁶“Nam ut hominum omittam innumerabilia spectacula in omnibus theatris sine signo ipsis rebus exhibentium.”

⁴⁷ The skill of the actors was such that they were somehow able to convey Pythagorean philosophy and the substance of Platonic dialogues entirely through pantomime.

earlier in the *De magistro*: relating “fabulas sine verbis saltando,” in a kind of interpretive dance (3.5).

How Augustine can so readily pass over the nonverbal signs of this theatrical form is explicable once we realize that histrionic gestures do not really partake of natural language. Far from viewing stylized theatrical gestures as similar to natural language, Augustine uses the term “fabulas” to intimate that they not only fail to self-signify, but that they communicate only fictions and lies. Regardless of their silent nature—evoked by the modern understanding of pantomime—the *verba visibilia* of the stage have more in common with the verbal signs of literature, used simply to “tell tales [‘fabulantur’]” (*De doctrina* 2.3.4). For this reason, Augustine more explicitly denies the association of acting with natural language later in his career even as he cites it as superfluous for Christian *doctrina*. “If the signs made by actors while dancing were naturally meaningful,” he observes, “rather than meaningful as a result of human institution and agreement, an announcer would not have indicated to the Carthaginians, as each actor danced, what the dance meant (*De doctrina* 2.25.38).

Also like words, actors’ symbolic movements contain no intrinsic or readily apparent meaning and require interpretation, a task only possible for the “scientibus,” a limited audience of those few “in the know” (*De doctrina* 2.3.4). Roman aficionados of pantomime were “familiar with the different myths, and moreover (rather like contemporary devotees of the ballet) the precise way in which they were to be danced” which apparently was no longer the case in Augustine’s day (Beacham 143). Furthermore, once the meaning of arcane stage gestures is discovered, they present lies without value for Christian education; consequently, attendance at plays is an example of

improper *fructus*. Any superficial likeness theatrical signs share with other *verba visibilia* is negated by their intersection with fiction.⁴⁸

It is important to keep in mind that the gestured acting critiqued by Augustine is very specific to Roman stagecraft and does not automatically disqualify the visual signs of all drama as tools for Christian education. Yet, because theater was so strongly affiliated with pagan religious practice and culture, even more so than secular literature, Augustine himself “could not (or saw no reason to) synthesize...[it] with Christian learning” (Dox 16). Unlike how he adapted classical rhetoric and philosophy, he simply “could not tease theater out of its cultural function as popular entertainment and let it serve Christian ends” (Dox 16). The closest that Augustine comes to anticipating a Christian theater is in his *Sermones*, where he describes martyr narratives in highly visual terms as spectacle, albeit a kind that differs from conventional theater “in that the eye is directed inward, where the drama is played out in the mind’s eye” (Cox Miller 31). The impassioned phrasing he uses to describe his feelings for such narratives is strongly visual—“Denique amo martyres, specto martyres: quando leguntur passiones martyrum, specto” (“Sermon 301A” qtd in Cox Miller 31, n. 25)—at once testifying to the dramatic quality of such narratives and proposing a “spiritual theater of the mind” as the alternative among Christians to pursuing secular *spectacula*.

Created with “instruction in faith and morals as a primary end,” medieval religious plays put drama to a didactic use unforeseen by the Bishop of Hippo (Tydeman 18). However, as I will show in Chapter 2, they recapitulate many of Augustine’s key ideas on instruction. For its *doctrina*, medieval religious drama similarly emphasizes the

⁴⁸ Examples from the visual arts, like the mural of Jupiter and Danae in Terence’s play, are not discussed as extensively as theatrical signs in Augustine’s corpus but presumably represent another exception to the educational value of visual signs due to their potential portrayal of false or immoral subjects.

interpretation of signs and promotes the pedagogical efficacy of *verba visibilia* through the use of props, scenery, and movement of actors before an audience. And, they do so while situating Jews as symbols of misinterpretation against inner faith that leads to understanding.

CHAPTER 2: JEWS AND CHRISTIAN EDUCATION IN MEDIEVAL RELIGIOUS DRAMA

The Didactic Potential of the Stage

Augustine's rejection of Roman pantomime on account of the didactic uselessness of its visual signs may be unique among the Church Fathers, but his general antipathy to *spectacula*—stage plays and other forms of public performance like “wild beast shows, lubricious pantomimes, chariot races, and gladiatorial fights”—is not (Barish 43). Pre-dating Augustine by some two centuries, Tertullian's *De Spectaculis* represents the first and most famous Early Christian treatise in opposition to the theater.⁴⁹ His warning that “the laws of Christian Discipline. . . forbid among other sins of the world, the pleasures of the public shows” anticipates Augustine on worldly *fructus* as a distraction from spirituality (Chapter 1). But, at its crux, Tertullian's argument is a reaction to the threat of a rival interest: if attention is given to gladiators or actors, there is no space left to think on God, for a Christian cannot “serve two masters.”⁵⁰ Of course, the amount of energy spent by the Early Church reacting to the prevailing problem of Christians enjoying *spectacula* reveals just how powerful the draw of Roman theater was. Most tellingly, when barbarians besieged Rome, crowds sought solace in theatrical entertainment rather than in church assemblies (Beacham 194).

Within the framework of competition that underlies their protests against the stage, patristic authors find one particular form of rivalry most threatening: the association of theater with pagan worship, even if this link had long become peripheral to

⁴⁹ I am excluding the fragmentary discourses of Tatian against acting mentioned by Barish (44).

⁵⁰ See Tertullian, *De spectaculis* XXV. The original citation is from Matthew 6.24.

the purpose of entertainment. By emphasizing “many different ways the sin of idolatry clings to the shows,” Tertullian raises an identification of theater with anti-Christian belief, and consequently with moral turpitude, a connection Augustine would repeat as a cause of Roman degeneration in the *City of God* (Ch. XIII).⁵¹ Among the Greek Fathers, John Chrysostom avows that “there is no difference between the theater and the synagogue,” conjoining the Jewish place of worship with the stage as equivalent loci of disbelief (I :2.7).⁵² This patristic attachment of disbelief and theater would persist for centuries even after a formal ban on public performance: the Carolingian *Benedictus lenta* continued to forbid from bringing legal suit “all that are spattered with the stain of evil repute: that is, *histriones* . . . heretics and Jews as well” (Ogilvy 608).

Just as Augustine was dismayed by the lessons present in fiction, leading him to ally *fabulae* with heresy, concerns about the pagan attributes of theater acknowledge that the stage can be an influential source of instruction for ideas antithetical to Christian morality. For Tertullian, “tragedies and comedies, bloody and lustful, impious and prodigal, teach outrage and lust,” making audiences complicit in crimes of murder or fornication witnessed on stage—whether real or simulated—and desirous of committing these grave sins themselves (*De spectaculis* XVII).⁵³ Augustine denies the possibility of extracting Christian lessons from drama, but recognizes a pagan didactic threat. He labels the shows a “den of wickedness” (*De doctrina* 1.29.30) and “disgusting spectacles of frivolous immorality” (*De civitate dei* 1.32) and in so doing connects the influence of

⁵¹ Chapters Five through Thirteen of the *De Spectaculis* are dedicated to mustering evidence in this regard. For Augustine’s views, see *De civitate Dei* 2:8.

⁵² Chrysostom’s related charge that “Jews are gathering choruses of effeminates” (I:2,7) raises a similar association of theater with deviant sexuality, which also recalls Tertullian’s opposition to the stage for its unnatural cross-dressing (See XVII, XXIII).

⁵³ Barish’s main criticism of Tertullian’s argument is that he does not distinguish between the wrongfulness of witnessing real activity versus that which is only simulated (47-49).

performance directly to their visual nature. Much is made in the *Confessions* of Alypius' ability to temporarily resist his lust for gladiatorial spectacles (*gladiatorii spectaculi*) by closing his eyes while present at the arena (6.8). But when, prompted by the sound of cheers, he opens them and sees bloodshed, looking on the scene is described as a deep wound to his very soul (*graviore vulnere in anima*) (*Conf.* 6.8).

That Augustine should perceive the ability of *spectacula* as a visual medium to deeply impact the soul is not unusual given his treatment of *verba visibilia* as a powerful pedagogical and mnemonic tool. More curious is that, despite patristic fears relating to the great potential for negative instruction inherent in the theater, it took nearly a millennium before the Church would look to “compete with less decorous amusements by harnessing the methods of profane presentation” (Tydeman 4). Augustine could not begin to consider the possibility of exploiting the theatrical form for Christian *usus* because it was so closely bound to its pagan origins; it was “indistinguishable from the culture that produce[d] it” and thus could not be “despoiled” like rhetoric or *grammatica* (Dox 16). For medieval Christian thinkers, the “physical quality of ancient theatrical practice as it was understood through late classical sources—the requirements of buildings and performers, spectators and prostitutes, scenery and costume; its social function—set theater apart from texts and language that constituted knowledge” (Dox 70). And so, with the Trullan Council’s outlawing of formal public performance in 692, the conventions of dramatic staging passed into obscurity so that we have no evidence of theater through the early Middle Ages except for vague references to solo street performers, buskers of sorts called *mimi* and *scurrae*.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Ogilvy’s article in *Speculum* 38 still provides the best overview of the terms used to describe these performers. Ogilvy and others (Chambers, Tydeman) have contended that the *mimi* and their ilk

For Bevington, the medieval loss of Roman dramatic principles is exemplified in the tenth-century plays of Hrotsvit, which were based directly on Terence but intended solely for reading, with no understanding of staging technique (3). Yet, regardless of whether or not Hrotsvit's *Dramas* were enacted at Gandersheim (a real possibility according to some scholars), the Saxon canoness deserves notice more for her contribution as the first to "despoil" pagan drama for Christian didactic aims than for what she did not know of stage conventions.⁵⁵ Hrotsvit consciously intends to imitate the dangerously appealing form and style (*dulcedo sermonis*) of Terence in order to "glorify . . . the laudable chastity of Christian virgins in that self-same form of composition which has been used to describe the shameless acts of licentious women" (Hrotsvit "Preface" *The Plays of Roswitha* l. 9). Not only does she explore the "Augustinian theme of the use and abuse of worldly objects and beauty" as she reiterates Augustine's views on the corruptive influence of fiction (again exemplified by Terence), but she also appropriates a pagan fictive form for Christian edification within the model of Augustinian *spoliatio* (Eril Hughes 63).⁵⁶ Her response to the anti-Christian content of the theater is simply to make it Christian. Men enter brothels not for sex but to convert prostitutes. Where a young man's passion leads him to rape in Terence's *Eunuchus*, it brings conversion and the maintenance of chastity in Hrotsvit's *Drusiana*. Hrotsvit's apparent defiance of

represented a continuity of professional actors who somehow kept the "rudiments of acting" alive and thus available for the eventual rebirth of drama, even if they were prevented from staging organized performances (Chambers qtd. in Mann 141). Given the lack of hard evidence for such professional troupes, this remains a minority view among theater scholars.

⁵⁵ Becker (*passim*) believes that Hrotsvit's *Dramas* were staged based on their visuality as well as the cultural climate of Gandersheim and the Ottonian court. It is just a small step from written dialogue to assigning spoken parts to different individuals, especially given the standard monastic practice of reading aloud. From this point, it is easy to imagine the addition of some physical movement and gesture, and perhaps props and costuming.

⁵⁶ Sticca sees Hrotsvit's approach as a legacy of Jerome's advice in *Epistola XXI* on how to use the classics (1-2).

convention in writing a genre outlawed by the Church actually represents her long overlooked conformity to the established tradition of *spoliatio Aegyptiorum*.⁵⁷

Despite being the first to exploit the dramatic form to present Christian values, Hrotsvit did not contribute directly to the development of later religious drama. The integration of histrionic elements into the Church service, such as in the tenth-century *Quen quaeretis*, is generally figured as a natural development, “an impulse” (Bevington 5, 6) built into the nature of the Eucharistic service with its reliance on ritual garb, props, and gestures presented before an audience; it was a change that “arose spontaneously as part of a much wider process of elaborating the services” and not part of any intentional didactic strategy (Wickham 11). In fact, dramatic descriptions of the liturgy, as in Amalarius of Metz’s consideration of the Mass, never raise a connection with classical theater precisely because the latter existed “solidly in the realm of society, idolatry, and representational perfidy” (Dox 58). Writing in the twelfth century, Hugh of St. Victor would discuss theatrics as one of the mechanical arts but only in regard to its prior existence in antiquity not in terms of any contemporary dramatic activity (Lerud, *Memory, Images* 33). Given this careful distinction, rather than looking at the classical precedent, it is more fruitful to situate the development of drama against changes in attitude toward images in general.

The applicability of developments in medieval sculpture and painting to the study of drama has been widely observed. Lerud notes that the images that comprise drama can be “considered in the same general category as painted and sculpted images” and it is thus “fair to appropriate the discourse regarding images and image veneration to our

⁵⁷ A parallel exists between the behavior of Hrotsvit’s characters and her own act of *spoliatio*. Just as “feminea fragilitas” overcomes powerful pagan males in her plays, Hrotsvit, a self-declared “lowly little woman,” aims to overcome the negative influence of Terence (*Preface* 1. 33; See Schroeder *passim*).

understanding of the drama” (“Quick Images,” 213) while Jean-Claude Schmitt urges the study of “*l’image*” in all its semantic connotations (“tout le champ sémantique que ce mot circonscrit”) during the Middle Ages (*Le corps* 167).⁵⁸ Both visual art and drama can be seen “as two participants in a larger visual discourse, repeatedly building on and reacting to each other” (Stevenson 6). The Western Christian attitude toward images has long been a vexed one, marked by considerable negative perceptions that are expressed quite thoroughly by Theodulf of Orleans in the eighth-century *Libri Carolini*. Yet, a countercurrent existed, beginning with Pope Gregory the Great’s letters to Bishop Serenus of Marseilles. Gregory’s statements, which are ultimately influenced by Augustine’s discussion of visual signs (Chazelle 138), mark a turning point in the perception of images and were “cited by virtually every author and encyclopaedist who considered the role of images throughout the Middle Ages, up to and including the Council of Trent” (Athene Reiss 5).

In response to Serenus’ destruction of the images in his church to prevent them from being adored, Gregory defends their value for the instruction of the illiterate (“ad aedificationem imperiti populi”) (XI, 10.48); painted images are permitted as long as they are not adored but serve as a means of instruction concerning what should be adored (“Aliud est enim picturam adorare, aliud per picturae historiam quid sit adorandum addiscere”) (XI, 10:22-23). In this role, pictures are like books for the unlearned (“in ipsa legunt qui litteras nesciunt”) (XI, 10.25-26). Here, Gregory is promoting the didactic value of images based on their ability to evoke the content they depict. For Peter Brown, this key moment marks a new notion that “images can act as a substitute for writing”

⁵⁸ Pamela Sheingorn lays the groundwork for doing this in the seminal “On Using Medieval Art in the Study of Medieval Dramas: An Introduction to Methodology” (*passim*).

(17). Moreover, Gregory's statements clearly present the idea that images can serve as a means of accessing the divine, "the invisible world 'out there'," a crucial development for the eventual use of visual signs in drama (Kessler, *Spiritual* 105).

Despite continued suspicion of images during the Carolinian period, Gregory's influential letters opened the door to the didactic use of images in the service of Christian instruction, a door that would then be flung wide open with the growth of an Incarnational theology from the tenth century onward, leading to "une véritable conversion aux images" (Baschet 10). When God took on physical form, he essentially acceded to making himself visible—in the words of Irenaeus of Lyon, "The Son is the visibility of the Father"—and so, through the image one could attain salvation (qtd. in Baschet 17). This prominent idea in turn led to an "emphasis on the material world and the body's place within it," sparked the representation of sacred subjects in sculpture and painting (Stevenson 3) and "lent itself extraordinarily well to various kinds of mimetic activities" including the depiction of the same subjects in visual performance (Dox 4). The production and use of sacred images would reach such a level during the eleventh and twelfth centuries that the practice was often criticized by Jewish theologians as a form of idolatry, prompting Christian apologists like Rupert of Deutz and Guibert de Nogent to formulate thorough defenses, often in the form of a debate (Schmitt, *Le corps* 99). Jews also feature in medieval religious drama, not only as continued emblems of disbelief but as misinterpreters of signs, against whom the plays model a correct approach to understanding that likewise defends the value of visual signs.

The Didactic Judeus of the Anglo-Norman Adam

The central focus of the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman *Ordo repraesentationis Ade*, also known as the *Jeu d'Adam* or *Mystère d'Adam*, is a creative account of the Fall, but some of the most intriguing aspects of the play are centred on interruptions to this biblical narrative. After staging the murder of Abel at the hands of his brother, the *Adam* diverges from its source material in Genesis to include a procession of Old Testament figures declaiming messianic prophecies about Christ (ll. 745-882). This *ordo prophetarum* is interrupted in turn after some 150 lines when a Jew, “quidam de synagoga,” attempts to argue with the prophet Isaiah concerning the credibility of his predictions:

Ore me respon, sire Ysaïas:

Est ço fable, ou prophecie?

Que est iço, que tu as dit?

Truvas le tu, ou est escrit?

Tu as dormi, tu le sonjas.

Est ço certes ou a gas? (ll. 883-888)

Much of what has been written about the procession of prophets in the *Adam* has addressed it as a variant on the popular sixth-century *Sermo contra Judeos, paganos, et Arianos de symbolo* falsely attributed to Augustine.⁵⁹ From this perspective, the *ordo prophetarum* is mainly valuable for the evidence it provides for a staging of the play during the Christmas season when the *Sermo* was traditionally part of the liturgy. Setting aside other evidence that the *Adam* was not a winter play—its use of pre-Lenten

⁵⁹ Karl Young reprints the original *Sermo* in volume II of *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, 125-37.

responsories, its performance outside the church—I believe that the moments of narrative disruption surrounding the *ordo* are more important for what they reveal of the playwright’s interest in signification, in which Jewish disbelief is essential.

The disputatious Jew who does not appear in the Pseudo-Augustinian sermon and who interrupts the procession of prophets with his scepticism has gone almost without comment in critical discussions of the *Adam*. Erich Auerbach’s noted chapter on the mimetic aspect of the play analyzes the Genesis story but ignores Judeus’s interruption and the ensuing procession.⁶⁰ Neither Karl Young in his comparison of different twelfth-century *ordines prophetarum* nor Willem Noomen in editing the *Adam* text discusses the polemical Jew at all.⁶¹ And while Lynette Muir has speculated on how the *Adam* author’s knowledge of Jewish exegesis is reflected in the unique attributes of his *ordo*, she only mentions the *Judeus* to observe that it would be “not impossible, though ... very original” to have his audience “represent the Jews, so that the *quidam de synagoga* would come out of the audience and Isaiah and his fellow prophets would address the audience as *Judei*” (34). Her own doubts notwithstanding, Muir’s supposition furnishes the best way of looking at the *Judeus*: within the context of the twelfth-century Christian-Jewish debates as a sign substituting for the equally disbelieving Christian spectator.

By the twelfth century, the application of logic and dialectic to faith led many Christians to question a number of thorny doctrinal issues like those of the Incarnation and the Virgin Birth, as “they could see with their own eyes that empirical reality

⁶⁰ In discussing the mixing of high and low styles in the *Adam* play (*Mimesis* 143-73), Auerbach reveals the continued influence of Augustine who identified the same feature in Scripture.

⁶¹ A notable exception is Jennifer Goodman’s “*Quidam de Sinagoga*: The Jew of the *Jeu d’Adam*,” *Medieval Cultures in Contact*, ed. Richard Gyug (New York 2003) 161-188, which perceives the *Judeus* as part of a proselytizing message for a Jewish audience. Young’s discussion of the *ordines prophetarum* occurs in *The Drama of the Medieval Church* Volume 2, 125-71. Noomen’s *Jeu d’Adam* has long been considered the critical edition.

contradicted what their priests taught them to believe” (Abulafia, *Christians and Jews in Dispute* I, 183). At the core, these issues involve interpretation of signs: Is the doctrine of the Virgin Birth based on the correct reading of Scripture? Should one believe the verbal signs one has read or heard taught in this regard or judgments formed on the basis of empirical experience? Because the doubts raised by Christians reflected the objections posed by disbelieving Jews, the former projected their internal discomfort outward in the form of a virulent and irrational anti-Jewish sentiment that also developed during the same period.⁶² Robert Chazan speaks of social and intellectual “developments that engendered a sense of dislocation and anxiety in the northern European populace of the late twelfth and early thirteenth century” and observes that a “fearful population would have been likely to project some of its discomfort” on a minority like the Jews (93). In its written expression, this vehement anti-Judaism appears in works like Guibert of Nogent’s *Autobiography* and the *Adversus Iudeorum* of Peter the Venerable.⁶³ On a more rational level, thinkers like Odo of Cambrai, Anselm, and his pupil Gilbert Crispin, sought to validate difficult theological issues using the dictates of logic, and, given the similarity between Christian and Jewish misgivings, frequently framed their writings in the form of a debate between the author and an incredulous Jew.

The number of such dialogues put in writing during the twelfth century suggests occasions of informal exchange that actually took place between Jews and Christians at the time, but it is readily apparent that the Jews of the dialogues are more important for

⁶² A complex of other social developments—resentment over Jewish baronial ties and usury, for example—also contributed to anti-Jewish feeling that arose in the twelfth-century, but anger toward the disbelief of “the sole legitimate dissenting [religious] group” in Northern Europe remained the primary motive (Chazan 11).

⁶³ See Chazan, *Medieval Stereotypes*, pp. 47-52.

their functional didactic value than for their historicity.⁶⁴ The *adversus Judaeus* tradition, as Fredriksen reminds us, is always “[p]edagogical and prescriptive” (93). The *raison d’être* of these works is to enforce the truth of Christian doctrine and the words of the Jewish opposition “had to be reformulated for them to be in any way operational in fulfilling that aim” (Abulafia, *Christians and Jews in Dispute* x); quite simply, the Jews cannot win the debate and are merely strawmen. Peter Damian’s eleventh-century *Dialogus inter Judaeum et Christianum* is one example of a work that is “more of a pedagogical exposition” than a conversation (Dahan 54). Its goal is expressly to provide one “Honestus” with an *ars disputandi* against the arguments of Jewish opponents. But unlike Honestus’ purportedly confrontational real world counterparts, the Jew in Damian’s text is virtually silent, providing “brief, formulaic...questions to which Peter gives much fuller responses in his own voice” (Kruger 21).

The more realistic polemical works of the following century, like Gilbert Crispin’s *Disputatio Iudei et Christiani* and Odo of Tournai’s (later Cambrai) *Disputatio contra Judeum Leonem*, which provide the Jewish opponent with lengthier responses and do not conclude with his obligatory conversion, nonetheless continue to use Jewish characters as an opportunity to present Christian instruction. Odo’s declared purpose in writing the *Disputatio* is “ad instruendum fidelem monachum,” Brother Acard, regarding concise arguments in support of the doctrine of the Incarnation (Col.1103A). Odo’s declaration that his discussion with Leo took place in Senlis may suggest the historicity of his debate, but his statement that “it seemed appropriate to me to pursue this question [of the Incarnation] in the form of a dialogue, where the Jew had asked and I had

⁶⁴ Gilbert Dahan discusses five twelfth-century dialogues (55-60) and a similar number of other works that make at least passing reference to actual public debates between Jews and Christians (23-27).

responded” is an admission to its invented nature (85). Likewise, despite claims of a true encounter with a Jew from Mainz, Crispin notes that he is writing “sub persona Iudei” (5.22).

Limiting opposing arguments to ensure that Christian doctrinal points are vindicated testifies to the use of Jewish characters not as free agents but as instruments to defend and teach orthodox interpretation. Crispin’s Jew voices ideas originally expressed by Anselm and Jerome (Abulafia, *Christians and Jews in Dispute* VI, 141) and “much of what Leo has to say in [Odo’s] disputation is Christian rather than Jewish” (Abulafia, *Christians and Jews in Dispute* X, 385). In this way, the Jew of the dialogues becomes a polyvalent sign, simultaneously an instructive mouthpiece for the Christian author and a defeated surrogate for those judaizing “Catholics who had been lost by taking the part of the Jew” and who should now realize that their doctrinal doubts have been misguided (Odo of Tournai 97).

This conception of Jews as useful didactic instruments is not original to the medieval dialogues but derives from Augustine’s philosophy of *testimonium veritatis*, which finds its most famous medieval proponent in Bernard of Clairvaux. According to this notion, Jews have been and should continue to be preserved if only for their valuable function as keepers of the scriptures that testify to the truth of Christ through the typological prophecies contained therein. As such, they would remain “a continuing quotidian revelation of God’s will shining in the darkness of secular time” (Fredriksen 365). In other words, Jews are exclusively objects for use, “an *implement* for preserving, transmitting, and expounding the prophecies of Christianity inscribed in the Old Testament” (my emphasis), compared by Augustine in one image to writing desks

[“*scriniaria*”] upon which sacred books may be placed (Cohen 29). And, in carrying the Old Testament, they are transmuted into the signs of the Old Testament themselves. In the words of Bernard, Jews become “the living letters (*vivi...apices*) of Scripture,” *verba visibilia* of a sort with the capacity to teach the typological truths of Christianity (qtd. in Cohen 236).⁶⁵ Like pagan texts, Jews can thus be “despoiled” for their *usus* as didactic signs. The effectiveness of Jews as general instruments for Christian education, indicated by their repeated use in instructive dialogues, carries over to the *Ordo repraesentationis Ade*.

Far from being “an afterthought [or] a footnote to the vivid biblical drama of the play’s earlier scenes,” the *quidam de synagoga disputans* who clashes with Isaiah bears a close resemblance to the Jews of twelfth-century interreligious debate literature, suggesting a shared purpose or influence; situating the Jew in this context is thus vital in illuminating his underappreciated role in the instruction of the play (Goodman 166). Since the audience for the *Adam* was not likely to include any Jews, summoning them to an assembly (“*Vos, inquam, convenio, o Judei*”) for the purpose of teaching them how to interpret their own sacred texts would clearly be a fruitless effort.⁶⁶ Jennifer Goodman’s claim that the play is primarily “an argument for the conversion of Jews addressed to a contemporary Jewish audience” (162) remains unconvincing, as it discounts the primary Christian audience shared with the Latin debate literature, which was surely not aimed at Jews. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine Jewish passersby, who may have been barred from proximity with churches during Holy Week (Goodman 176), stopping to engage themselves in a play that vehemently emphasizes the wrongness of their belief. Such

⁶⁵ The source is Bernard’s Letter 363.

⁶⁶ *Lectio* following l. 744.

lessons in the play on reading signs are really directed at a questioning Christian audience, as in Odo's and Crispin's influential and widely circulated dialogues from earlier in the same century. In fact, the stage directions support identifying the Christian audience of the *Adam* with the "Judei" of the *ordo prophetarum*.

When Daniel directs his prophecy "a vus, Judei," the Latin rubric has him "stretching his hand toward those to whom he speaks" ["manum extendens contra eos ad quos loquitur"].⁶⁷ It is unlikely that there is a group of real (or fictitious) Jews on stage, or they would have been mentioned in the same extensive and careful stage directions that call for the prophets to be prepared in a secret place, one by one ["in loco secreto singuli"].⁶⁸ The similarity of the vocal *quidam de synagoga disputans* who confronts Isaiah, however briefly, in the *Adam* to the Jews of the interreligious debate literature from the same period suggests influence or at the very least a shared purpose.⁶⁹ We can therefore expect that the author of the *Adam* uses his *Judeus* in much the same way as a didactic instrument. Close reading of the Jew's narrative interruption reveals that he is specifically a vehicle for instruction on the proper interpretation of signs, a focus that exposes the playwright's own desire to promote the didactic efficacy of dramatic signs.⁷⁰

Questioning the Reliability of Signs

Isaiah's prophecy in the *ordo* relates the conception of the Messiah in the line of Jesse ("Egredietur virga de radice Jesse"). Before the Jew will grant the validity of

⁶⁷ Stage direction preceding l. 827.

⁶⁸ Stage direction preceding l. 745.

⁶⁹ E.K. Chambers' statement that dialogue is "the first condition of drama" is appropriate here to the degree that the passage from written dialogues addressing doctrinal concerns to a play with the same end in mind is easily suggested (I, 77).

⁷⁰ As in Odo and Gilbert Crispin, symbolic use of the *Judeus* does not discount real contact between the author and real Jews. The *Adam* playwright's unusual use of "Chaim"--a name that appears in the Hebrew Chronicles--for Cain may indicate at least a superficial knowledge of actual Jews (Stampnitzky), a possibility supported by the knowledge of Jewish exegesis suggested by Muir (118).

Isaiah's teaching on the subject, a concession that would require nothing less than the acceptance of typological interpretation as an exegetical method, he aims at establishing the validity of its verbal signs. The first question he asks about Isaiah's words—"Est ço fable, ou prophecie?"—recapitulates the notion of invented tales (*fabulas*) as devoid of all truth, the antithesis of true prophecy (l. 884). When Judeus asks "travas le tu, ou est escrit?" his choice of the verb "trover" labels Isaiah as a "troveor," one who invents poetry and makes a profession of fabrication, and whose lessons are thus untrustworthy "fables" (l. 886). As if to reinforce the prophet's potential role as a maker of fictions, an earlier rubric calls for him to be clad in "an ample cloak" ("magno indutus pallio"). Medieval French poetry contains numerous instances where poets are paid for their performances with gifts of robes or other garments, so that a sumptuous cloak would be for a jongleur or trouvère, "the outward sign of [poetic] talent" or skill at invention (Bloch, *Scandal* 48).⁷¹ By voicing concerns about the truth value contained in the *verba* of fiction, the *Adam* playwright answers raises potential objections of those (again represented figuratively as Jews) who may desire a clearer separation between the inalienable truth of Scripture and the invented content of drama before accepting the credibility of the play.

Yet, the Jew's suspicion that Isaiah's words are untrue stems not only from their fictive nature, but also from their status as oral signs in the vernacular. Judeus voices his initial objection not to Isaiah's Latin prophecy but to his longer paraphrase in Old French, for which the Jew repeatedly demands a proof-text. His "ou est escrit?" followed six lines later with "En livre est escrit?" (1518), opposes material that is written with that which is

⁷¹ Fabliaux like "Le Vilain au buffet" and "Le Chevalier à la robe vermeille" depict the distribution of garments by generous patrons as a means of paying worthy poets at court.

recited by a *trouvère*, judging the former to be reliable and the latter not. All of the origins Judeus proposes for Isaiah's teachings—*fable*, dreams (“tu le sonjas”), and jokes (“gas”)—are frequently associated with orality, not set down in writing and consequently mutable, of questionable authority because they are open to invention by the teller while remaining closed to textual examination (1509-10). Dreams, for example, were long held to be of dubious value in patristic and other ancient sources including Augustine's influential account of vision where, at best, they were “sometimes false, sometimes true” (*De Genesi ad litteram* 12.18.39).⁷² Though they could contain true prophecy, they are “often fallacious” with an equally strong possibility of being “l'oeuvre de l'Ennemi” (Schmitt, *Le corps* 98).

Similar apprehensions about the diabolism of oral performance are embedded in the play's earlier representation of the Fall, where the devil is depicted as *trouvère* of sorts with Eve as his credulous audience. Insisting on the validity of his instruction (“Ne me crerras?” [545]; “n'aiez dutance” [567]),” Satan repeatedly defines his relationship with Eve as one of his narrating in the vernacular (“t'en dirrai” [452]; “te dirrai” [508]) and her listening (“Orras me tu?” [456]; “tu m'ascute” [508]). For Steven Justice, the French spoken in the garden connects the narrative of the Fall with an audience that speaks the same language, enforcing a sense of shared culpability that depends on identifying the vernacular as a fallen “language of potential error, of ignorance, and...of duplicity” (855).

Unlike Eve, the Jew will not trust what he hears unless he can scrutinize a written source for Isaiah's teachings. This does not seem unreasonable, especially at a time when the production of texts was labour intensive and the material implements of writing—

⁷² “Aliquando et haec falsa, aliquando autem vera sunt” (12.18.15-16 in *CSEL* 28).

parchment and ink—important commodities. Works deemed worthy of preservation in written form, the Bible being the most prominent example, had to contain some significance, which Judeus understands to be the possession of truth. Conversely, putting something in writing could reinforce its permanence and imply its condition as unalterable fact. Eric Jager has discussed how clerical or monastic culture privileged “written tradition as a means not only of preserving the truth but also for avoiding error,” an idea promoted by *Adam* author’s own use of the extensive Latin stage directions (152). When the playwright seeks to ground his work in a set written script by specifying that the actors should “neither add nor subtract a syllable but pronounce them all steadily, and speak those things that are to be spoken in their due order,” he expresses a distrust of oral presentation similar to that of Judeus.⁷³ And later, the *ordo prophetarum* commences with a similar warning for the prophets to pronounce their prophecies “aperte et distincte” (1304). The need to set down these caveats in the rubrics suggests that dramatic performance was fraught with risks of improvisation or misdelivery of lines. The only way to curtail the potential manipulation of didactic meaning in the play is to base all performances on a single, permanent written script that encompasses the author’s intended message. By setting the rubrics of this script not in Anglo-Norman French but in Latin, the language of Scripture and patristic texts, official papal and court documents, the *Adam* playwright also appears to subscribe to Judeus’s notion of Latinity as imbued with “qualities of prestige, stasis . . . and regularity,” as opposed to the sense of “impermanence, and change” that marks the vernacular (Machan 232).

⁷³ “. . . et, in rhythmis, nec syllabam addant nec demant, sed omnes firmiter pronuncient, et dicantur seriatim quae dicenda sunt.” Opening stage directions, Bevington 81.

Forcing the actors to conform to a written text may enforce the idea that writing retains truth that can be lost in oral presentation, but once we consider the play from the viewpoint of an audience, the author's proscriptions become irrelevant. Unlike actors or a producer versed in reading Latin, audience members do not scrutinize the script and are unaware of its contents, receiving their instruction only through performance. They have no way of knowing whether the actors on stage are being true to the written intent of the playwright or not. Moreover, the *Adam* is the earliest extant play that provides Christian instruction in the vernacular, and so what they hear is not performed in Latin but in the vernacular and is thus not imbued with "the qualities of prestige, stasis . . . and regularity," but with a reputation of the vernacular for "impermanence, and change" (Machan 230, 32). Vernacular commentary, translation, or retelling, as Rita Copeland has discussed, always "creates a certain difference with the source," and a creative stage version of the Genesis text in Anglo-Norman French would appear to risk the concomitant loss of *auctoritas* due to this difference (103). Indeed, the laity took belief in the authority of sacred Latin works to the point that the codices in which they were inscribed became physical talismans, "regularly fetishized as objects of awe and mystery" (Green 263). So, if the Jew continues to represent a Christian audience for the *Adam*, his refusal to accept instruction without written evidence, presumably in Latin, may anticipate suspicion of the play, by either lay viewers or other *clerici*, as a means of education. If the Jew is correct about the unreliability of oral *verba* in the vernacular, his objection threatens the didactic potential of the dramatic performance.

Res significandi in the Adam

To assess the *Adam* author's responses to Judeus's objections, it is again useful to consider the context of other Jewish-Christian debates. The didactic purpose of these dialogues determines that the Jew's argument can never be right; his ideas are raised simply to be refuted, as they are in the *Adam*, albeit in a much more compressed form. The response to the Jew in the play differs markedly from other debates, however, in defending the didactic value of dramatic performance at least as much as it upholds Christian doctrine. The *Adam* author clearly does not view his verbal signs as fictive, for one thing: significantly, the only character in the play other than Judeus to accuse another of fabrication is the murderous Cain, who does so wrongly and in nearly the same phrasing—"Ja est ço fable" (l. 654). The playwright's proscription against changing a single syllable of his script is reminiscent of warnings against the alteration of sacred texts and bespeaks an attempt to give his work a commensurate status above fiction.⁷⁴ If a Christian audience member is unlikely to accept Judeus's assertion that the prophecies of a prophet like Isaiah are "fable," he or she likewise should not doubt the lessons taught by a play that is also ultimately grounded in Scripture and closely allied to sacred (Latin) liturgy through its responsories and *ordo prophetarum*.

Where Judeus's insistence on written proof is concerned, Isaiah can easily provide a chapter and verse from the Old Testament, which is the entire purpose of the *ordo prophetarum* in which he appears—to convince disbelieving Jews with the evidence of their own sacred texts. This is what takes place in the twelfth-century *Ordo ad*

⁷⁴ For a twelfth-century example, see Hildegard's warning from God at the end of her *Scivias* against "madly abridging" her prophetic words (Book 3, Vision 13). The Chester "Purification of the Virgin Mary" also features the Jewish priest Simeon's attempt to physically alter the written text of Isaiah's prophecies about the Virgin Birth, an effort that is twice thwarted by an angel who restores the proper words.

repraesentandum Herodem when Herod's scribes find and present evidence of Christ's miraculous birth by paging through the Hebrew Bible (l. 56), but no such effort at presenting prooftexts is made in the *Adam*. That Isaiah resists drawing on the authority of the Bible for support is surprising in this context (and in its own right), even more so since the prophet appears on stage "ferens librum in manu," with a book (presumably of Scripture) that he refuses to use, preferring the unwritten "book of life" for proof.⁷⁵ Here the *Adam* author goes out of his way to eschew biblical authority in favour of the more important point that writing, though potentially more stable than oral *verba*, is neither an automatic guarantor of truth nor the best source of instruction. In so doing, while simultaneously seeking to lock his own text in a written script, the playwright perfectly illustrates what M.T. Clanchy has identified as new tensions between written and oral signs—the latter of which should also encompass exchanges of objects and witness to visible acts—as most reliable in presenting truth.

Written works like those of the classical *auctores* and the Church fathers had been set down on parchment because they already possessed status on account of their age or connection with divine teachings and were not rendered authoritative solely by virtue of being written down. On the contrary, in the Norman England of the *Adam* play, newly written texts often begot distrust, particularly among those who could not write and did not possess a mastery of reading, as Clanchy has shown.⁷⁶ For these individuals, who were not few, information in written works was more suspect than what was simply heard. Such suspicion was evidently well founded, for monks as "the traditional experts

⁷⁵ Stage direction preceding l. 877.

⁷⁶ Literacy during the High Middle Ages, as Clanchy and Brian Stock (*The Implications of Literacy, passim*) have demonstrated, was present in a number of degrees from the minimal ability to read "a little Latin, sufficient to get the gist of a royal writ or to understand a line in the Bible" (Clanchy 246) to the ability to read extensively in the vernacular tongues and in Latin.

in writing, were also the greatest forgers” (Clanchy 234), taking full advantage of the permanence of the written word, “so that a document which stated something untrue or unverifiable would continue to state it—and make it look authentic and proven—as long as that document existed” (Clanchy 193). As a consequence of this mistrust, it was expected that an “honest person . . . did not demand written proof,” while a disreputable one, like Judeus, would insist upon it (Clanchy 193).

The nature of the *Adam* play as a performed piece also depends inescapably on signs that are other than written. Because of this, the playwright must refute Judeus’s insistence that truth only resides in a written textual source if he is to preserve the didactic value of his dramatic enterprise. Given the potentially negative aspects of written signs (and the need to promote the non-written signs of performance), when Isaiah finally admits that evidence for the truth of his prophecy does originate in a book, the text he refers to is not an actual codex but the metaphorical “book of life.”⁷⁷

Within the book “de vie,” things that are seen (“vëu”) are prioritized rather than written or even spoken signs, as they are in Augustinian semiotics, (I. 893). Images, following Gregory the Great’s dictum, can properly instruct not only the uneducated but also “those who knew only vernacular languages,” bolstering the authority of instruction provided to this sort of audience by the play (Kessler, “Gregory” 163). Images can thus serve as authorized antidotes to the “fluid, often embellished oral accounts” of biblical narrative (Kessler, “Gregory” 163). The *Adam* author’s choice to rhyme “veer” (“to see”) and “voir” (“true”) suggests that he too holds that visual signs signify truthfully, a proposition proven in the strange episode with “no specific biblical source” that follows

⁷⁷ For similar medieval views of the unwritten book of nature or the world, see Jesse Gellrich, *The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages*, ch. 1.

Isaiah's mention of the book of life (Muir 108). Judeus shows Isaiah his hand and asks the prophet to tell him if this external sign signifies a healthy or a sick heart, a metaphor for his spiritual condition (ll. 899-900).⁷⁸ Isaiah responds that it signifies the Jew's incurable state of error, a finding that appears obvious and easily arrived at given the doctrinal emphasis of the play without the need for chiromancy. Nevertheless, Isaiah's correct interpretation instantly convinces Judeus that objects apprehended visually signify the truth more readily than written texts; he abandons his insistence on textual proof and asks the prophet to reprise what he has seen in his vision, upon which all the Jews will take Isaiah as their schoolmaster and "hearken to [his] teaching" (l. 910-13).⁷⁹ What better testimony to the instructive efficacy of a heavily visual medium like Church drama?

Indeed, in its use of visual signs, the *Adam* embodies all three ways in which images may be used pedagogically, later termed the *triplex ratio* by Aquinas: it instructs, moves to devotion, and prompts recollection (Kessler, "Gregory" 152). First, as soon as Judeus learns to recognize the power of objects (*res*) in signifying visually—a lesson he derives from Isaiah's analysis of his hand—he can learn about typological reading as an exegetical method. In medieval exegesis, such as Hugh of St. Victor's *De Archa Noe*, visuals are frequently promoted as the optimal means of teaching typological interpretation, "because the representation of typologies in pictures will imprint exegetical concepts on the mind more forcefully than by other means" (Christopher Hughes 174). This generally refers to art that provides "visual exegesis" of biblical

⁷⁸ The connection of a Jew's mutilated hand with the corrupt state of his soul appears to be a common one in the drama of the Middle Ages. In rehearsing the graphic violence of the medieval stage, Gattón gives four examples from French and Middle English plays, including the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, where the hand or hands of irreverent Jews miraculously fall off (83-84).

⁷⁹ "Nos te tendrom puis por maistre,/E ceste generacion/Escutera puis ta leçon" (l.910-13).

content in medieval churches or manuscript illustrations, but it would seem to apply equally to drama, which frequently emphasizes typology (Christopher Hughes 183).

The initial prophecy that had prompted Judeus's to interrupt the *ordo* involves a description from the Vulgate of a flowering branch arising from the root of Jesse, followed by Isaiah's interpretation of it. What Judeus had questioned was not the visual image but the prophet's typological reading of it as a sign. The Jew, whose inability to interpret is necessarily exaggerated for rhetorical reasons, seems to perceive the flowering branch as little more than that, a literal object communicating its own nature as a branch. Isaiah interprets it as anticipating the birth of Christ through Mary, based on an Augustinian understanding that certain *res*—like “the wood which . . . Moses cast into the bitter waters to make them sweet . . . the stone which Jacob used as a pillow . . . the ram which Abraham offered up instead of his son”—signify allegorically (Augustine, *De doctrina* 1.2.2). Having learned to view objects as possessing the ability to signify truthfully, Judeus recognizes the branch as an occasion of *allegoria in rebus*, and asks for details about its interpretation such as whether it is “verge ou baston” and who will be born from its flower (l. 908-9). Judeus's questioning thus becomes a didactic tool promoting the central lesson of how one comes to interpret *res* typologically, without which knowledge Christians will interpret scriptural signs literally, like Jews.

The importance of typological reading is emphasized on many levels within the *Adam*. It is inherent in the overarching structure of the play as a whole, which, though incomplete, would seem to have concluded with Christ's redemption of Adam. In his prophecy, Abraham (who is unique to the *Adam ordo prophetarum*) strongly suggests this conclusion, speaking directly of “Jhesu, le nostre salvaor,/Qui Adam trarra de grant

dolor,/Et remettra en paräis” (l. 925-27). Typology is also stressed in the *ordo prophetarum*; as each prophet declares his role in anticipating the coming of Christ, he indicates his place in a chronological progression based on the New Testament fulfillment of Old Testament signs.⁸⁰ *Res* that possess typological meaning communicate God’s plan through events and objects in the world and are therefore free of deception, unlike *verba*, which are created by humans in a fallen condition and are hence prone to manipulation.

From the perspective of Augustinian semiotics, even *res* like Judeus’s hand that do not serve as signs from God share the reliability of divine language and come close to the sign-less communication possible before the Fall. Actions like walking or eating, for example, signify themselves by being performed and seen, without need of verbal explanation, so that one “doesn’t learn at all unless he himself sees what is described” (Augustine, *De magistro* 12.39). Similarly, in Augustine’s description of how he learned the meaning of spoken words as a child, *verba* are zero referents, mere sounds that bear no meaning until the *res* they refer to are pointed out and seen (*Conf.* 1.8). The effectiveness of a visible sign in converting Judeus continues to illustrate the Augustinian sense of visual learning as superior, a conclusion that extends to the *Adam* playwright’s prioritization of dramatic *res*—props, scenery, costumes, gestures, and action on stage—over words in conveying instruction.

The presence of ample stage directions in the *Adam* points to a concern with extra-verbal signification. Among other twelfth-century plays, only those of the Fleury collection, in Latin, provide a similar amount of detail. The Fleury *Ordo ad*

⁸⁰ According to John Phillip Colletta, this consistent chronological bent makes the *Adam ordo* “very different from the older *ordines prophetarum*, which constitute simply a series of prophets, and those out of historical sequence” (79).

repraesentandum Herodem contains directions such as “let Herod and his son make threatening gestures with their swords” and “let the Magi go to sleep there in front of the manger,” but these do not concentrate on the performers’ actions as signs (Bevington 64-65). Along with its caveat not to alter the spoken dialogue of the script, the *Adam* rubrics require that performers make gestures appropriate to the subject matter they are speaking about (“faciant convenientem rei de qua loquuntur”).⁸¹ This warning is reminiscent of one in Quintilian’s *Instituta Oratoria* warning to avoid histrionics during rhetorical performance (*action*) that could create a disconnect between what is being said and the accompanying gesture (11.3.87). Similarly, gesture and bodily movement serve a rhetorical function in the play as signs that convey information independently of speech and so must be used with care to preserve the proper meaning of the play.

Jody Enders also connects the use of gesture in medieval French drama, including the *Adam*, to the rhetorical tradition, especially Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria*, which maintains the notion of “gesture as ‘truer’ than language, truer than words, truer than writing in that it could agree holistically not with language but with such internal motivations as thought and character” (Enders, “Of Miming” 7). Where the didactic efficacy of non-verbal signs comes into play, I would amend Enders’ assertion that “in rhetoric as in drama, gesture and other visual phenomena speak *first*” (as apparent in the *Adam*) to include the equally important contribution of Augustine’s semiotics (“Of Miming” 10).⁸²

Following Augustine’s notion of *signa naturalia* (though here presented with intent to signify), the *Adam* stage directions operate under the assumption that human

⁸¹ Opening stage directions.

⁸² As a rhetorician, Augustine was familiar with Quintilian’s work, which may have influenced his treatment of gestures in the *De magistro* and elsewhere.

facial expressions are a form of non-verbal communication that can be used in drama to signify inner emotional states without possibility of misunderstanding. When Adam refuses the devil's temptation, for instance, the latter withdraws "tristis et vultu dimisso" but approaches Eve "laeto vultu."⁸³ Later, when the Figura confronts Eve, he does so "minaci vultu."⁸⁴ It is presumed in each of these instances that an actor would know how to represent sadness, happiness, or threat with an expression and that an audience that has not read the rubrics would understand the meaning of each look. Besides facial expression, movement also has the ability to signify transparently. The actor playing Adam can indicate piety by inclining his head in one way ("caput pie inclinans") and rage in another ("cum magna indignatione movens caput").⁸⁵ Shame on account of sin can be conveyed through a more complex series of movements, by standing "not fully upright, but . . . somewhat bent forward."⁸⁶ And when Adam and Eve suffer violent grief, they indicate it by throwing themselves to the ground and striking their breasts and their thighs, "manifesting their sorrow with their gestures" ("dolorem gestu fatentes") in a manner that the audience would understand.⁸⁷ This may draw on the second value of images, eliciting emotional investment from an audience. Though it does not promote the level of affective piety in later Middle English Passion plays, the emphasis on conveying emotion through facial expression, gesture and body language contributes to engagement with the content of the play.

⁸³ Stage directions before l. 205.

⁸⁴ Stage directions before l. 439.

⁸⁵ Stage directions before l. 523; before l. 535.

⁸⁶ Stage directions before l. 387.

⁸⁷ Stage directions before l. 519. François Grenier's two volumes, *Le Langage de l'image au Moyen Age*, catalogues these gestures as they appear in medieval iconography.

The use of physical signs of this sort is extensive enough for Lynette Muir to consider “the dumb-shows and the mime” one component of the tripartite structure that comprises the play (3). However, despite the extensive visual communication present, this is obviously not the only means of instruction: the play is not a “dumb-show.” If dramatic *res* are primary in the play, words are also necessary at least to “gloss the images of theater” (Lerud, *Memory, Images* 47). Herbert Kessler has written extensively on the importance of *tituli* or written captions to sacred works of visual art during the Middle Ages. These—most notably the “Nec Deus nec homo” accompanying depictions of Christ—were designed to tell the viewer how to perceive the image, circumscribing interpretation and understanding. One of the objections to images raised by the *Libri Carolini* was the fact that they did not signify transparently in all cases; for example, it might be impossible to tell whether a painted depiction of a beautiful woman represented Venus or the Virgin Mary based on visual cues alone (Kessler “Spiritual Seeing” 187). Therefore, verbal captions were necessary to identify figures in sacred images at least to those who were literate enough to understand the label. Drama requires no such literacy as the identification of biblical figures is delivered to an audience as spoken text, as in the Salerno *ordo prophetarum*, which pre-dates the *Adam* and follows the original *Sermo contra Judeos* closely. Here, the lector invokes each prophet using the repeated verbal formula “Dic et tu [prophet’s name], testimonium Christi” before each delivers his speech.⁸⁸ In Limoges, the cantor likewise calls upon each prophet by name: “Israel, vir lenis, inque de Christo,” “Dic tu, David,” and so on.⁸⁹ Naming functions as a convenient didactic or mnemonic aid enabling the audience (which for a Latin work was likely a

⁸⁸ See Young 133-37.

⁸⁹ See Young 2:139-140.

clerical one), to identify the personage on an elementary level and to join speaker to scriptural passage for more sophisticated understanding.

While the opening rubrics for the *Adam* procession include similar direction for the prophets to be called by name (“vocantur per nomen prophete”), no specific lines are provided to be repeated before each prophet’s appearance—only Abraham is given the line “Abraham sui” (l. 745).⁹⁰ On the other hand, the costuming and props given for each speaker in the *ordo* receives detailed attention. The *Adam* author deemphasizes the naming the prophets, just as he does not allow Isaiah to provide Judeus with a scriptural citation, to promote instruction by the visual interpretation of *res*. The props or accoutrements possessed by the prophets in the *ordo* are signs indicating who they are and often their relationship to one another. Abraham is “senex cum barba prolixa,” befitting the forefather of Israel. Moses bears “in dextra virgam et sinistra tabulas,” the latter which identifies him easily still today. Aaron appears “episcopali ornatu, ferens in manibus suis virgam cum floribus.” His garb as a bishop is a useful reminder of his status as High Priest, and his *virga*, which has typological significance in its own right, connects him to his brother Moses who carries the same object. An ornate diadem and other royal (in)sign(ia)s label David as a biblical king. Solomon, also a king, is dressed the same way but naturally appears younger than his father David. The Fleury *Herod* contains directions that the ruler’s scribes should be “barbati” and his companions clad “in habitu juvenili” but these do not come close to the detailed signs particular to specific figures (Bevington 62).

⁹⁰ Isaiah’s identity is incidentally revealed after he dictates his prophecy, when Judeus confronts him as “sire Ysaias” (l. 883).

Certainly, these *res* do not teach on their own who the prophets are or tell their stories; they are not self-evident in their signification. Instead, they serve the third purpose of images, which is to prompt recollection, depending on a prior knowledge of what the prophets are supposed to look like based on “a well-defined visual code of representation, by which a saint could . . . be defined by his attributes” as depicted in *ordines prophetarum* carved on the facades of churches and cathedrals like Notre Dame (Camille, “Seeing” 33). John Colletta has described how the props of the prophets in the *Adam* are “precisely the objects that had come to symbolize a prophet” in sculpted representations of the *ordo* from the late-eleventh and early-twelfth centuries (80). Most medieval Christians would have been familiar with these images and would have learned whom they signified either by reading the accompanying inscriptions or through “a combination of questions and insights supplied by others,” if they were unable to read Latin (Noakes qtd. in Camille, “Seeing” 33). Indeed, in his second letter to Serenus, Gregory describes the value of images using the term “addiscere,” “to learn more,” implying that there is some pre-existing verbal instruction (XI, 10.23). If an individual should come upon the likeness of a prophet again in the *Adam*, there would be an instant recognition based on remembrance. In this sense, the props and costumes of the *Adam* are visually mnemonic rather than didactic, spurring recollection of a pre-existing system of non-verbal, iconographic signification and dependent upon it for their interpretation. This process still comprises an important part of learning; once remembrance takes place, visual appearance teaches which Old Testament authority spoke which typological prophecy about the coming of Christ.

The costumes and props in the *Adam* function within this mnemonic system not only to revive the memory of prior images but to inscribe images in the mind for future recollection, as they are themselves visually memorable. For this last stage of the learning process, the playwright draws on the rhetorical tradition present in manuals like Cicero's *De oratore* that advocate the value of "mental pictures" as a means of remembering words or concepts for oratorical situations, advice that reappears in what Mary Carruthers has spoken of as the "completely medieval art of 'images in places'" (*Memory* 130). Though not widely influential until the thirteenth century, the pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium* was copied as early as the eighth century in Corbie and was commented on in the 11th-century at the school of Chartres (Lerud, *Memory, Images* 11; Copeland 159). It offers a good example of how the memory space works, recommending that one imagine figures of "exceptional beauty or singular ugliness," for example, individuals extravagantly dressed "with crowns or purple cloaks" (III, 22.37), so they can more easily be recollected, and situating them before an ordered backdrop: "a house, an intercolumnar space, a recess, an arch, or the like" (III, 17.29).

As Enders notes, an *ars memoriae* like this that requires "detailed memory backgrounds against which vividly costumed characters moved holding their special props" could very well be describing actors, scenery, and props on stage (*The Medieval Theater of Cruelty* 68). In fact, Theodore Lerud has argued convincingly that medieval theater developed, like medieval art, specifically in the mnemonic tradition, "as external versions of those images necessary to the psychological processes of memory and understanding" ("Quick Images" 213). No where is this more apparent than in the *Adam* which draws on the mnemonic and rhetorical significance of images as an integral part of

its didactic method, dressing the prophets of the *ordo* in “largis vestibus” (1306, 1407), rich robes and crowns of the sort described in the *Ad Herennium*, so that their vivid visual attributes might enable an audience to better retain the typological messages they present.⁹¹ And, it is easy to imagine the recesses, arches and areas between columns as loci inside or outside the church building that comprised the performative spaces for the play.

The same opening stage directions that specify details of costuming and props also insist that any actor who names (“nominaverit”) paradise is to “look in its direction and point it out with his hand” (“respiciat eum et manu demonstrat”).” This requirement implies that naming with words alone is insufficient to convey meaning. As Jean-Claude Schmitt puts it, “Pour être compris, on ne peut dire ‘ceci’ sans pointer l’index vers l’objet don’t il est question” (*La Raison* 47); one must see the *res* being named, to which one is directed by another non-verbal sign—the pointing hand. Consistent with Augustine’s description of learning the names for things in the *Confessions*, as well as his discussion with Adeodatus in the *De Magistro* (3.5), pointing tells the viewer that a semiotic relationship exists between what is described verbally and its physical referent on stage, directing him or her to discover the attributes of the object through visual scrutiny. Pointing is thus the gestural equivalent of the verbal “ecce,” a means of instructing without words (*De Magistro* 10.34).

Several prophecies in the *ordo prophetarum* depend upon this type of visual assessment to illuminate their symbolic significance, which may not otherwise be

⁹¹ Meredith and Tailby 131 and 133, provide evidence for an explicit concern with the mnemonics of bizarre costuming in the much later 16th-century Lucerne “Easter Play,” where Jacob is to be appalled “in a quite old-fashioned way, the stranger the better” and Abraham “in an expensive and strange style, the stranger the more worth looking at.”

accessible to the audience. Habakkuk, in declaring his awe of the “works of God” shows the object of his fear and wonder by raising his hand “contra ecclesiam.”⁹² A more direct visual interpretation is provided for Jeremiah’s reference to the people of Judaea entering “ceste porte...Por nostre Seignor aourer” (l. 859-60). When Jeremiah indicates the doors of the church building, he attaches a typological referent from the history of the Church to his Old Testament prophecy, one physically present before the medieval audience: the prophet’s demand that the people of Judah return to the Temple to worship becomes a admonition for Jews to enter the Church. In each case, the gesture of pointing reinforces a different way of perceiving other visual signs, reminding the audience to look beyond the literal to the typological signification of certain *res*.

A mindset that sees events and objects as signifying across the past, present, and future is critical to typological understanding. Interpreting Aaron’s rod as not just a physical staff but a *res significandi* referring to the advent of Christ through Mary requires one to recognize the object for what it is in the Exodus story as well as its meaning centuries later. Connecting the doors of a twelfth-century Romanesque church to the prophet Jeremiah’s words in the Holy Land more than a thousand years before demands an interpretation of signs that straddles time and space. This is borne out in the iconography of the period as well: an illumination of Christ’s supper at the house of Simon the Pharisee in the *St. Alban’s Psalter*, for example, depicts the literal bread of the meal marked as the sacramental host of later ritual.⁹³

An essential part of Christian education involved training people to “see through” the literal referent of a sign and simultaneously visualize the typological one it also

⁹² Stage directions before l. 855.

⁹³ See Appendix A.

signified at another time. The most famous iconographic instance of pointing in Christianity—John the Baptist’s indication of Jesus as “Agnus Dei” in John 1:29—presents just such a typological “ecce” relationship between sign and referent. John is not indicating a literal lamb or a metaphorical one but is identifying Christ typologically as the messianic sacrifice in Isaiah and as the eschatological lamb of the Apocalypse.⁹⁴ The semiotic relationship thus pointed out remains a true one, as devout viewers of this iconographic representation would “see through” to its typological referent.

On the other hand, pointing out the stage set hung with curtains and silken hangings whenever “paradise” is mentioned would seem to promote a relationship of false signification: the dramatic *res* indicated is a constructed set piece, not the historic or biblical garden suggested by the verbal signs applied to it. Yet, the directions for its construction—“Constituatur paradus”—do not call for a simulacrum of paradise to be constructed, but paradise itself.⁹⁵ Eugene Vance locates the same lack of distinction in the rubric insisting that “‘Adam’ (and not the actor playing Adam—the differences between author, actor, and spectator are not yet distinct) must be well instructed (*bene instructus*)” in how to respond (195). By way of contrast, the *Regularis concordia*, frequently cited as the earliest evidence of histrionic elements in liturgy, describes the set piece of its Easter service as “a kind of likeness of the sepulcher” [quaedam assimilatio sepulchri], going out of its way to resist a direct identification (Bevington 16). More contemporary with the *Adam*, the opening rubric from the Fleury playbook *visitatio* speaks of making “similitudinem Dominici sepulcri” and not the sepulcher itself (Bevington 39).

⁹⁴ A third typological association is with the sacrament, identified as the Agnus Dei during the Mass.

⁹⁵ Opening stage directions.

More than a symptom of an incipient drama that does not account for simulation, this equivalence can be seen from one perspective as continuing to promote the typological instruction of the play. The naming and pointing that takes place in reference to the *paradisus* adorned with hangings, fruit, and flowers may refer to the part of the church building so festooned and thus, by synecdoche, to the church/Church itself, which is typologically anticipated by paradise in patristic writings (Justice 864). In this case, the act of pointing is again meant to indicate a relation based on typological signification, and by the same principle the actor playing Adam *is* Adam just as all men are.

In a broader sense, the lack of separation between actor and character, stage set and historical place is an indication of how medieval church drama participates in and promotes a particular way of looking at what Baschet calls “image-objets” from painting and sculpture to dramatic representation (16). Baschet’s term is useful in capturing the medieval notion that such visual *res* were always to be perceived as objects of *usus*, signs of other transcendent realities, not referents in their own right. We can already see the application of this Augustinian distinction to images in Gregory’s letters to Serenus where images are acceptable in the practice of worship only if they are not adored but viewed as signs of “the invisible world ‘out there’” (Kessler *Spiritual* 105). In Gregory’s formulation, “it is one thing to adore a picture, another to learn through the picture what should be adored” (*Ep.* 11). This idea would serve as the cornerstone in how to view images without partaking in idolatry and is recapitulated often in the *tituli* that accompany examples of visual art like the Hitda Codex image of *Majestas Domini* (c. 1000), reminding viewers, “This visual image represents the invisible truth” (Kessler, “Gregory” 153).

Such a caveat is not necessary in the *Adam*, for it is unlikely that any audience would mistake a constructed paradise for the real thing, or venerate it, so the insistence on its being “paradisus” is instead an invitation to “‘see through’ [the]...image in order to experience a higher reality behind it” (Ehrstine 265); it would be improper to see a stage set as being its transcendent counterpart, but it is necessary to use the former to imagine the latter.⁹⁶ In a manner that is strongly Platonic, the successful response to an image, whether a painting or dramatic *res*, recognizes that it is not an end point, not a thing merely to be enjoyed, but something that functions on the order of *transitus*: as a means of accessing the divine (Baschet 42). Here, Augustine’s tripartite concept of vision again comes into play. Corporeal vision may see one thing on stage, but if one “sees through” and identifies what is seen with its biblical referent, it is raised to the level of spiritual sight or imagination “from which truth will be abstracted by the intellectual sight,” leading to an understanding of the sacred (Scherb, *Staging* 19).

It is no wonder dramatic performance developed as a means of Christian instruction, for the process of elevated seeing is inherent to the medium. Augustine’s concern in the *Soliloquia* that the actor Roscius could be simultaneously a real man and a real actor and a “falsa Hecuba” or a “falsus Priamus” touches on the essential doubleness of dramatic *res* (2.18); they are always two things at once: what they are in the real world and what they represent in the play, though drama, including the *Adam*, encourages its audience to let the former disappear. As a rule, an audience “looks past, or through, the real events on stage” (Saltz 203) to that which is represented, and to the degree an

⁹⁶ The one occasion where special care is taken to ensure a distinction between visual sign and referent is the unusual and unique reference to the character of God as “Figura,” rather than “Deus,” or “Dominus” as in the contemporaneous Fleury *Conversion of the Apostle Paul*. Here, “Figura” may represent a careful distinction of “not veritas but imitatio veritatis” in that an actor is not God, though the term is never provided to the audience only to those who read the script (Auerbach, “Figura” 44).

audience focuses on the representation, “the real world is ‘subdued’ and ‘transcended’” whereas attending to the props as props or actors as actors distracts from appreciating the representation (Saltz 206). Thus, dramatic *res* “are only important because they are objects of imagining” (Saltz 210). The correct way to encounter visual signs promoted by the *Adam*, however, as a medieval Christian way of seeing, has particular spiritual significance. The need to transcend corporeal vision—like going past literal interpretation or rejecting *fructus* for *usus*—so crucial for spiritual understanding, is conveniently embedded in the dramatic medium, whereby spectators not only see to learn but also learn to see. Just as the arrangement of pictures and *tituli* in manuscripts or on the walls of churches often directed viewers’ eyes in a way that reinforced an upward progression from the material to the sacred invisible, the conglomeration of gesture, staging, and dialogue in dramatic performance were also designed for the purpose of “setting in motion a dialogic process, an intellectual movement” from corporeal vision up the ladder to spiritual seeing and higher understanding (Kessler, *Neither God Nor Man* 132).

The audience for the *Adam* would already be accustomed to interpreting signs in this fashion if not from looking at visual art then from liturgy. As Ehrstine observes, “scenic enactment” in dramatic performance “encouraged spectators to elide the boundaries between stage representations and their spiritual significance, producing a ‘sacramental gaze’” (265) similar to what took place when they viewed the bread and wine of the Eucharist as the real body and blood of Christ, truly and miraculously present before them.⁹⁷ Those who partook in the sacrament were encouraged to suspend what

⁹⁷ Although the doctrine of transubstantiation would only be sanctioned officially by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, Eucharistic realism had long been accepted as part of the Mass. The monk Radbertus, writing at Corbie in the ninth century affirmed Christ's bodily presence in the bread and wine of the

they saw with their corporeal eye, so the transformation that occurred became real. In Aquinas's formulation, "no bodily eye can see the body of Christ contained in this sacrament" (qtd. in Beckwith, *Signifying* 61). As with the Mass, audience members for the *Adam* also participate "par les yeux de corps mais surtout à travers eux par les 'yeux de l'âme'" (Schmitt, *Le corps* 360).

Indeed, encouragement to view the *res* in the *Adam* with the same mentality that one would maintain in Eucharistic devotion comes from the Latin *lectiones* in the play, which, as Joseph Dane observes, "refer the audience to the Mass, where the listener is accustomed to understand *things as signs*" (22).⁹⁸ Beckwith observes that the Eucharist is fraught with "an almost irreducible tension between visible and invisible...precisely because of its flagrant transgression of the evidence of the senses" (*Signifying* 61), sight in particular, but there is less tension in drama because it aims to a greater degree at being mimetic. Seeing through the *Adam* stage set to the true paradise of Genesis actually requires less imagination than the sacrament, since it is planted with "odiferi flores et frondes...diversae arbores et fructus."⁹⁹ One can imagine Abraham when looking at an actor dressed as the prophet. While indicating the stage paradise as the original paradise is not laden with the complexity surrounding transubstantiation, part of the devotional experience of religious drama, as represented by the play, involves similarly visualizing

sacrament. The opposing viewpoint of Radbertus' opponent Ratramnus that the sacrament is a sign of Christ's body and blood and not these things themselves, was formally condemned by the eleventh century.

⁹⁸ Dane also notes that whether or not the meaning of the *lectiones* was understood by the *Adam* audience, merely hearing them would be enough to recreate the atmosphere of the divine service (22).

⁹⁹ Opening stage directions. The dramatic *res* of the play partake not only of the historic *res* that they represent, but seem to engage the original Neoplatonic *formae* or universals of which they are signs.

the dramatic *res* as if they were really and truly present before the gaze.¹⁰⁰ As they are enacted, the directions of the play enforce this idea.

Interestingly, the technique used in the *Adam* to promote proper seeing of a visual sign anticipates what would later be done in the liturgy. By the end of the twelfth century, it would not be enough to indicate the transformation of bread into flesh through the priest's words—*hoc est corpus meum*—alone. A “gesture of elevation [that] marked the moment of consecration” was integrated into the Mass for this purpose (Rubin 55). With the development of sacramental elevation, “the essence of the rite lay in seeing the host” (Rubin 60). The officiant reinforced the transformation of bread into the true referent of his spoken words by visual display, leaning on gesture to indicate a true semiotic relationship, not unlike an actor who repeatedly indicates “paradisus” (Rubin 55).

It is possible, however, that the ability to see beyond dramatic *res significandi* can go too well according to one of the rare objectors to church drama, Gerhoh of Reichersberg. In his *De investigatione Antichristi* (1161-62), Gerhoh writes,

Sed divinitas insuper et matura facies ecclesiae abhorret spectacula
theatralia, non respicit in vanitates et insanias falsas, immo non falsas sed
iam veras insanias, in quibus viri totos se frangunt in feminas quasi pudeat
eos, quod viri sunt, clerici in milites, homines se in daemonum larvas
transfigurant.” (qtd. in Young II, 412)

¹⁰⁰ Several critics have commented on a similar conflation of present and past space, of visual sign and referent, in the York “Entry into Jerusalem”; here, the audience is “swept up in a process of ritual participation” as the streets of York become an imagined substitute for Jerusalem (Beckwith, *Signifying* 26). As in the *Adam*, characters “likely gazed out at York as they remarked upon the biblical setting, thereby visually and gesturally fusing the two worlds into a single entity” for a similar purpose (Stevenson 98).

Gerhoh's emphasis on the "false, nay, not false but indeed *true* madness" that takes place on stage, such as how an actor playing a dead man who was resurrected died shortly thereafter, smacks of Augustinian concerns about the confusing mixing of truth and falsehood in *fabulas* and on the stage (Clopper 44). Gerhoh also rehearses longstanding objections to the frivolousness of theater, affiliating some liturgical drama with Roman "spectacula theatralia." However, he seems especially concerned with the transformative aspect of drama: how men shame themselves by changing ["transfigurant"] "*entirely* into women" ("totos...in feminas"), clerics into soldiers, or humans into demons. Somehow the true nature or aspect of the actor is unnaturally subsumed and erased by the act of impersonation. Indeed, speaking about another form of dramatic *res*—masks—Twycross and Carpenter surmise that medieval audiences were not likely "to look behind the mask, or recognise a tension between it and the actor Once the mask is on, the actor as an individual man simply disappears behind or into it: only the character is left" (32-33). The ability to see past objects on stage to what they signify is, at least in Gerhoh's estimation, too effective when clerical actors are seen as Herod, the Antichrist or the demons they play while their status as holy men is overlooked (Clopper 44).

Augustine's "Intus Magister" in the Benediktbeuern Ludus de nativitate

For a medieval audience, the suspension of disbelief necessary for viewers to identify the true referent of the sacrament or to envision the space outside a church as the paradise of Genesis represents more than the willingness to imagine spoken of by Coleridge: it is a pious act adhering to Augustine's concept of the Inner Teacher, wherein

faith is the first prerequisite for learning the proper interpretation of visual signs. As archetypal non-believers, Jews are therefore emblematic of an inability to learn; Isaiah tells Judeus that his condition of error is permanent because the latter's continued adherence to Judaism is enough to preclude the possibility that he will be graced with understanding. The prophet, whose faith is sure, is conversely able to arrive easily at the meaning of Judeus's hand "par Deu vertu" (l. 894) just as what he has seen in the book of life has been taught by God ("de Deu l'ai apris") (l. 928). But Judeus has apparently also begun to internalize Christian belief during his discussion with Isaiah, for he asks the prophet to repeat his teachings with the expectation of learning from them.

The connection of belief to learning only hinted at in the *Adam* is the central didactic focus of another twelfth-century drama, the Benediktbeuern *Ludus de nativitate*, which explores the issue again through its characterization of Jews. Like the *Adam*, the Benediktbeuern Christmas play contains an *ordo prophetarum*, termed "the most imaginative version of the Procession of Prophets to be found anywhere in medieval drama" (Bevington 179). In this *processus*, each of the prophets emphasizes the inviolate nature of the Virgin Mary—another aspect of Christian doctrine subject to twelfth-century doctrinal scrutiny—and not the typological signs predicting the advent of Christ. The energy and innovation of the *ordo*, however, is owed largely to another polemical interruption by a Jewish antagonist, this time called Archisynagogus, whose extravagant gesturing ("imitando gestus Judaei in omnibus") is a form of dramatic *res* that signifies his Jewishness transparently.¹⁰¹

Unlike his counterpart in the *Adam*, Archisynagogus does not demand textual support for a typological reading but requests a rational methodology of arriving at the

¹⁰¹ Stage directions preceding l. 79.

truth of the Virgin Birth. He declares that he has come with the sole expectation of learning the “chain of events” (“rerum series”) behind the logic-defying concept that he has heard so much about (ll. 85-86). In doing this, he seems to be opening the door for a Christian-Jewish debate that will ultimately reaffirm the purity of the Virgin for any Christians who evince doubts similar to those expressed by Archisynagogus. Indeed, as in contemporary written debates, the Jewish participant is made to voice Christian doctrine even in stating his objections. Marsicano notes, “Even [Archisynagogus’] oxymoron about the wolf fleeing the lamb puts Christian iconography on his lips” (61).

Archisynagogus appears to be present to provide a didactic lesson based on rational explanation and “argumenta,” an expectation that is generally fulfilled in Christian-Jewish debates like those by Odo and Crispin. And so, when the Boy Bishop who presides over the festivities calls on “The mind of Augustine,/By whom the dispute/May be brought to an end” (99-102), there is every anticipation of an intellectual battle, one that will reaffirm the purity of the Virgin on rational grounds for any Christians harbouring doubts similar to those voiced by the Jew.

Augustine begins his appearance by commanding his Jewish opposition to “open their ears” (“nunc aures aperi”) to verbal instruction, which prompts only loud laughter from Archisynagogus (l. 119). In line with the theme of overturning and reversal that governs Christmas festivities like the Feast of Fools, what follows is marked by a curious incongruence between stage directions and dialogue, expectation and actualization. While the directions call for Archisynagogus to address Augustine’s testimony on the virgin birth “cum nimio cachinno,”¹⁰² his words actually contain a well-ordered refutation of the statement “virgo pariet” as a concept “quod negat ratio” (l. 131). The dialectical

¹⁰² Stage direction preceding l. 127.

construction of Archisynagogus' words establishes his desire for Augustine to respond "ad objectum," to continue in the debate format using the same method; and, if the didactic purpose of the Christmas Play were indeed to defend Christian doctrine using reason, we would expect Augustine to answer the latter's objections with logic (l. 164-65). Instead, Augustine halts the discussion, completely eschewing "argumenta moresque sophistic" as methods of arriving at the truth of miraculous events on the manifest grounds that reason falters in this unique case ("talis casus unicus") (ll. 169-71).

This is highly unusual, for in addition to the existing tradition of Jewish-Christian written polemic as a mode of defending Christian belief, "rational dialogue was becoming a preferred medium of arguing about theology" as early as the eleventh century where it also was identified strongly with Augustine based on his debates with the Manicheans (Novikoff 394, 417). Moreover, no excuse bars rational argument about the Virgin Birth elsewhere in the context of interreligious debate. Odo's argument defending the notion of Mary's bodily purity relies specifically on the concept of "ratio" as superior to "sensus," for instance, while Inghetto Contardo's *Disputationes contra Iudeos* bases its justification on empirical observation of parthenogenesis in earthworms;¹⁰³ therefore, despite what the character of Augustine claims, the dismissal of an established and effective method of instruction does not reflect its inherent uselessness for the given situation, but a divergent view on the proper means of Christian learning.

Archisynagogus's interruption of the *ordo* is thus less an opportunity to uphold any single doctrinal point (*what* one must believe) as it is a means of promoting an Augustinian notion of *how* one must believe to best learn sacred truth in general, a focus

¹⁰³ Odo's discussion, which concludes his polemic, appears in cols. 1110C-1112C. Gilbert Dahan excerpts a passage from Inghetto's discussion of the Virgin in *The Christian Polemic* 113.

that has remained largely unexplored in assessing the didacticism of the play. The utter rejection of debate reveals the conflict between Archisynagogus and Augustine as a clash of two opposing pedagogical approaches to Christian mystery: the Jew's emphasis on learning by intellectual process versus the saint's ultimate defence of seeing and believing. The resolution of this ideological opposition in favour of the latter constitutes the overlooked didactic message of the episode and of the *Ludus de nativitate* as a whole.

The motives behind the rejection of debate as a means of instruction are first determined by the authorship of the play. To no small extent, the rejection of “sophistic arguments” takes aim at the carefully constructed scholastic approach to doctrinal issues used by contemporary Christian thinkers like Roscelin, Odo, and Anselm among others, a method with which the Benediktbeuern author was surely very familiar. The presence of the *Ludus* in the same manuscript as the *carmina burana* songs strongly suggests that it is part of a single collection composed by the *vagantes clerici*, the wandering student poets who were known to “thumb their collective nose at the very academic and ecclesiastical establishment that nurtured them” (Colish, *Medieval Foundations* 202).¹⁰⁴ In this case, the disdain for “educative dialogue and intellectual dispute..., the methods and practices most emblematic of the medieval university,” can be read as a parodic jab by students against their masters and modes of teaching (Novikoff 418). Archisynagogus is twice called “magister” (401, 526) and his belaboured emphasis on the wording of the statements “virgo pariet” (132, 140, 144, 154), “est virgo puerpera” [“A virgin is childbearing”] (151), and “matre virgine” (183) recalls university instruction through

¹⁰⁴ The attribution of the Benediktbeuern plays to the *vagantes* is longstanding. Wolfgang Michael for one calls the manuscript “the most outstanding vagantic collection on German soil” (27).

sophismata, logically problematic sentences like these that were dissected at the level of grammar and debated *pro* and *contra* “to teach proficiency in argument” (Leff 207).¹⁰⁵

Likewise, when Archisynagogus remarks that Augustine’s foolish defence of the Virgin Birth is akin to the statement “homo mortuus est” (176), he conveys the ridiculousness of the proposition by invoking a classic sophism that preoccupied a number of later thirteenth- and fourteenth-century university masters at Paris and Oxford.¹⁰⁶ In simplified terms, “the man is dead,” is held to be a grammatically impossible statement by schoolmen like Richard Kilvington and John Buridan since a man who is dead is no longer technically a man but a corpse that no longer partakes in the state of being.¹⁰⁷ By giving Archisynagogus an interest in the rigorous application of logic, the vagantic author mocks the “Jewishness” of schoolmen with the same narrow understanding of Christian mystery, drawing on an established notion of Jews as “hair-splitting logicians” (Smalley 235). Criticizing precisely the Judaic interpretation of “a virgin shall conceive,” Peter the Chanter, for example, notes that Jewish readers are “versed in the sophism of composition” that lacks comprehension of deeper truth (qtd. in Smalley 234).

In a broader sense, the Jew’s confrontational attitude to learning is highly reminiscent of the methods of dialectical instruction that also developed in the schools toward the end of the twelfth century, particularly the *quaestiones disputatae*. This approach required a master to debate an *opponens* in response to a question (*quaestio*) on

¹⁰⁵ On the *sophismata*, see Pironet.

¹⁰⁶ The best history of this *sophisma* is Sten Ebbesen’s “The Dead Man is Alive” in *Synthese* 40:1 (Jan. 1979), 43-70.

¹⁰⁷ It appears, for instance, as question 14a:4 in the first book of Buridan’s *Quaestiones in analytica priora* and in *The Sophismata of Richard Kilvington* 100.

a topic such as the interpretation of Scripture or canon law posed to him by students or other masters before providing an authoritative resolution or *sententia*.¹⁰⁸ For Vincent Marsicano, the entire structure of the *Ludus de nativitate*, not just the *ordo*, is governed by this didactic pattern of *quaestio-disputatio-sententia* (60). Yet, to perceive the presence of these scholastic elements as a means of promoting instruction through polemics is to neglect the parodic implications of attributing the format to Archisynagogus. In Vitalis of Blois' *Geta*, another Latin play with connections to the medieval schools, the title character also engages in sophistries to the point of doubting his identity and very existence:

Sic sum, sic nil sum. Pereat dialectica per quam

Sic perii penitus. Nunc scio: scire nocet.

Cum didicit Geta logicam, tunc desiit esse (401-403).

[Therefore I am; therefore I am not.

Oh, damnation to this dialectic

Which has condemned me utterly to non-existence.

Now I have knowledge, but knowledge is dangerous.

When Geta learned logic he ceased to exist.]¹⁰⁹

Recognizing a similar parodic aspect of the Archisynagogus episode, as well as the sudden truncation of all arguments in the play, remains an essential step in unveiling its more sober point: Augustine's refusal to take up the *quaestio* of another master and

¹⁰⁸ Bernardo C. Bazàn discusses the origin and evolution of the *disputatio* in *Les Questions disputées dans les facultés de théologie, de droit, et de médecine* 31-40.

¹⁰⁹ Translation by Allison Goddard Elliot, *Seven Medieval Latin Comedies*. See Ferruolo, 118-19 for commentary on the criticism of logic in *Geta*.

participate in his proposed mode of instruction reflects the notion that Christian *sententia* must be obtained through means other than *disputatio*.

An examination of the serious philosophical motives behind the denial of scholastic didacticism in the play reveals the nature of this alternative path toward sacred truth. Beyond its participation in the simple mockery and reversal of order that characterize Christmas festivities such as the election of the Boy Bishop, the deferral of reason in the *ordo* evokes the anti-Aristotelianism of thirteenth-century theologians like Eustace of Ely who defended inspired learning against those who “sought to reduce the ineffable mysteries of the Trinity, transubstantiation and other theological truths to ‘our understanding...and presume to formulate them according to certain natural and philosophical and logical reasons, seeking to include within the rules of nature what is above all nature” (Leff 199). Archisynagogus’s opposition to the Virgin Birth on account of what the “law teaches” (158) does not find the concept incongruous in relation to the “Old Law” of Judaism but according to the laws of nature expounded by Aristotle. Refutations of “homo mortuus est” appear in commentaries on the *De Interpretatione* and *Sophistici Elenchi* and the logical impossibility of this *sophisma* leans heavily on Aristotle’s discussion of syllogism in the recently discovered *Prior Analytics*, a technique alluded to as well in the Jew’s request to be shown the “rerum series” (86).¹¹⁰ Archisynagogus is therefore a champion of learning through Aristotelian logic—a point made obvious in his direct invocation of the philosopher’s authority to support his case

¹¹⁰ Buridan’s *Quaestiones in analytica priora*, for example, is a commentary on Aristotle’s *Prior Analytics* and assesses “homo mortuus est” in light of the philosopher’s “multi modi syllogistici” (14a:4). See Ebbesen, “The Dead Man,” 43 on the Aristotelian origins of the *sophisma*.

(176-78)—and his wrongheadedness owes as much to this philosophical perspective as it does to his Judaism.

Although the *Ludus de nativitate* can be dated no more precisely than the late-twelfth or early-thirteenth centuries (the MS dates from 1230), it is tempting to identify its interest in university instruction alongside its anti-Aristotelian perspective as a response to the early controversy over the teaching of Aristotle at the University of Paris between 1210 and 1231; this was an expansive quarrel that “crystallized the latent conflict between rational experience and revelation” (Leff 190). Whether or not this clash of ideas had yet come to a head when the play was composed, it casts the introduction of Augustine as a foil to Archisynagogus in a more complex light, for the Bishop of Hippo is not only the putative author of the *Sermo contra Judeos* but also a representative of Platonic instruction, the bastion of a pedagogical system that opposes a reliance on external logic with one based on inner inspiration.

The deferral of reason is a didactic reminder to the clerical audience for the Latin play that Christian learning, following Anselm’s Augustinian “credo ut intelligam,” must always be grounded first in faith; this is the sole means of confronting the absurd puzzle of how God could have been born in a lowly manger or Archisynagogus’ criticism about the irrationality of conception without sexual intercourse. Augustine thus appears in Christmas Play not just as the putative author of the *Sermo contra Judeos* but as the bastion of a didactic methodology in which “all truth could only be gained from an inner illumination that ultimately...derived from God” (Leff 205).

Because logical explanation is didactically useless, one must learn instead by seeing and believing.¹¹¹ The value of images is precisely their special ability to subvert the limitations of reason and instill belief, an idea promoted by critics of scholastic learning such as Serlo of Wilton (Kessler, *Neither God Nor Man* 139). According to legend, Serlo abandoned his position as master at the university of Paris after experiencing the vision of a dead former student, who was clad in a “gown of parchment covered with the sophisms of the schools,” and who was now burning in purgatory for the “vain arguments” he had made while alive (Raby 340). The story surrounding Serlo’s conversion is particularly apt for the message of the *Ludus de nativitate*, for not only does Serlo reject the scholastic path to pursue a life of faith as a Cistercian, but he is also converted by virtue of what he sees.

Similarly, Archisynagogus and his Jews must learn through seeing. How this is to be accomplished is encapsulated in Augustine’s response to Archisynagogus’s cry of “Res neganda!” (“A thing to be denied!”) regarding the Virgin Birth, a mindset antithetical to the pious receptivity required for learning (204). Instead of countering by emphasizing the miracle as “a thing to be affirmed,” Augustine replies with “Res miranda,” “a thing to be wondered at” (205). If metaphors of vision—seeing the truth, gaining insight, and being illuminated—are most suited to describing the process of inner learning, the external sight implied by the act of “wondering” conversely “has the greatest affinity to mental vision,” and is capable of providing a similar transformative experience (Augustine, *De trinitate* 11.1.1). Described as “blind” (“caeca”) (222) and “veiled in shadows” (“tenebris abscondita”) (111), Archisynagogus and his companions must first *see* the truth; only then can they accept the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. This

¹¹¹ The precise mechanism appears to be seeing leading to believing leading to understanding.

approach is apparent when the character of Augustine abandons his appeal to the ears of the Jews and offers instead the classic pictorial image of light passing through a glass, not as rational proof, but as a visual analogy for the conception of Christ (ll. 192-98).

Still more effective than imagery in teaching Christian truth are the visual signs of drama because they include verbal exposition, and so Archisynagogus and his followers are invited to become spectators to biblical events portrayed in a series of playlets within the larger *Ludus de nativitate*.¹¹² These episodes—the Annunciation, the Coming of the Magi, Adoration of the Shepherds, and Slaughter of the Innocents—come after the exhortation of “Discant nunc Judaei” (233) and are clearly intended as a means of creating belief among the fictional Jews and, by extension, of affirming it in a wider Christian audience.

Reconsidered from this perspective, the Benediktbeuern Procession of Prophets already contains a unique emphasis on observing *res* as a means of arriving at sacred meaning. In no other medieval *ordo* edited by Young, including the original *Sermo contra Judeos*, does Daniel’s prophecy conclude with his singing of the responsory “aspiciebam in visu noctis” (27), which stresses the importance of sight in his sacred knowledge. Moreover, while other *ordines* present only the eschatological prophecy of the Erythraean Sibyl on the signs of Judgment (“Iudicii signum: tellus sudore madescet...”), the Benediktbeuern *processus* depicts her first “viewing the star” (“inspiciendo stellam”) over Bethlehem and commenting on its messianic “novum

¹¹² The stage directions call for the prophets to withdraw or “sit in their places to observe the play” (“sedeant in locis suis propter honorem ludi”) (Stage directions preceding l. 233). There is no mention of where Archisynagogus and his associates are to go, though since the play’s lesson is directed toward them, they likely remain on stage to witness the action and later enter it.

nuntium” or “new message” (29).¹¹³ On one hand, the “newness of the star” (“stellae novitas”) (30) and its message refer no doubt to the supercession of the *vetus testamentum* with the coming of Christ; however, because simply observing the star is represented as the direct catalyst for the Sibyl’s visionary awareness, “newness” is also identified with seeing and believing as a replacement for the old scholastic approaches to sacred knowledge, approaches embodied by the *senex* Archisynagogus and classed as “errore Judaeorum” like a continued adherence to the Old Law.¹¹⁴

Such a distinction between new and former ways of learning is made plain when the star is foregrounded as a mystery to be interpreted, in the scenes portraying the Coming of the Magi. As the three kings seek to interpret the star of Bethlehem, rubrics indicate that they begin by properly marvelling at it (“admirentur”),¹¹⁵ but the first king confuses himself by trying to understand the “novum. . . nuntium” (253) further according to the “sayings of the *old* school” (“lingua sectae *veteris*,” my emphasis) (268), namely astrological knowledge based on the scholastic methods of the “quadrivium” (247). For all this, he remains “perplexed” (246), “bemused” (259), and “speechless” (271), knowing only that a child of global power will be born (275-77). The second king initially focuses on stargazing (“semper inspiciendo stellam”) like the Sibyl, but makes the mistake of also “pondering about it” (“disputet de illa”) in an internalized *disputatio*, and is frustrated by his attempts to comprehend the mystery fully through the “faculty of reason” (288).¹¹⁶ The third king is similarly able to recognize that the star is an object signifying the birth of “a great prince” (327), but since he too is occupied with reasoning

¹¹³ Stage direction preceding line 28. Young’s edition of the *Sermo* in *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, vol. 2, 130-31, provides the standard text of the Sibylline prophecy.

¹¹⁴ Stage direction preceding l. 95.

¹¹⁵ Stage directions preceding l. 246.

¹¹⁶ Stage directions preceding l. 278.

about its nature (“disputando de stella”) in the mode of the university, he is unable to grasp its full significance.¹¹⁷ The kings begin to comprehend the divinity of the king they seek when they recognize that the star speaks (“stella loquitur”) its own self-evident meaning as a type of *verba visibilia* (l. 366). Only another visual act—seeing the infant to whom the star refers—can bring a complete understanding of its meaning.

Simply gazing on the child is again offered as the final arbiter of sacred truth later in the *Ludus de nativitate* as well when *angelus* and *diabolus* compete to sway an audience of shepherds regarding the divinity of the newborn Christ. The devil—who, in the medieval conflation of the Judaic and the diabolic, sounds very much like Archisynagogus—attempts to derail the faith that is the basis for inspired understanding when he urges the shepherds not to visit the manger.¹¹⁸ His argument, couched like Archisynagogus’s in the language of Aristotelian dialectic, characterizes the concept of a divinity born in a manger as something “that truth does not prove” (“quae non probat veritas”) (452); the angel who announces this concept thus “makes contraries out of the truth” (“fabricat/vero contraria”) (467-68), an objection that accuses the angel of violating the very basis of dialectic: its capability “of discerning true things from false” (Alcuin qtd in Catherine Brown 37). This is highly ironic, for the quasi-magical power to turn “verum in contrarium” (477) through syllogism is exactly what medieval critics of dialectic like Walter of St. Victor present as its “diabolic art,” confirmed now in the devil’s own manipulative logic (Catherine Brown 64).¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Stage directions preceding l. 312.

¹¹⁸ A later example of the Judaic-Satanic equivalence appears in the N-Town “Parliament of Hell” where Satan voices the Jewish concern that Christ will “oure lawe . . .down hewe” (l.33). Joshua Trachtenberg’s *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* remains the best discussion of medieval perceptions on Jewish diabolism.

¹¹⁹ Brown cites Walter’s critique of dialectic taken to extremes in his *Contra quatuor labyrinthos Franciae*.

But the devil's rhetoric aims at more than creating doubt through reason; his choice of words seeks to undermine seeing as the basis for belief by representing the Incarnation as "a falsehood open before the eyes" ("ad oculum...reserata falsitas") (455-56) when it is only questionable according to the dictates of reason. The angel who speaks against him, however, reaffirms the didactic value of marvelling in the absence of any rationalization, assuring the shepherds that the manger will *show* the truth ("monstrabit praesepium," my emphasis) (488) to those who look on. This episode thus does not simply portray "belief in divine miracle as an alternative to rational faithlessness," as Bevington observes, but more specifically counters logic with an invitation to see for oneself, which will lead to understanding (179).

Such an emphasis on looking on to gain understanding of the divine may also be owed to what Hahn has identified as a thirteenth-century shift from the idea of momentary glimpses or glances of the sacred to "prolonged gaze apprehended as an interactive experience" as might take place when attending a dramatic representation ("Visio" 169). This requires a certain willingness of the viewer to engage with the object of sight, following Augustine's theory of extramissive vision, whereby "a diffusion of rays...are emitted from narrow pupils into the open" ("diffusio radiorum...e brevibus pupilis in aperta emicant"), encounter the object and return to imprint the soul of the viewer (*De musica* 6.8.21). The viewer "must actively turn the power of looking upon the appropriate objects and invest the soul's energy wisely" (Hahn, "Visio" 184) to gain comprehension of sacred truths.

Because of this, the didactic methodology illustrated in the Benediktbeuern Christmas Play is one where the ability to apprehend Christian truth through visual signs

is inextricably bound to and preceded by belief, a notion that goes back to Augustine's idea how comprehension is reached via the Inner Teacher. Only observers who approach signs, whether visual or otherwise, with willing faith can raise corporeal sight to the highest sort of vision and be guaranteed understanding, an idea reiterated often in the Middle Ages; As Hahn notes, outside of the letters to Serenus, in his *Dialogues*, Gregory presents the idea that "the physical eye, used as it should be, could be opened to truth conveyed by vision if one purified sight through 'acts of faith and abundant prayer'" ("*Visio*" 177). Caesarius of Heisterbach, glossing Augustine in the early thirteenth century, similarly extolls the ideal "vision of the saints" in the *City of God*—those who are perfected in faith—as "full and clear" not "doubtful and obscure" (Hahn, "*Visio*" 170).

Differing from the view presented in the *Adam*, faith triggers acceptance of visual learning in the *Ludus*, not vice versa. Judeus is converted simply by seeing Isaiah's interpretation of his hand, but Archisynagogus is unconvinced when witnessing New Testament events because he lacks a willingness to suspend the doubt that is the basis for rational inquiry. For viewers of the *Ludus de nativitate* to learn, they too must distance themselves from the lack of faith that allies them with Jews by simply accepting the truthfulness of the dramatic *res* they see on stage. Once more, the suspension of disbelief that takes place when viewing dramatic *res* as the things they portray participates in the desired state of non-intellectualizing receptivity necessary to learn sacred truth. Christian viewers eager to disavow the lack of faith that would ally them with a Jewish audience would surely be inclined to accept the truthfulness of the what they see on stage.

Ultimately, a persistent emphasis on learning by looking promotes the didactic efficacy of the Benediktbeuern play itself and the dramatic medium in general, for Biblical scenes recreated on stage are accorded the same evidential weight as the events themselves. Archisynagogus and his companions are expected to learn by watching the original events surrounding Christ's birth; this enables Archisynagogus to abandon his role as a spectator and enter the action at Herod's court on two separate occasions (401-424; 526-34). Yet, because these are the same scenes performed for the audience of the play, the distinction between true Gospel events and their re-enactment, between passive observation and active participation, breaks down and with it any obstacles to visually accessing spiritual truth. Even more than the *Ordo repraesentacionis Ade*, the Benediktbeuern play emphasizes a sense of seeing where "there is no gap between what happened at one moment in salvation history and what happens in real time" (Muessig 137). As Clifford Davidson has observed, in any drama, "the impression of breaking down the barriers of time and space must be present if the play is to be brought alive," but in the *Ludus*, the Jews are actually brought across these barriers as audience members ("Space and Time" 74). This sort of participation in the events of the play, the sense of "being-in-the-biblical-world," strongly reinforces a way of looking at Christian history as transcendent (Stevenson 98).

Learning from Jewish Violence in Middle English Drama

In addition to illustrating an Augustinian view of images in learning, the reflexive acceptance of what one sees stressed in the *Ludus* signals a fundamental shift in attitude surrounding the right to question Christian doctrine, a change with implications for European Jews and their depiction in medieval drama. An increasing emphasis on

orthodox belief within the thirteenth-century Church resulted in the establishment of inquisitional tribunals and the passage of legislation designed to check spontaneous interreligious debate of the sort desired by Archisynagogus. Synods at Paris, Trier, Tarragon, and Bourges issued orders, echoed by papal bull, that expressly forbade “any lay person...[to] discuss in public or private the Catholic religion,” for the logic of disbelieving Jews “often tricks simple Christians” and promotes rather than forestalls doubt (Dahan, *The Christian Polemic* 28-29). Alongside these limitations against debate, a number of canons from thirteenth-century councils, most notably Fourth Lateran Canon 68 and the Synod of Narbonne Canon 3, aimed at preventing Jewish-Christian interaction altogether, effectively eliminating the possibility of continued dialogue (“The Twelfth General Council” 290-91).

For historian Gavin Langmuir, a vehement and violent antisemitism arose from “an irrational reaction to repressed rational doubts” precisely because such restrictions and texts like the *Ludus* promoted the denial of reasoned inquiry in favour of unwavering belief (276). When Christians who questioned theological matters like the Incarnation and Virgin Birth were encouraged to “suppress...their rational empirical knowledge about the nature of objects and human beings” rather than to address such doubts using the tools of logic, the resulting acceptance of irrationality primed them to invent and accept fantasies about Jews that were not grounded in observation, particularly involving their imagined violence against Christians through ritual murders, well poisonings, and cannibalism (Abulafia, *Christians and Jews in the Twelfth-Century* 5).¹²⁰ Such beliefs in turn led to the increased hostility and reactionary attacks against Jewish communities.

¹²⁰ For an extended account of these accusations, see Langmuir 299-302.

Though the exact causes of medieval antisemitism are highly complex, it cannot be denied that coincident with the development of these irrational attitudes, depictions of rationally questioning Jews all but disappear from medieval religious drama as well. This does not mean that Jews no longer figure in the didacticism of late-medieval drama, however—in fact, the exile of actual Jews made them even more useful as symbolic instruments—only that the Jewish approach to interpretation usually figured in terms of inappropriate verbal interrogation is represented more abstractly and with greater hostility as brutality toward the *corpus Christi*. Archisynagogus’s attempt to learn through scholastic *quaestiones* is supplanted by dramatic representations of Jewish *quaestio* in its sense of inquisitional torment; the non-intellectualized response to visual scenes urged by the Benediktbeuern Christmas Play would find its most prominent expression in the highly affective portrayal of Jews as torturers of Christ in enactments of the Passion from late-medieval English drama¹²¹

This use of Jewish violence as a metaphor for misguided interpretation is perhaps most evident in the large surviving works of Middle English religious drama. Any generalizations made concerning the 150 or so plays of the surviving English cycle plays must be drawn with caution, but it is safe to say that interpretation remains a central concern across the extant works. V.A. Kolve’s assertion that the “organizing principle” of the Corpus Christi cycles is, like that of the *Adam*, based on figures and fulfillment, points to the importance of typological interpretation in particular (97). A number of plays emphasize typology overtly through an “expositor” or “doctor” who introduces or

¹²¹ See Jody Enders, *The Medieval Theater of Cruelty: Rhetoric, Memory, Violence* 41-43 for the multiplicity of meanings inherent in the Latin term *quaestio* particularly as it applies to the “shift in the rhetorical tradition from intellectual to bodily hermeneutics” (38).

interrupts the narrative in order to teach its significance directly to the audience. The most extensive instruction of this kind takes place in the Chester “Abraham” where an expositor provides some seventy lines of explanation on what the circumcision, the *akedah*, and the wine and bread Melchisedek offers to Abraham “signifieth” for Christians (l. 143).¹²² In the first Passion Play of the N-Town cycle, Jesus himself turns exegete, explaining the symbolic meaning of the Last Supper at length (l. 349-440).

Within the teaching of typology, Jews in the cycles are used as quintessential examples of how disbelief removes the ability to understand both the Christological signs hidden in Old Testament events and the divine nature of Jesus in the Gospels. Even Moses in N-Town cannot comprehend how the burning bush, altered but not consumed, figuratively anticipates the Virgin Birth; he knows only that it “fyguryth sum thyng of right gret fame” though he “kannot seyn what it may be” (“Moses” l. 21-22). Whereas the bystanders at the crucifixion who misunderstand Christ’s cry of “Eli, eli” as a prayer to Elijah are described in Matthew 27.47 and Mark 15.35 only as “quidam autem illic stantes et audientes” and “quidam de circumstantibus audeintes” respectively, these misinterpreters are specifically made out to be Jewish in the surviving Middle English cycles. In Chester, the misunderstanding of verbal signs is made by “Primus Judeus” and in N-Town by “Secundus Judeus,” while in York the high priest Caiaphas himself commits the interpretive error.¹²³ Depicting an audience comprised of Jews who stand around and listen but do not comprehend relays the importance of belief in learning for another standing audience, that of the plays themselves. Jews are again surrogates for the

¹²² The Expositor interrupts the narrative three times (l. 113-144; l. 193-208; l. 461-84) with extended monologues.

¹²³ See the Chester “Crucifixion” l. 365, N-Town “Crucifixion” l. 190, and the York “Death of Christ” l. 227. From a historical perspective, it is unlikely that any Jews present at the crucifixion would have misunderstood a call to God in Aramaic, the *lingua franca* of first century Jerusalem.

Christian audience, revealing the ignorance that results when seeking to learn Christian truth in the absence of faith. Nowhere is this lesson more starkly presented than in the interpretative violence of Herod's court.

The brief mention of Herod's desire to see a "signum" from Christ and the latter's silence during his interrogation in the Gospel of Luke ("interrogabat autem illum multis sermonibus at ipse nihil illi respondebat") becomes in the York, Wakefield, and N-Town Passion sequences an opportunity to present Jewish disbelief as an obstacle to interpreting Christian truth (Luke 23.8-9). Christ appears before Herod in absolute silence as an inscrutable visual sign, glossed by verbal reports as both a traitor and a maker of miracles, one who has healed the sick and raised the dead, but whose utter speechlessness neither confirms nor denies these readings. Like Archisynagogus, Herod desires to learn Christian interpretation. In York, he wants to hear how Jesus "ledges our laws"; in the first N-Town Passion he is eager to learn the "trew sentence" ("Litsers' Play" l. 168) behind the miraculous stories he has heard, seeking not rational explanations but visual proof of Jesus' powers—"O meracle wrought in my presens" (Play 30 ll. 202-04). Herod orders Christ to "prove some of thy posty" before he can believe, but within an Augustinian model of inspired learning, Herod needs to believe *before* he can see or understand (Chester "Trial and Flagellation" l. 186).

Expressly Jewish in all of the cycles (a worshipper of "Mahound" and a disciple of Satan as well in the York "Litsers' Play"), Herod is shackled by unbelief and cannot comprehend Christ's teachings or nature on his own, interpreting reports of the latter's deeds as "leasings" or lies ("Litsers' Play" l. 223).¹²⁴ Stymied in his efforts to extract the truth by Jesus' complete refusal to reply, Herod and his retinue threaten physical violence

¹²⁴ Herod's Jewishness is consistently emphasized in the plays by his concern for "oure lawes" (l. 168).

as a means of drawing out an explanation. When threats also fail to make Jesus speak in York, the court continues to misread his silence as resulting from his awe of royal dress (l. 282), his insanity (l. 272), or his fear either of Herod's loud voice (l. 251), his sword (l. 255), or his station (l. 280). Even the punishment Herod's advisors finally devise betrays a false understanding of signs. As Beadle and King note, Christ's white fool's tunic does not make him into an object of ridicule but into a visual sign of purity and humility for the Christian audience of the play (175).

When Herod actually administers corporal punishment in the N-Town Passion, he does so in a last-ditch attempt at interpretation; since Jesus' resolute silence fails to either show or tell, Herod orders several "Judei" to scourge him to "make hym for to speke," to compel him to interpret himself truthfully (l. 232). Christ's silent form becomes an impenetrable text from which Herod seeks to extract meaning by force.¹²⁵ By diverging from Gospel accounts to ascribe the scourging of Christ to Herod and his lackeys rather than to Pilate, the N-Town play emblemizes an improper response to indecipherable Christian signs as typically "Jewish" violence. The sweat of interpretation figured in patristic terms as fruitful ploughing becomes the fruitless toil of Jewish torturers who exhaust themselves trying to beat meaning from the silent Christ. This forceful approach to interpretation governs Judaic exegesis of written signs as well, according to the

¹²⁵ This connection of Jewish violence to interpretation is not original to Middle English religious drama—it is anticipated by Chrétien de Troye's *Cliges*, when the inert, silent body of Fenice is stripped, flogged, and burned by three physicians from Salerno in an attempt to make her speak and reveal the truth: that she is alive. Given the parallels of Fenice's tortures to the persecution of Christ as well as the role Jews played in medicine and in the founding of the medical school at Salerno in particular, it is safe to assume that Chrétien's three physicians are also Jewish. Interestingly, in *Image on the Edge*, Michael Camille mentions a Middle English medical text that speaks of the "margynes of the skynne" (16).

Depictions of Christ's flesh as a text inscribed in blood (and the spit of Jews) are also widespread in the late-medieval "Charters of Christ" which are generally contemporary with the cycle plays (See Rubin 55). These do not, however, discuss torture as interpretation but as an act of writing on Christ, transferred by him to the human heart.

Chester “Purification.” Encountering Isaiah’s prophecy on the Virgin Birth, the Jewish priest Simeon twice tries to “scrape... away” the problematic word “virgin” in his Bible (a process of erasure that requires applying a razor to the parchment skin) to impose by violent means his own anti-Christological reading of “a good woman” (ll. 33-40).

Perhaps the most direct demonstration of physical force as an interpretive technique appears in the extra-scriptural *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*, which can be associated more directly than the cycles with the feast of Corpus Christi (Gibson 35). The *Croxton* play dramatizes the efforts of the wealthy Jewish merchant Jonathas to procure the sacrament and subject it to various tortures. The accusation of host desecration levelled against Jews is not a new one, originating in the thirteenth century, but *Croxton* differs from most accounts in attributing to the participants a motivation other than simple malice. As Jews were officially absent from England following their expulsion in 1290, those in the play are once more stand-ins for incredulous Christians who question orthodox belief rather than historically accurate portrayals. Written in 1461 as a response to the Wycliffite rejection of transubstantiation, *Croxton* uses Jewish violence to symbolize the Lollards’ erroneous attempts to understand the supernatural mystery of the sacrament according to the dictates of reason.¹²⁶ Like Herod and Archisynagogus, the Jew Jonathas is driven by doubt to seek empirical evidence of Christian truth, to “put [it] in a prefe”; but where Archisynagogus’ rational inquiry had been reminiscent of the intellectual *quaestiones* of scholastic didacticism, the Jews of Middle English religious drama depict *quaestio* in its sense of inquisition by torture (l. 422).¹²⁷ Jewish violence

¹²⁶ See Scherb, “Violence,” *passim*.

¹²⁷ Enders (*The Medieval Theater of Cruelty* 41-43) discusses the multiplicity of meanings inherent in the Latin term *quaestio* particularly as it applies to the “shift in the rhetorical tradition from intellectual to bodily hermeneutics” (38).

directed toward Christ's body in the form of the host becomes a means of investigating the truth of Christian doctrine. As Jonathas explains, "the entent is, if I might knowe or undertake/If that [Christ] were God all-might" (l. 291-2), a proposition he wants to test by stabbing a sacramental wafer with daggers "to prove in this brede if ther be eny life" (l. 460). What is already deemed an improper means of interpreting Christian signs—seeking proofs and rational explanations—is replaced by a learning process that wrests truth using brute force, one more starkly at odds with the Augustinian concept of inspired understanding and equally ineffective.

Paradoxically, torture in its own right is no more useful a method of discovering Jesus' divinity than verbal questioning would be—neither stabbing nor boiling, nor baking the sacrament yields the information Jonathas seeks—but the abused body of Christ is extremely effective as a self-evident *verbum visibilium* that creates understanding through simple visual inspection. The conversion that ultimately takes place in *Croxtton* is not the result of rational proof derived from violence—the Jews confess to Christ their error in seeking to "know thy crede" (l. 754)—yet the "child...with wondys bloody" whose appearance is essential in converting the Jews nonetheless materializes as the product of torture (l. 804). The mutilated aspect of the figure is necessary to its value in teaching Christian truth; looking on the "swemfull" form is repeatedly foregrounded as evidential, both by Jonathas (l. 800, l. 805) and by the Episcopus who invites audience members onstage "to goo see that swimfull sight" (l. 809). Like Thomas of India, who believes in the resurrection only when he actually sees and feels Christ's wounds, the Jews are best convinced by observing the gory image on

stage, as is the audience—and the didacticism of the play takes the effectiveness of this *verbum visibilium* into consideration.

As Sarah Beckwith has observed, the body of Christ was frequently a metaphorical venue for issues of “social integration and social difference” in late-medieval England (*Christ’s Body* 33); the mutilated *corpus Christi* of Jonathas’ “newe Passion” (l. 38) participates in this social dynamic as a locus of incredulity, then an instrument of conversion. For Mervyn James, the conversion of the Jews in *Croxton* represents the *communitas* that can result on the occasion of the Corpus Christi celebration, a social union extended to the audience by the bishop’s invitation to participate in the procession of the play (11). I would suggest rather that what results in the action and performance of the play is an Augustinian form of *communitas* arising from a common approach to Christian signs, one grounded in seeing and believing; it is, in other words, a social group made up of those who now share the same notion of how to learn. As R.A. Markus notes, for Augustine, “[w]hat distinguishes the Christian from the Jewish community is . . . an openness to the New Testament context within which the things spoken of in the Old Testament receive a further meaning. Lack of it is the ‘servitude’ of the Jewish people, the closure of their biblical discourse” (“Signs” 104). This need for openness extends beyond typological reading as part of an interpretive approach to the whole body of Christian signs, which demands a willingness to accept visual signs as true signifiers. By doing this, the Jews of *Croxton* do not learn just that the Christian doctrine of the sacrament is true, they learn to adopt an entirely new method of learning. It is not surprising that didacticism regarding the interpretation of *res significandi* is presented through Jewish confusion regarding the sacrament, as rejecting

transubstantiation (a central aspect of Lollardy transferred to Jews) is the prime example of an inability to understand signs and signifieds.

If, from a patristic perspective, Christ's Passion at the hands of Jews is ironically necessary for salvation to take place, looking on the "swimfull sight" of the suffering Christ also ensures that the lessons of belief and repentance it presents are retained in memory. The mnemonic value of the cycle plays in general has been commented on in a number of places. Scherb discusses how the N-Town Passion plays are divided by their rubricator "into a series of independent scenes that have the authority of an iconographic tradition behind them" (53) while Lerud's extended thesis proposes that "the English Corpus Christi drama must be informed by a view of the plays as 'quik boks,' uniquely able to jog the mind toward spiritual understanding" (*Memory, Images* 62). However, less has been said about the particular role of visualizing Jewish violence in this process.

It is no secret that images of violence are held to be exemplary mnemonic tools in both classical and medieval *artes memoriae*. To remember the phrase "Iam domum itionem reges," for example, the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* recommends visualizing "Domitius, raising hands to heaven while he is lashed" (3.21.34). As Mary Carruthers notes, while certain aspects of the image ("Domitius") evoke specific terms to be remembered ("domus"), the image of a suffering man being flogged is used simply to make the whole scene vividly unforgettable (*Memory* 140). In a more general sense, the *Rhetorica* proposes mutilating the memory image in some way ("deforabimus"), dismembering to create remembrance (3.22.37). Thomas Bradwardine's fourteenth-century "De Memoria Artificiali," which developed independently of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* tradition, similarly enjoins the reader to use a series of shockingly gory

images, like those of a bull being castrated and a woman with her womb ripped apart, to help recall the signs of the zodiac (Carruthers, *Memory* 136).

The Franciscan devotional practice of affective piety that contributed to the development of the cycle plays likewise demanded that one visualize the suffering Christ of the Passion in order to remember the nature of his sacrifice. In the York “Crucifixion,” Jesus on the cross calls directly on the audience to “Byholdes myn heede, myn handis, and my feete,/And fully feele nowe” (l. 255-6). The graphically violent simulations of Jesus being flogged, beaten, and crucified in all of the surviving Middle English cycles furnish the ideal medium to trigger this visual recollection and imprint the image on the mind so it will not be forgotten in the future. The various Jewish authorities and torturers presented as responsible for acts of violence against Jesus in the drama are thus essential didactic instruments in a mnemonic sense.

But beyond simple memorialization, visualizing the brutal suffering of Christ either through an image or dramatic recreation serves a devotional purpose addressed in Gregory’s second letter to Serenus, where he speaks of “the burning of compunction” (“ardorem compunctionis”) that will come from seeing depictions of past holy deeds (XI, 10.60). In his earlier *Pastoral Care*, Gregory had already spoken of something more than “a simple reaction of the memory” in response to images, discussing how one engages in “revolving images in the mind until they are portrayed on the heart” (Hahn, “Visuality” 50). Witnessing the suffering of Christ facilitates a devotional understanding via emotional engagement. The Jewish brutality against Christ’s body presented as an example of faulty interpretive technique remains necessary in begetting both visual

learning and remembrance through its own wrongful violence; its inclusion in drama is vital to ensure that the lesson of the plays is internalized and retained.¹²⁸

Against the Jewishness of Drama

A subtle but crucial shift in the medieval attitude toward the didacticism of visual signs is reflected in the depiction of Jews in the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*: here, the visual can precede and prompt belief, which had not been the case in the *Benediktbeuern Ludus de nativitate*. This change marks the movement from an Augustinian view of learning that perceives inner illumination as the fundamental basis for understanding to an Aristotelian nominalism that places “increased emphasis upon intuition or sensory apprehension in knowledge” even in the absence of an *intus magister* (Carré qtd. in Davidson, *A Middle English Treatise* 15). For Clifford Davidson, the nominalist idea that signs in the world possessed their own reality independent of universal forms was largely responsible for the validation of perception in the acquisition of knowledge and consequently for the proliferation of drama as a valid source of truthful instruction in the late Middle Ages. If signs apprehended visually can convey truth without the prerequisite of inner illumination, dramatic performance becomes an even more powerful tool to create, not just enhance, Christian belief, even in those may not be able to access intellectual vision. Any nominalist underpinnings in the *Croxton* play, and in Middle English religious drama as a whole, remain conservatively grounded in faith and Christian doctrine and not independent empirical or philosophical speculation associated

¹²⁸ The idea that “No torment was too extreme or too gory for representation” in medieval religious drama thus reflects more than a lust for the sensational and bloody decried in John Gattón’s thesis (79): graphic violence likely contributes to the mnemonic value of the plays, whether there are Jews involved or not.

with Aristotle. Nevertheless, the reliance on visual signs or sense experience as an instrument for learning in religious drama was not without its detractors.

The views expressed in the fifteenth-century Lollard *Treatise of Miraculis Pleyinge*, written some fifty years before *Croxton*, represent the most complete arguments prior to the Reformation rejecting the validity of religious plays as a didactic medium.¹²⁹ Despite the heresy attributed to Lollard works, the *Treatise* rehearses familiar patristic fears concerning the unsavoury social atmosphere at dramatic performances that leads “to lecherie . . . to glotonye and to othere vicis” (ll. 142-46). Where it targets the signs of religious drama, the *Treatise* is actually quite Augustinian in denying the notion that such signs (as part of fiction) are at all instructive, though it goes further to deny that the true signification of *verba visibilia* is applicable to the visual presentation of drama.

Because its aim is first and foremost entertainment or “verrey leeing” (l. 244), stage representation comprises “signis withoute dede” (l. 245); the visually apprehended signs of religious drama merely pretend to signify deeper Christian content—“dedis” or *res*—since any hidden didactic meaning is effaced by an entertaining façade, making dramatic signs essentially empty ones. Echoing the Bishop of Hippo, the *Treatise* author maintains that where surface pleasure and underlying edification coexist they do so always at the expense of didacticism, as “two things most contrarious mowen not pleyn togidere withouten hurting of either . . . and most schal the fleysh hurtyn the spirit, as in suche pleyinge the fleysh is most meintenyd and the spirite lasse” (ll. 576-79). Like Augustine’s *fabulae*, religious drama entraps by creating *fructus*, enjoyment of literal

¹²⁹ The Wycliffite author’s definition of miracle plays encompasses all forms of religious drama including representations of the Crucifixion in the admonition that “Men shulden not pleyn the passion of Crist” (l. 813-14).

content that becomes an end in itself. The *verba visibilia* that signify transparently in Augustine's semiotics, "as nakyd lettris to a clerk to ridden the treuthe," fail to make miracle plays didactic; the mechanism whereby one simply sees and understands is negated by the profane nature of the plays, which are "made more to deliten men bodily than to been bokis to lewid men" (ll. 445-48).

Distracted by *fructus* and lacking in faith, spectators of religious drama are entrapped by external appearance and become, once more, akin to Jews. Those who act in the plays and maintain them, as well as those who gain pleasure from them, are no better than "the Jewis that bobbiden Crist" because they scorn the teachings of God, especially in their failure to break free of an enslavement to literal signs (l. 157-58). In fact, the *Treatise* explicitly describes the enjoyment of religious drama as a kind of regression into a Jewish attachment to the letter, a "verre goinge backward fro dedis of the spirit to onely signs" (ll. 631-32) or "fro the gostly living of the Newe Testament to the fleyshly living of the Olde Testament" (l. 628-29). The *Treatise* author also compares the religious drama to Ishmael in its carnality, a familiar anti-Judaic metaphor typologically applied to Jews, who are thus distinguished from the Christian spirituality embodied by Isaac (l. 622 ff.). Where the *Croxton* play would later accuse the Lollards of interpreting like Jews, the Wycliffite author applies the same metaphor to viewers of religious drama. Rather than teaching Christians how to avoid interpreting signs like a Jew, the plays "judaize" Christians by inviting literal reading.

Ultimately, debate over the didactic efficacy of religious drama, and by extension of visible signs, was settled in favour of the views expressed in the *Treatise of Miraclis Pleyinge*. During the Reformation, Protestant legislation in England upheld the

dangerously seductive nature of images, outlawing visual representations in art or on stage that invited misinterpretation and could lead to doctrinal confusion. The impact of this policy can be witnessed in the expurgation of objectionable scenes from the religious drama and in the eventual abolishment of the cycle plays themselves by the late sixteenth century.¹³⁰ Yet, the shifting notion of visible signs, this “anti-visual prejudice” that shaped English Protestantism, does not originate with the objections raised by Wycliffite thinkers. Warnings against obtaining knowledge through sense experience repeat thirteenth-century concerns that arose in response to a new Aristotelian outlook, one that is most fully voiced in the didacticism of the Old French fabliaux.

¹³⁰ See Clifford Davidson, “The Anti-Visual Prejudice” *passim* and Harold Gardiner *Mysteries’ End* 80-85.

CHAPTER 3: DANGEROUS SIGNS: SEMIOTIC INSTRUCTION IN FABLIAUX

Fabliaux and the Question of Didacticism

One of the most remarkable characteristics of scholarship on the Old French fabliaux has been its imprecision concerning issues as basic as authorship, date, audience, and extent of the corpus. Most of the works in the genre are anonymous and nearly all, in the words of Jean Rychner, “sont indatables” (I, 8). In the hundred or so years since Joseph Bédier initiated the contemporary study of fabliaux, even the definition of what constitutes one remains not entirely settled and the number of tales considered part of the corpus varies by collection.¹³¹ As Crocker puts it, “Unstable in terms of authorship, audience, purpose, and even effect, the *fabliaux* are almost impossible to see as a coherent creative corpus” (1). Given these difficulties in pinning down exactly what a fabliau is—and consequently which works should be included in the canon—the reasonable subjectivity of Muscatine’s admission may be the best that one can hope to achieve: “my reading tells me that there is something basically different in tone and attitude between a ‘typical’ fabliau” and works with which it shares some resemblance like “Richeut” or the *Roman de Renart*” (“The [Re]invention of Vulgarity” 286).¹³²

¹³¹ Bédier’s terse “contes à rire en vers” (30) which encompasses a subjective choice of 148 tales pared down from the 152 in the earlier Montaiglon and Raynaud collection, has been criticized by Knud Togeby (7) and Omer Jodogne (22) among others as too broad and inclusive. Operating on the much narrower assumption that only those works that call themselves fabliaux are such, Jodogne in *Le Fabliau* reduces the object of study to a mere 56 tales which leaves approximately 100 fabliau-like works in a sort of generic limbo. Following Jodogne’s criterion, though starting with sixty-six “fabliaux certifiés” (Jodogne 16), Mary Jane Stearns Schenck arrives at the very specific definition of “an independent, brief narrative with a tripartite macrostructure whose narrative is a humorous, even ribald, story with a cautionary moral” (*Fabliaux* xi) and 130 texts, based on structural and morphological features of what seems to be the typical fabliau. Meanwhile, the latest complete edition of the tales, in Willem Noomen’s *Nouveau recueil general des fabliaux (NRCF)* arrives at an inventory of 127.

¹³² I am reminded of US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s definition of obscenity in 1964 (particularly apt considering the scurrilous nature of fabliaux): “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced ... [b]ut I know it when I see it” (Silver).

In addition to the difficulty scholars have had in locating the defining attributes of the fabliau, the origins of the tales (from Gaston Paris' Orientalist theories to Per Nykrog's view that the genre originates in fable); their productive milieu (among the bourgeoisie according to Bédier, in the aristocratic courts for Nykrog, among upwardly mobile peasantry in the estimation of Schenck); and their didacticism have all defied firm resolution.¹³³ Of these, the question of whether or not fabliaux are didactic has perhaps most polarized scholars into two opposing camps, for unlike medieval religious drama where moral or doctrinal instruction is always in evidence even where the chief aim may be social, the didacticism of fabliaux is never above suspicion even where there are explicit declarations of didactic intent.

The most popular method of assessing instruction in the genre has been an examination of these authorial statements in the prologues and concluding morals of the tales. In support of general didactic purpose, one version of "La Housse partie" opens with the Horatian assertion that a master poet must create understanding and teach ("Fere connoistre et enseigner") as well as tell a good story (III, 16: 3).¹³⁴ A second version of the same tale immediately proclaims itself an "essanple" (l. 1) as does "La Dame escoliée" (VIII, 83: 5) and "Le Prestre crucefié" (IV, 27: 1), evoking an association with didactic exempla. In a more extended defence of literary didacticism, Trubert, the author of "Le Vilain au Buffet," upholds his desire to relate something from which one can learn ("a dire chose ou l'en apraingne") in answer to those wicked people who think literature is only frivolous lies (V, 52: 7).

¹³³ See the first chapter of Schenk's *The Fabliaux: Tales of Wit and Deception* for an excellent summary of these issues.

¹³⁴ All citations from fabliaux provide volume, tale number, and line number from the *Nouveau recueil complet des fabliaux* (NRCF) and refer to the critical text.

Similar evidence for didactic intent comes in the concluding remarks of fabliau poets, such as “Par exemple cis fabliaus dist...” followed by a particular moral in “Les Perdris” (IV, 21:150). These are often “conseils de vie pratique” (Jodogne 23) rather than expressly Christian morals, advising a male audience not to trust women (or a wife) for instance, as in the ending of “La Sorisete des Estopes” (VI, 66) and “Les Tresces” (VI, 69). Johnston and Owen determine that 95 out of the 152 fabliaux in the nineteenth-century Montaignon and Raynaud collection—roughly two-thirds—end with a moral (xiv). Limiting her study to only those tales that actually call themselves fabliaux, Schenck likewise finds that a majority (forty-five) contain moral conclusions (*Fabliaux* 28). If one expands the ground of study to include “not only the terminal *moralitas* of the familiar type (‘Par cest flabel poëz savoir ...’ ‘Par cest exemple vos deffant’ ... etc.), but also all occurrences of lines or passages in the text, before, after, or during the course of the action, when either the author, or one of the characters, or a group of characters speaking in unison makes some generalizing observation on the significance of the action, or interprets it in relation to an extra-textual frame of reference or system of belief,” only “[t]wenty-five fabliaux are without passages of sentence of any kind” (Percy, “Sentence” 234, 240).

Yet, for every prologue that declares didactic purpose, there are those like “Le Pliçon” that begin by overtly distinguishing the “risees/ Et mokeries” they offer with serious “siermons,” thereby vaunting the absence of instruction (X,116: 1-3). On account of statements like these, Glending Olson has argued that fabliaux are mainly intended for recreation and the promotion of joy. Works like Cortebarbe’s “Les trois Aveugles de Compiègne,” which describes the tale as dispelling “maint duel, maint mal” (II, 9: 7-8),

are a prime example of hygienic and not didactic intent, though Olson also proclaims that “a great many [non-didactic] fabliaux are just dirty stories”(138).

The concluding morals of fabliaux, which do not contain any authorial statements regarding the purely recreational aspect of the particular tale just presented, appear to remain better evidence for didacticism in the genre, but these too have been subject to doubt. For Bédier, “l’intention morale n’est jamais que accessoire. Elle ne vient que par sùrcroît” (311); the morals represent false or elevated claims that later critics would consider merely a stylistic or rhetorical requirement (Nykrog, *Fabliaux* 249) included by rote as “part of [the] habitual thinking” of fabliau poets (Muscatine, *Old French Fabliaux* 102), and indicating either a vestigial origin in fable or an attempt to valorize the tales within a system of Horatian criticism that privileges moral instruction.¹³⁵

Since many concluding morals are not legitimate, they can appear “capricious and arbitrary,” incongruous or peripheral in light of the plot they purport to illuminate (Percy, “Sentence” 244), hence Muscatine’s remark that if “fabliaux often carry a moral, they only infrequently embody it” (*Old French Fabliaux* 102). There is perhaps no better example of this than the conclusion of “Du Con qui fu fait a la Besche” (IV, 22). After a misogynist account of how women are physically created to enjoy beatings and an attribution of female garrulousness to the devil, the poet concludes by calling down divine punishment on anyone “who will say anything but good of women” (“Ja Dieus ne li face pardon/Qui d’eles dira fors que bien”) (76-77). If this is not contradictory enough, the final lines speak, in yet another reversal of opinion, of how “maint preudomme en sont destruit:/Honi en sont et confondu/Et lor avoir en ont perdu” (80-83). Other tales present morals in which it is difficult to find any useful instruction. “La Coille noire” (V,

¹³⁵ On the connection of fabliaux to fables, see Nykrog 250-52 and Johnston and Owen xv-xviii.

46) for example, declares that male genitalia of any color are equally good, “Des Chevaliers, des .II. Clercs, et les Vilains” upholds that “there is no delight for a churl but shitting” (*The French Fabliaux* II, 33:35-36), and “Le Prestre et le mouton,” presents the great truth that one must watch out for everything (“il se fet bon de tot garder”) (VIII, 88:18).¹³⁶ Indeed, even as she argues that the genre is didactic, Schenck too admits that she includes in her count “morals [that] could be characterized as oblique, or drawn from a secondary point in the narrative” (*Fabliaux* 29) in addition to “one example of a blatantly sarcastic moral” (*Fabliaux* 30).

Further complicating a determination of didacticism in fabliaux, we not only have these conflicting authorial statements, but “frequently heavy-handed” truth claims present in many of the tales, which can be interpreted in conflicting ways (Theiner 122). Claims that the material presented in obviously fictive plots is “chose veritable” (“Le Foteor,” VI, 59:3), “voires” (“Le Fevre de Creil,” V, 42:32), or “verité” (“Les deus Changeors,” V, 51:275) can be interpreted in one reading as tongue-in-cheek, similar to how contemporary jokes or urban legends are often said to have “really happened.” But it is also possible that what we have is “une autre vérité, la seule qui compte, qui est une vérité de dévoilement, intimement liée au didactisme” (Abramowicz 12). From the perspective of those who seek proof of instructional content, “the author may be telling us not that the event actually occurred, but that it is ‘true’ because it possesses exemplary value” (Lacy, *Reading* 3).¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Other inappropriate morals include those of “Boivin de Provins” variant P (II, 7:341), which inverts Christian morality in saying that “a good thief is one who steals from another” and “Le sot chevalier” (V, 53) which ends with an admonition not to take fools seriously, advice that would not have saved the victims in the tale from being wounded by the defective knight of the title.

¹³⁷ A short list of other tales that make such truth claims includes «La Housse partie» (III, 16), « Le Bouchier d’Abeville (III, 18), « Celle qui se fist foutre sur la Fosse de son Mari » (III, 20), « La Male

To what can we attribute this dichotomy of critical opinion? For one thing, the heterogeneous nature of the fabliau corpus is already enough to ensure a variety of views; the tales are the product of multiple poets over more than a century, and it would therefore “be wrong to impose on the fabliaux as a genre a strict unity of conception and purpose” (Hellman and O’Gorman 184). Norris J. Lacy has identified a similar polarity of views concerning women in the genre, accounting for divergent perceptions of whether fabliaux are antifeminist or not; on this basis, Lacy urges critics to “systematically resist the temptation to homogenize the stories or the views they offer” (*Reading* 77).¹³⁸ On a related note, different fabliaux, and even versions of the same fabliau, were tailored to the requirements of different audiences, courtly or bourgeois for example, as Rychner’s study of manuscript variants has shown.¹³⁹ Perhaps then a jongleur would recite a didactic fabliau for one kind of audience and a purely entertaining one for another.

Yet, if these possibilities can explain why one fabliau provides instruction while a second does not, they continue to be based on the assumption that there are some clearly didactic fabliaux to begin with, which is hardly a foregone conclusion. Nor do they permit one to draw any conclusions on the debatable didacticism of individual tales. We are thus returned to the sense of questionability, difference, and debate that appears to be the only sure characteristic when considering the instructive content of the genre; since

Honte » (V, 43), « Le sot Chevalier » (V, 53), « La Dame qui fist trois Tors entor le Moustier » (V, 54), and «Connebert » (VIII, 77).

¹³⁸ For the view of fabliaux as misogynist, see E. Jane Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993). Harriet Goldberg presents an opposing view in “Sexual Humor in Misogynist Medieval Exempla.”

¹³⁹ *Contribution à l’étude des fabliaux*. 2 vols. Geneva: Droz, 1960.

this is the case, perhaps the question of whether fabliaux are didactic is continually raised because the issue is also problematized in the tales themselves.

Reassessing divergent fabliau prologues from this new perspective, it is possible to see them as representing both sides of an ongoing poetic debate on whether poetry *should* be instructive. For example, the plot of Watriquet's "Les trois Chanoinesses de Couloigne," which features the poet himself as a character, revolves expressly around the unresolved question of whether a tale of "sotie" or "sens" is preferable (X, 121:5). But more than this, fabliaux are concerned with whether poetry *can* be instructive.

As I have discussed in Chapter 1, Augustine sees the distracting *fructus* provided by the literal content of poetry as a communicative impediment precluding its pedagogical *usus* and effectively negating any hidden moral lessons it may contain. Debate on the value of secular literature continued throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, often in relation to the instruction of the universities.¹⁴⁰ We can regard the didactic indecisiveness of fabliaux as reflecting this contemporary debate on the merits of poetry, its unresolved conclusion on the subject a means of problematizing the ability of fiction to convey moral instruction; to paraphrase Marshall McLuhan, the medium of the debate is the message.

Such an emphasis would not be unprecedented. Robert Sturges has identified conflicting notions on whether the hidden meaning of signs is absolutely determinable (the dominant assumption of allegorical reading) or indeterminable as the central preoccupation in a number of medieval works including the *Lais* of Marie de France and

¹⁴⁰ A twelfth-century Cistercian manuscript, for example, presents a parable of Virgil in hell urging students to renounce poetry and the study of liberal arts (Ferruolo 67), while Jacques de Vitry, following Augustine's ideas on *spoliation Aegyptiorum* very closely critiques "figmenta poetarum" in the following century (Ferruolo 250-51).

Chrétien's *Conte del Graal* where Perceval is faced with signs that he fails to understand correctly. For Sturges, these works are all about the obstacles and difficulties of semiotic interpretation; specifically, they "thematize indeterminacy, that is, they make it one of their own (determinate) meanings to be communicated to the audience" (34). Thus, while the works discussed by Sturges maintain the frequent indeterminacy of meaning in allegorical signs, they do not extend this finding to their own *verba*, but maintain the ability of the poetic enterprise to communicate a didactic point.

Fabliaux, which Sturges does not mention, also explore the nature of signs in a post-lapsarian world as one of their main concerns, but, like medieval religious drama, many also apply questions of interpretation to their own use of signs. These fabliaux go further to assert that any effort to communicate the problematic character of interpretation through literature is fraught with the same perils of indeterminacy and can be misunderstood. If the message of fabliaux, informed by an originally Augustinian perspective on the worthlessness of literature, is that meaning is difficult or impossible to transmit through poetry, then it would be just as difficult to locate this particular lesson in fabliaux because they too are works of poetry. Given the emphasis of the comic on negation, overturning, contradiction, and irony (for Schenck [*Fabliaux* Chapter 5], one of the defining characteristics of fabliaux), it is perhaps not surprising that the didacticism of the genre should be expressed this way. Paradoxically, then, the better a literary work argues that hidden meaning is inaccessible, the more the argument fades from view and conversely, the more accessible it is, the weaker the point. Yet, once we know what to look for, we can guess at where to look: in places not likely to contain instruction. For

instance, such a lesson is manifest in the very incongruency of fabliaux end morals that have tormented critics, which helps to explain their apparent failure.

Rather than being the symptom of an unintended artistic lapse, when interpretation is itself the issue, an oblique or inappropriate moral becomes evidence that poetry cannot adequately convey didactic content. At work is something similar to what De Looze has identified in the proverbs in Book IV of Juan Manuel's *Conde Lucanor*, which "quite literally *do not* make sense" as "part of a larger hermeneutical challenge" foregrounding the difficulty of constructing meaning ("Nonsensical" 202). Earlier fabliau poets already play with the expectation of finding meaning, creating a discontinuity between words—the verbal expression of the moral—and the actual meaning of the tale to problematize the nature of *verba* and the difficulties of interpretation in a fallen world.

This semiotic basis likewise explains the frequency of tales like "Le Bouchier d'Abeville" (III, 18) "Les deus Chevaus" (V, 50) "Le Plantez" (VII, 76), and "Les trois Meschines" (IV, 32) that suspend moral judgment of what has taken place in the plot and instead direct the audience to decide wrong and right for themselves. In "Les deus Chevaus," a monk and peasant tie the tails of their two decrepit nags together in a pulling contest to determine who will win both animals; on the verge of losing, the monk cuts the rope, and the poet asks the audience to determine if the peasant ought rightfully to have the monk's horse. Certainly, the absence of a moral increases amusement by creating a kind of judicial game that encourages audience participation; yet this is only possible because a gap is also created between what is portrayed in the plot and its moral interpretation. The poem does not or cannot connect the two. Jurgen Beyer's statement

that the concluding “moral actually documents the unfitness of the fabliau for moralization,” aptly encompasses this semiotic point (39).

Furthermore, it is this gap that contributes to the humor of the morals—they are funny because they barely make sense, a trait often used to dismiss their instructional value. But the abyss between meaning and expression is not empty, for the humor of the bizarre moral encompasses the real didactic message of the tale and hints at where else it may be found. If the instruction present in a work of poetry is that poetry cannot be sufficiently instructive, then this message cannot be found in the “explicit statements of *sentence*” analyzed by critics without undercutting itself (Percy, “Sentence” 245): if the point is clear, it becomes untrue. Consequently, as I will demonstrate, fabliau didacticism must be situated in the unexpected places of the text like the humor of the genre; this fact has heretofore been overlooked because of a tendency toward duality, a persistent legacy of Horatian criticism, that assumes didactic content is separate from that which entertains, even in a literary work characterized by both. As Catherine Brown observes, contemporary readers of medieval texts tend to view “narrative pleasure and didactic activity as opponents in a pitched battle,” and feel compelled to choose an obvious victor (8).

For medieval audiences, however, the presence of apparently conflicting motives in the same work was less a call to harmonize opposites than a stimulus for learning and a means of instruction; such, upon closer scrutiny, is what takes place in the fabliau. Lessons of interpretation are also present in the flaws that purportedly mar fabliaux, those that have traditionally supported arguments for the absence of meaningful content in the genre: their incongruous morals (as we have already seen), in their frivolous plots that

defy verisimilitude, in their lack of stylistic adornment, and even in their much maligned obscenity.

Res significandi in Fabliau Plots

Inevitably, any findings on the incommunicability of verbal signs in fabliaux must be grounded in a broader assumption that the interpretation of post-lapsarian signs, and fallen human language in particular, is problematic. Thus, not all of the 127 fabliaux in the *NRCF* focus only on the semiotic shortcomings of their poetic enterprise;¹⁴¹ like Chretien's *Conte del Graal*, 95 tales or three-quarters depict some misinterpretation of signs in a more conventional determinate manner that extends beyond poetic expression to the world at large.¹⁴² This high percentage strongly suggests that the didactic point of the genre is the difficulty of interpreting signs. In fact, several end morals of an apparently practical (and often misogynist) nature like the admonition not to believe one's wife more than one's own eyes at the end of "Le Vilain de Bailleul" (V, 49) or the statement that "fame est fete por decevoir:/Mençonge fet devenir voir,/Et voir fet devenir mençonge" in "Les Perdris" (151-53), are unconcealed statements on the need for careful interpretation in a world where the manipulation of signs is commonplace. So too is the advice of a broader moral like "De folie s'entremet/Qui croit ce que de ses iex voie" ("He

¹⁴¹ In accomplishing my analysis, I do not think it essential or even possible to prove my conclusions applicable to all fabliaux—warnings against homogenizing the genre remain good ones—but to show that an interest in the problems of semiotic interpretation is evident in many works in the corpus. Consistent with the approach promoted by Norris Lacy, I also intend my findings to represent "characteristics, and not... criteria on which we can construct a rigid definition," and so assume the tales present in the *NRCF* to be a fairly representative sample on which to base my study (Reading 30).

¹⁴² For a list of specific tales, see Appendix B. I am including in this count open-ended fabliaux that ask for audience judgment, like "Les trois Meschines," "Le Plantez," and "Le Jugement" (X, 118), as these require the audience to interpret the events of the plot. I am not including several other tales relating the correct interpretation of signs, like "Le Fevre de Creil" and "Connebert" (VIII, 77), in which a husband recognizes his wife's adulterous behavior.

who believes what his eyes see is mad”) in “Le Chevalier à la Robe vermeille” (II, 12:309-10).

The difficulties of arriving at the precise meaning of actions suggested by calls for audience judgment, also at the end of fabliaux, extend to similar “judicial scenes” that are widespread in fabliau plots as well. Encompassing “a verdict from a judge [or] a decision from other characters in the tale,” these have been read as evidence of larger developments in the medieval legal system (Schenck, “Orality” 64), but at their core involve efforts to decipher the signification presented by ambiguous actions or forms of behavior. In “Le Vilain au Buffet,” for example, a nobleman has to interpret the reason why a peasant has struck a member of the court and in “La Coille noire” a clerical court decides not to annul a marriage after discovering the reason behind the mysterious colour of the body part in question. The conundrum that needs to be unravelled in each case involves an initial misjudgement of appearance: the *vilain* is wrongly assumed to have perpetrated violence without cause and the discoloured gonads are presumed to be a sign of impotence, though another explanation is later found. While Brent Pitts identifies the prevalence of truth-seeking or “veritropic discourse” (96) of this sort in fabliaux, it is an important point that attaining the truth is an arduous process in which usually “the answer offered is neither final nor truthful” (97). The final ruling sometimes fails to penetrate appearances and arrive at authoritative truth; judgment is instead based on what affords the judge(s) the most amusement. The husband’s implication that his blackened testicles result from his wife’s poor hygiene is no more valid an interpretation than hers, but is accepted because it makes the judges laugh heartily (108). Literal plots involving judgment thus raise semiotic problems but they do not necessarily resolve them.

Outside of a judicial context, 74 of the 95 tales that emphasize some kind of interpretative puzzle feature *res significandi*—objects, events, physical appearance (including disguise), even sounds—that are at some time hidden or improperly understood by one or more characters in the tale. As Muscatine observes, in at least fifty fabliaux “we are dealing with a literature preoccupied with *things*” that are at the centre of narrative interest (*Old French Fabliaux* 59). In an informal inventory, Marie-Thèrese Lorçin finds that physical objects feature in more than 50% of fabliaux, again evoking the important role of *res* in the tales (“Le statut” 9). Perhaps the most obvious semiotic example of this is the brief “La Crote,” all sixty lines of which depict an interpretative guessing game played between a peasant and his wife to pass the time; she offers him a bit of amorphous matter, “plus grosse d’un pois” (VI, 57:29), which he examines and touches, wrongly assuming that it is first dough, then wax. Only when the peasant tastes the substance on his final guess does he discover it is “merde” (56). It is easy for a squeamish critic to dismiss a tale like this as offensive and devoid of meaning, though it clearly highlights the risks of empirical interpretation in a humorous fashion.

In “La Crote,” the intrinsically indeterminate nature of the *res* that is examined is emphasized, as it is in tales where an action is interpreted such as “Celui qui bota le Pierre” (VI, 63). Here a passing priest admonishes a woman who is kicking a stone not to do so, or she will be “foutré” (24). As her young child looks on, she wilfully continues the action, and the priest accomplishes his threat. When the woman’s husband returns home, he accidentally kicks the same rock, and the child fearfully warns his father to stop or he too will be screwed by the priest, “Sicom il fist ore ma mere” (49). Here, the child uses observation in a fashion akin to how Augustine learned the relationship between

signs and things as a toddler in the *Confessions*, but the former misinterprets the meaning of an action with likely negative results for his mother.¹⁴³ There is no direct intent to deceive through the performance of the action of kicking, but the inherent ambiguity of the action and its result leads the child to assume a non-existent semiotic relationship.

“Celui qui bota” presents a typical example of the visual misapprehension of *res significandi*, by far the most common source of sensory confusion in fabliaux.¹⁴⁴ Other examples include “Estormi” (I, 1) and its variants “Les quatre Prestres” (VIII, 85) and “Les trois Boçus” (V, 47), which relate the failure to distinguish objects by sight; each plot involves the corpses of three different individuals, either priests or hunchbacks, that are assumed by the young man charged with disposing of them to be the same corpse returning multiple times. Frustrated at having to repeat his labour, when the youth encounters a live priest or a hunchback after disposing of the last body, he assaults the fourth individual to forestall yet another iteration, killing him in two of the stories. This confusion is, of course, based on the assumption that all priests or hunchbacks look alike, which destroys the verisimilitude of the tale and its seriousness; yet, its very strangeness suggests metaphorical meaning, one that again relates to the difficulties of empirical interpretation. In rejecting the ability of visually apprehended *res* to communicate their meaning transparently, the genre presents a view of signs that contrasts markedly with that of religious drama, which may speak to changes in medieval views of vision and perception during the thirteenth century. Suzannah Biernoff observes that there was a

¹⁴³ *Confessions* 1.8. In this passage, Augustine is talking about learning names for things, not what actions mean, but the principle of semiotic observation pertains. Arguably, the child of “Celui qui bota” has also learned what “foutre” means by attaching the verbal threat to the priest’s action.

¹⁴⁴ “La Crote” emphasizes tactile interpretation while “Les deus Vilains” (IX, 107) and “Gauteron et Marion” (VIII, 84) depend on misunderstanding the sound of a fart as a mouth blowing on hot soup and an indication of lost virginity respectively.

“shift from symbolism to naturalism during this period” wherein “instead of looking through the visible world towards a higher, invisible reality,” there was a focus on looking at properties of things in the world (40). In the absence of the Platonic transcendent ideal that can be accessed, for example, in Augustine’s mechanism of comprehension, one must rely instead on assessing the seen object itself, which presents a greater possibility of error.

Unlike religious drama, which tends to promote learning by observation as an error-free process, fabliaux thus present visual apprehension as prone to mistakes. Yet, relatively few tales represent visual signs as being naturally ambiguous. Instead, most illustrate obstacles to interpreting objects and actions, such as the obscurity of night. The action of “Estormi” takes place at night, which lends a modicum of believability to the idea of identical corpses. Hindered by darkness, a lover can accidentally put on the pants of a husband (“Les Braies au Cordelier” [III, 17]), one bed can be mistaken for another (“Le Meunier et les deus Clers” [VII, 80]), or buttocks assumed to be a keg (“Le sot Chevalier” [V, 53]). Thus, according to some fabliaux, interpretative difficulties are abetted by a natural impediment to visual acuity.

Following a Robertsonian perspective that seeks a doctrinal lesson in fabliaux, one can connect these interpretative difficulties to a lack of faith on the part of the interpreter, for “[i]mpaired perception can accompany moral deficiency” within an Augustinian system of cognition (Tachau 99): a sinner would not be fully graced with the aid of the *intus magister* while seeking to gain understanding. However, faith clearly does not factor in the secular fabliaux as it does in religious drama, for many of the victims of poor interpretation are guilty of nothing more than gullibility, while the

perpetrators of semiotic manipulation who get away with it commit more serious crimes of adultery and murder.

The most common cause of interpretative problems is therefore intentional behavior by the makers of signs to obscure the meaning behind the appearance of things for their own self-interest; the “repeated acts of deception” that Schenck (*Fabliaux* ix) sees as a defining characteristic of fabliaux can be assimilated to semiotic manipulation. Confusion arises as to which bed is which in “Le Meunier” because one of the visiting clerks purposefully shifts other furniture in the room. A wife is wrongly suspected of adultery because the procuress “Auberée” (I, 4) leaves a man’s *surcot* under her bed as part of a plan to make her available for a would-be lover. A cleric steals a chaplain’s meal and smears some of the grease on the mouth of a crucifix, presenting the result as evidence that Christ has eaten the food (“L’oue au Chapelain” VIII, 86). The deliberate falsification of visually apprehended signs can involve something as basic as a wife’s hiding her lover under an inverted tub (“Le Cuvier” [V, 44]), her creative use of a double who receives a beating in her place (“Les Tresces”), or her elaborate disguise as a male knight to humiliate a cowardly husband (“Berengier au lonc Cul” [IV, 34]).

In each of these cases, the false *res significandi* remain impenetrable due in no small part to the sign maker’s audacious skill. The most masterful manipulators of signs in fabliaux alter appearances to the degree that they can make the most outlandish semiotic relationships seem plausible. Hence, one of the women in “Les trois Dames qui troverent l’anel (II, 11) can disguise herself as her husband’s niece and compel him to give her away in marriage to her lover. Yet, as talented as the sign makers are, their skill

is often proportional to the blindness of the interpreter, like the husband of “Les deus Changeors” who is shown his wife’s naked body by her lover and does not recognize it.

While a great many fabliaux feature the direct manipulation of *res* through various means of obscuring visual assessment, in the majority of cases (56 of the 70 extant tales featuring *res significandi*), misunderstanding is created primarily through a lie that is spoken and not through the inherently confusing nature of appearance. In “Estormi” and its variants, the young man thinks the same corpse has returned because this is what the provider of the bodies says has happened. The wife in “Le Pescheor de Pont seur Saine” (IV, 28) thinks the severed penis her husband shows her is his simply because he says so; she scrutinizes it carefully and realizes what it is —“ele l’a bien regardé...Et connut bien que ce fut vit” (127-29)—but nevertheless seems only to accept it as her husband’s based on his story. Thus, when there are potentially uncertain *res*, their final (and incorrect) interpretation is determined by false *verba*.

Sometimes a visual sign presented is fairly unambiguous and seemingly simple to decipher in the absence of words. When a husband finds another man’s pants in his bedroom in “Les Braies au Cordelier,” or actually sees through the keyhole of his house that his wife is copulating with the local priest in “Le Prestre qui abevete” (VIII, 98), an inference about what these *res* signify should be easy to draw; but once the wife says she has borrowed the pants from a holy friar as a talisman to induce pregnancy or once the priest explains that the keyhole magically alters the perception of what is happening inside, these inventive lies supersede the evidence of the senses. In some cases, the manipulators of signs go so far as to insist that their victims “see for themselves,” “deliberately invoking the ‘real world’ standard of visual confirmation only to employ it

against itself” through the addition of a false verbal interpretation as in “Le Prestre qui abevete” (Kohler 142). As Lacy notes, “[w]hile we might expect to hear characters say ‘I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes,’ such trust in visual perception is overturned in favor of a greater confidence placed in the spoken word,” a confidence that is misplaced given the ease with which words can be used to deceive (*Reading* 91).

Ultimately, then, fabliaux do not present as pessimistic a view of visual signs as they do of verbal ones, for misunderstanding of the former tends to happen only when they are purposely obscured or abetted by lies. *Res*, existing independent of human intention, are neutral and become deceptive when manipulated by a human actor; *verba*, which are inseparable from a speaker, are not only used in conscious lies but are also unreliable as signs in their own right, a point emphasized in an additional eighteen fabliaux that exclusively treat the confusing interpretation of words. Because the meaning of *verba* can be unknown or multiple, it is easily altered. Taking full advantage of a limited vocabulary, the young man in “Cele qui fu foutue et desfoutue” (IV, 30), for instance, tricks a naïve girl into thinking the word “foutre” indicates a form of currency. Elsewhere, puns are misapprehended even in the absence of an intent to deceive: in “Estula” (IV, 38) the title name is misheard as the question “Es tu là?” and in “La Male Honte” (V, 43) the “male,” or bag, of a man named Honte is wrongly understood as an imprecation of shame.

This emphasis on the communicative shortfall of language places fabliaux squarely within the established medieval tradition of human words as flawed and corrupt in a fallen world. As I have discussed, according to Augustine, before the first sin, there

was no need for verbal communication since one soul transmitted meaning directly to another and “did not receive words from the outside” (*DGCM* 2.4.5). With the Fall, man “dried up by his sins, has need of . . . human words,” which can be unfamiliar, polysemous, or falsified, and fabliaux present a reminder of this widespread idea (*DGCM* 2.5.6).

Pearcy, on the other hand, sees a more contemporary connection between the interest of fabliau plots in “exploit[ing]...the ambiguities of verbal signifiers” and the influence of nominalist sign theory, where words have no absolute referents (“Modes” 194). As is the case with vision, within a nominalist perception of *signa*, the absence of transcendent realities that can be consulted to gain understanding leads to a greater possibility of misunderstanding, for one is limited to judging the signs themselves. Percy’s acknowledgment that the genre “has a firm and defensible philosophical basis” in the nominalist-realist debate of the late-thirteenth century ascribes some semiotic meaning to the genre (“Modes” 195), but he denies that fabliau poets express any “theoretical interest in exploring abstract philosophical questions” (“Investigations” 68). Percy’s remark that “in some respects fabliaux do make a partisan comment on some of the central philosophical questions of the time” (“Modes” 195) is grudging at best and makes the expression of such comments less than central to the purpose of fabliaux where “such concerns are deliberately eschewed by an intense and exclusive concentration on mundane social activities” (“Investigations” 68). This assessment, relegating the philosophical or semiotic point of the genre to its underpinnings, is once more governed by the conventional separation of deeper meaning from “narrative surface textures apparently lacking any abstract philosophical dimension” (Percy, “Investigations” 68).

However, as we have seen, the consistent depiction of interpretation and its discontents that permeates the “mundane social activities” represented in fabliau plots suggests this deeper semiotic issue is a significant part of their meaning.

Abysmal Humor and the Instruction of Fabliaux

In his examination of the comic climax in fabliaux, Thomas Cooke claims that the works of the genre “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” (138). In identifying comic intent as the primary trait of fabliaux, Cooke voices a truism with a history that goes back at least to Bédier’s initial definition of the tales as “humbles contes à rire” (383). Studies that seek to determine whether fabliaux are didactic inevitably start with an assumption that they are funny: the task is to determine which are also instructive. Or, as Percy puts it, “If every *essample* is necessarily a *risée*, the reverse would not appear to be true (“Sentence” 232).

We are confronted yet again with a segregation of deeper meaning from the other aspects of fabliaux. In this case the separation involves quarantining the humor of the tales from “thematic meaning, which is often thought of as an abstract statement of the point of a story...found in the moral tag at the end” (Cooke 138). A shift in approach would entail realizing that “the thematic meaning and the comic significance can be related, or even identical” (Cooke 138). I have already discussed how the humor of an incongruous moral exists as an acknowledgment of the inability of words to express meaning, either through the failure of the moral to capture the meaning of the poem or the failure of the poem to adequately represent some moral truth. A similar mechanism is

at work whenever one appreciates the humor of the genre as a whole: laughing at the punchlines of fabliaux involves understanding on some level what they have to say about the fallen nature of signs. From a certain perspective, plots that involve the misunderstanding of signs produce “stories intended primarily to amuse” (Pearcy, “Sentence” 242), and from another angle, the same lack of semiotic comprehension can be didactic, but these are not mutually exclusive ideas. The simplest way to reconcile the apparent clash of viewpoints is to synthesize them: the amusement generated by improper interpretation also contains its didactic message.

The question of what makes something funny has been the object of extensive study among philosophers, psychologists, and anthropologists alike. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine these issues in depth, but three basic theories of humor have been revisited in one form or another since Aristotle’s *Poetics*, pointing to a sense of incongruity, relief, and superiority that underlies what is deemed humorous. All of these help explain why fabliaux are funny and also how they are didactic.

In *Le Rire*, the philosopher Henri Bergson finds the basis for humor in the incongruity of “une certaine *raideur de mécanique* là où l’on voudrait trouver . . . la vivante flexibilité d’une personne,” as in clownish aping (8).¹⁴⁵ R. Howard Bloch, following Freud’s analysis of jokes, speaks similarly of humor as “a diversion, the displacement of an initial topic by a second one, as well as a substitution” (“Fabliaux” 17).¹⁴⁶ As already mentioned, this interruption of conventional expectation is responsible

¹⁴⁵ Slapstick is another example: speaking of fabliaux, Yves Roguet coincidentally describes how they “réduisent souvent . . . les victimes en mécanisant leurs comportements par la répétitivité de la violence” (459).

¹⁴⁶ Findings on the nature of jokes are applicable to fabliaux, which have been denigrated as “no more than extended ‘dirty jokes’” (Muscatine *Old French Fabliaux* 2), or more objectively considered as “extended or narrative jokes” (Cooke 159), sharing the same primary characteristics.

for the humor of a fabliau end moral that does not fit, and it is also at work in fabliau plots. “Le sot Chevalier” elicits laughter because its concluding punchline involves an incongruous act—the accidental spearing of a sleeping guest whose buttocks are mistaken for a keg of wine. It also presents an unexpected conclusion to what is anticipated by the plot. The knights who receive hospitality at the house of “le sot chevalier” fear their host will rape the tallest member of their party and beat the shortest, based on his repetition of the mantra “si foutera le plus lonc/et si batra le cort selonc” (141-42), which is actually the knight’s personal mnemonic for how to perform intercourse. The ending of the tale is unanticipated because although both the shortest and tallest are ultimately injured by their host—the former in a fashion reminiscent of anal rape—the means by which it occurs is unpremeditated and accidental. These cases illustrate that the reversal of expectation that occurs in jokes is not a pleasant and happy surprise, but one that remains somehow disturbing.

Laughter, which can be, but is not always, a physiological reaction to a humorous narrative, is commonly held to express a spontaneous release of tension created by the danger and inappropriateness of what has been narrated. “Le sot Chevalier” is inappropriate because it suggests the socially taboo subject of homosexuality and represents graphic violence. Any laughter that results is thus one of relief at the avoidance of what could have been an intentional act of violence and a real case of sexual violation; the situation is a near-miss made for amusement, which washes away its potential danger. With this alleviation may come an added sense of superiority, a type of *Schadenfreude* felt by those who laugh at the comic misfortune of others: because the audience are not being physically abused, they can express relief through laughter. When

one does not laugh he or she has either identified too closely with the victim of the tale or cannot otherwise dismiss the seriousness of the threat embodied in the narrative.

Based on these theories, a shattering of expectation is operational in all humor no matter what the subject matter of the joke or humorous narrative; that which is funny is always based on a semiotic slippage, a breakdown between expected meaning and received meaning cultivated to effect laughter. Without this discontinuity there would be no surprise punchline. Just as one “gets” a concept in the context of education, “getting” a joke, appreciating its humor, represents a kind of flash illumination, a sudden awareness of this rupture that may not be rationalized or consciously analyzed but is present nonetheless. To be sure, not all jokes contain narratives that also depict misinterpretation, particularly those that simply ridicule stereotypical traits of a specific group such as lawyers or blondes.¹⁴⁷ But because the narrative plots of most fabliaux also represent the gap between signs and their interpretation as their central point, the sense of failed communication is doubled, with the essential structure of the joke recapitulating and reinforcing the literal content.¹⁴⁸ Therefore, getting the humor of fabliaux coincides with grasping their didactic message concerning problems of interpretation on some level: humor and meaning are intertwined. The punchline is equivalent to a kind of *moralitas*. Interestingly, the essential social nature of the joke—“unless it is shared and we ‘get it’, it fails” (Camille, *Image* 43)—is reminiscent of what Augustine describes as the goal of *communitas* created by a shared learning of sacred signs; in this case, the punchline also

¹⁴⁷ Consider, for example, the widely circulated joke where the devil offers an attorney increased income as well as a long and hedonistic life in exchange for the souls of his wife, children, and grandchildren, to which the attorney asks “What’s the catch?” Here, the selfish immorality of lawyers is ridiculed and there is no emphasis on misinterpretation.

¹⁴⁸ Some fabliaux present indeterminacy only in their comic structure and not their literal content, like “Les quatres Sohais saint Martin” (IV, 31), where a husband and wife unexpectedly waste four wishes on inappropriate or vindictive desires.

creates shared knowledge of signs, but one that, removed from a Christian context, reveals them to be faulty.

When laughter occurs within the action of numerous fabliau plots, as characters mock another's misunderstanding, for example, it is likely to prompt the audience to laugh along; like the laugh track of a sitcom, such instances can become cues that "may signal expected interpretations," often pointing "toward deeper implications and epistemological concerns" (Gordon 486, 487). The audible response of laughter can mark the moment of "breaking through the intellectual barrier" . . . when "something is understood," in this case an awareness of the semiotic disturbance highlighted by the humorous (Blyth qtd. in Klein).

While culturally *risqué* subjects like castration, adultery, and casual mass murder ("Estormi") in fabliaux may elicit the laughter of relief following discomfiture, the interpretative indeterminacy that defines the essence of the humorous itself is dangerous enough to prompt this response. As M. Conrad Hyers observes, "in this comic perception of absurdity lies the potential for a deeper level of insight into the element of absurdity in all things, even the most obvious and assured" (*Zen* 94-95). The notion implicit in jokes that "nothing actual is wholly logical, nothing finite infinite," that predictability is an illusion, presents a glimpse over the edge of an epistemological abyss (Bloch, *Scandal* 114). Jokes "expose the inadequacy of realist structurings of experience" (Douglas 108), offering up a conception of signs that smacks of what Percy has labelled the nominalist *ethos* of fabliaux. Faced with the "new, unforeseeable kinds of interpretation" offered by the joke and the prospect of a universe in which "anything is possible" (Douglas 108), one can choose to respond with the pessimism of tragedy or the laughter of comedy.

A world of disrupted, deceptive signs in which one has to “watch out for everything” as in “Le Prestre et le Mouton,” a world in which there are no ideals, no absolutes, and thus no ability to grasp truth through Augustine’s Platonic *formae aeternae*, contains a high potential for a tragic outlook. The failure of interpretation and the collapse of infallible communication brought about by the Fall are losses that could result in utter sadness, but prompt laughter instead. In “De l’essence du rire,” Charles Baudelaire makes an explicit association of laughter with the Fall as a symptom of humankind’s post-lapsarian nature. There were no tears in paradise and hence no laughter either: all laughter springs from a recognition of misery “intimement lié à l’accident d’une chute ancienne,” but is also a way of coping with it (235).¹⁴⁹ So, as Leech observes, “humor fulfills a social function because it allows the audience to laugh at inner fears while reaffirming the accepted order of things”—the world has not been redeemed (111). We can confront the “awful truth” (Morreal 4) about the nature of fallen signs represented in fabliaux because it is contained in a safe, fictionalized form using what Lacy terms “esthetic distance” to mitigate the reality of the threat (“Types” *passim*).

Fabliau poets employ a number of stylistic techniques “to establish and maintain distance between audience and story”—authorial intrusion, absence of geographical and historical details, nameless two-dimensional characters; these not only enable one to laugh freely at the plight of victims of the tales, but also to safely compartmentalize the disturbing universe they present, so one cannot respond with the despair of tragedy

¹⁴⁹ Thomas Cooke holds a very different view of the reversal that takes place in fabliaux and the resulting revelation of the way the world functions, which he associates with a “supremely satisfying... vision of the good” prefiguring eternal reward (168-69). In this, Cooke appears to overlook the fact that most fabliaux end badly for the victim in the narrative, who can be cuckolded, beaten, or castrated. The humor in these cases is of a dark, rather than a joyful one.

(Lacy, “Types” 112).¹⁵⁰ Verisimilitude is altogether lacking in the genre, for instance. One cannot reasonably believe that a body would be mistaken for a cut of pork as in “Aloul” (III, 14), that a priest would dip himself in dye and disguise himself as a life-size crucifix (“Le Prestre teint” [VII, 81]), or that circumstances like these that “strain our credulity beyond the breaking point” were likely ever to have occurred in the Middle Ages (Lacy, *Reading* 101).¹⁵¹

Moreover, the victims who are essential in Schenck’s definition of fabliaux (*Fabliaux* ix) are exaggerated in their ineptitude at negotiating ambiguous signs, which also forestalls audience identification. Readers or auditors of fabliaux would not likely imagine themselves as “Le fol Vilain” (IX, 106) who mistakes his own shadow for a lurking thief, then incinerates a wheat field to flush him out. Nor would they believe themselves capable of being convinced that they are dead, like “Le Vilain de Bailleul (V, 49). Any audience-character affinity that exists lies with those who possess the requisite skill at penetrating obscure signs like the husband of “Le Prestre teint” who recognizes the signs of his wife’s indiscretions, spots the disguised priest and castrates him, or the wife in “La Borgoise d’Orliens” (III, 19) who sees through her husband’s disguise and his plan to entrap her, arranging to have him beaten for his trouble.

Pearcy’s assertion that the enjoyment of fabliaux depends in part on “the emotional pleasures of laughing at one’s fellow victims” therefore needs amending (“Sentence” 232). One can be subject to the same post-lapsarian conditions as the misinterpreters in the genre and still maintain a sense of alterity and superiority, without

¹⁵⁰ For Cooke, Chaucer’s inclusion of the victim “January’s suffering ... at its most severe” in his fabliau analogue “The Merchant’s Tale” is problematic from the standpoint of humor, bespeaking an intention that is not purely comic, but that tends toward tragedy (191).

¹⁵¹ Referencing several outlandish plots, Bloch (*Scandal* 4-6) debunks the numerous critical claims for the fabliau as realistic examples of medieval social history.

fellowship. The laughter of fabliaux is possible because of what Baudelaire terms “croyance à sa propre supériorité” (241), the perception that one would not be victimized by the specific circumstances faced by fabliau characters. This translates to the broader belief that one would be a better interpreter of signs in similar situations like Nietzsche’s Zarathustra who can “laugh because he is high enough to see all” (Bloch, “Fabliaux” 19). It is from this superior position “en situation de hors-jeu et assimilé à un dieu omniscient” that one is able to consider the interpretative conundrums that take place in the plots (Aubailly 115).

This is the godlike perspective held by the many “dramatized observers” in fabliaux, those who view and judge ambiguous situations and are thus surrogates for the fabliau audience itself (Lacy, “Subject to Object” 17). In “La vielle Truande” (IV, 37), for example, the hideous old vagabond of the title represents herself as the would-be lover of a young man she encounters on the road, then as his mother when she wants him to carry her across a watercourse. When he denies both claims, the “hauz hom...de cort” (136) and his retinue who come upon the arguing pair take it upon themselves to decide which of her contradictory and ambivalent *verba* are true; they compel the clerk to accept either that she is his mother and bear her on his back or copulate with her on the spot if she is not. The basis for the judgment is not reasonable, nor does the result represent a proper solution to the ambiguity of the situation, but it washes away the problem of interpretation with “grant risee” (221). A similar response is promoted by the clerical tribunal in “La Coille noire” that fails to come down with a firm ruling on an indecipherable sign: it merely laughs the case out of court.¹⁵² Clearly, while the need for judgment of an indeterminate situation may be serious for the parties involved, the task of

¹⁵² “Lors n’i a celui n’en rie...Et la dame se tint por fole” (108-10)

unveiling meaning is not a matter of grave import, but a game, just as it is for the fabliau audience. This is especially apparent in direct calls for audience judgment on such issues as which woman should pay for a wasted cosmetic (“Les trois Meschines”) or who deserves a found ring (“Le Jugement”). The absence of personal investment in the puzzle at hand enables laughter as a way of handling conditions of indeterminacy.

As Beyer explains, the structure of fabliaux enables one to “laugh about this world without ideals, because otherwise one could only weep” (42). Taken a step further, in the formulation of Mikhail Bakhtin, “cosmic fear,” which certainly includes encountering a world of indeterminate signs, “is defeated by laughter” (335).¹⁵³ The comic dispels despair, for it “presents incongruities as something we can live with, indeed, something in which we can take a certain delight” (Morreal 5). The didacticism of fabliaux thus broaches the prevalence of duplicitous signs in a fallen world but suggests a response: it both forewarns and forearms; this is the lesson embedded in the humor of the genre, hidden “derrière le rire” (Bégin 20).

Again, because the didacticism of signs present in fabliaux is of an unusual sort, not conventionally moral and not openly expressed but embedded in its humor and absorbed almost osmotically, it is easily overlooked. Thus, Thomas Cooke can see the laughter of fable as “an ulterior laughter, laughter with a purpose” vis-à-vis its declared moral, but in the absence of explicit *moralitas* readily declares that the “fabliaux share none of these characteristics with the fables” (111). So too, Clarissa Bégin can observe that the aim of fabliaux is “d’enseigner par le rire” (27) but miss the broader semiotic point in looking too closely at the literal content. Perhaps a useful parallel for

¹⁵³ Bakhtin also mentions the particular power of the scatological, something certainly not in short supply among fabliaux, in “transforming fear into laughter” (335).

understanding the instructive value of the genre involves envisioning fabliaux as the literary equivalent of the wise fool whose absurd antics and seemingly irrational remarks paradoxically contain deeper meaning. A still better analogue may be that of the Rinzai (“Sudden Enlightenment”) school of Zen Buddhism, which offers an important parallel for philosophical didacticism in the absence of explicit instruction.

Rinzai Zen eschews rational teaching as much as it rejects the validity of all dualities—between sacred and profane, between serious and comic, and presumably between entertainment and edification. Its preferred methods of instruction involve the use of *koans* (puzzling paradoxical statements or questions like Hakuin’s famous “What sound does one clapping hand make?”), bizarre and apparently irrational sayings or actions on the part of a master, and irreverent vignettes. In a simple sense, all of these approaches to teaching deflect attempts to rationalize instruction and suggest that one cannot have higher meaning explained and expect to understand it; one must “get it” her or himself. The possibility exists too that one simply will fail in this. The learner likewise cannot contemplate meaning and expect to uncover it just as one cannot ride a bicycle correctly while thinking about how to do it: one just does what comes naturally. In trying to analyze, one “seeks and seeks, but cannot find. One then gives up, and the answer comes by itself,” often by virtue of the joke (Hyers, *Zen* 161).

This surrender to gain understanding is supposed to happen in a particular Zen vignette that recalls fabliaux in its irreverence and scatology. A master asks a student “‘Where is the Buddha now?’ The anticipated answer would be, ‘The Buddha is in Nirvaana.’ The answer given, however, is, ‘The Buddha is taking a shit!’” (Hyers, “Humor” 271). This joke teaches that there is no dichotomy between the reverential and

the everyday, but it does not say so outright. To grasp its meaning, the student who hears the vignette has to experience a moment of *satori*, “the sudden and intuitive way of seeing into anything” that frequently arrives with a laugh (Watts 161). Thus, in the concise phrasing of humorist Allen Klein, “[w]hether it be a Zen koan, one of those questions which the rational mind cannot solve, or, a captivating Zen story, when we laugh at these, we go from a chuckle (“ha-ha”) to comprehension (“ah-ha!”).¹⁵⁴

Obviously, medieval poets and their audiences in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century France were not Buddhists, but the pedagogical process that functions in fabliaux is similar enough to what takes place in Rinzai Zen to make the comparison a fruitful one.¹⁵⁵ Audiences for fabliaux are not necessarily seeking enlightenment, but do end up being illuminated concerning semiotic instability and the best ways to handle it, both lessons learned by inference through humor. The authors of the genre choose not to declare their didacticism but use this unconventional approach “to teach what cannot be taught in words” because it is the best way to communicate the difficulty of communicating using fallen signs (Hyers, *Zen* 35). Having chosen humor as their expressive mode, fabliau poets are bound not to explain their lessons which would be the equivalent of ruining the joke.

¹⁵⁴ Klein also quotes the Chinese Zen master Hsüeh-T'ou whose maxim “When one has understanding, one should laugh; One should not weep” sounds a lot like Jurgen Beyer’s similar observation concerning fabliaux.

¹⁵⁵ De Looze (*Manuscript Diversity* 216) discusses a similar parallel involving the proverbs in *Conde Lucanor*, which he calls “the distant fourteenth-century Spanish relatives to the Zen conundrums that push the listener to meditation precisely because of the way they contradict both the listener’s expectations and themselves.”

Fabliau Learning and the Artes Memoriae

As the didacticism of fabliaux is inextricably tied to its joke structure, it should not be surprising that the same formal qualities contributing to the humor of the genre are also those that enhance its instruction. I have already noted how the sketchy and unrealistic portrayal of characters in fabliaux precludes emotional attachment and enables the laughter of awareness. Stock types such as the adulterous wife, gullible husband, lecherous priest, and foolish peasant verge on being allegorical representations: they are instruments for a purpose—the joke and its message—not realistic portrayals.

Along with stock characterization, fabliaux offer an economical style, simple linear plots limited to “the narration of a single episode and its immediate results” (*The French Fabliaux* vi), and general brevity of form. As Ocaña observes, brevity is “a stylistic desideratum as much as a formal and morphological characteristic of the genre” (190). Shorter fabliaux like “Le Pliçon” and “Gauteron et Marion” are mere vignettes, crystallized to an occasion of interpretative confusion, often the crisis moment when a husband returns home while his wife and her lover are engaged in adulterous behavior. Even longer or more convoluted fabliaux of 1000 lines or so like “Le Prestre comporté” (IX, 102) and “Aloul” (III, 14) deal with the confusions arising from a single action (trying to dispose of a dead priest and discovering a hidden lover respectively) during only one night.

This spare narrative style has led to a certain amount of critical condescension toward fabliau poets as lacking “toute prétention littéraire” (Bédier 341) or as “modest fellows conscious of their lack of literary graces” (Johnston and Owen xi), based on the recurring notion that complex structure is a sign of greater sophistication and literary skill

rather than a conscious stylistic decision. From a more neutral, non-judgmental perspective, brevity is a structural requirement of the joke, for “the jokester cannot allow his audience time to realize what is going to happen,” a consideration that is doubly critical in fabliaux where didactic meaning leans heavily on the revelatory punchline (Cooke 159). Yet, the spare narrative style that contributes to the efficacy of humor is also conducive to the more general requirements of instruction, as in didactic exempla. When John Jaunzems describes “the author’s deliberate avoidance of ornament” and “plainness of style that serves its purposes as a didactic instrument” in the “Seven Sages” tradition of wisdom literature, one can easily assume that he is describing fabliaux (58).¹⁵⁶ Given the inescapable communicative difficulties of fallen *verba* in literary genres that, unlike drama, cannot fall back on visible *res*, omitting anything that distracts from or disguises the central point of the plot is an instructional consideration, as is the need to hold the attention of an audience with a relatively short narrative. As the author of the sixty-line “La Crote” observes, “li fablel cort et petit/Anuient mains que li trop lonc” (4-5). Again, an apparent deficiency in skill becomes evidence of a conscious purpose, one that relies heavily on the didactic techniques of the *artes memoriae*.

Using evidence from *chansons de geste*, Paula Leverage has argued that “jongleurs traditionally perceived as uneducated, itinerant performers, were acquainted with at least the imagery and metaphors of medieval memory theory” (63). It is likely that the tenets of mnemonic imagery were commonplace enough so that any poet with a rudimentary education would have been familiar with it, yet the number of critical studies

¹⁵⁶ The exempla do differ from fabliaux in being part of larger collections, in prose, and treat Christian morality rather than practical problems of interpretation. Schenck notes that fabliaux are also different in being even longer than the “eight to twenty lines” that characterize the typical exemplum (*Fabliaux* 24). Both remain “short forms,” however, and share similar structural elements.

attributing clerical authorship to fabliaux suggest that their creators had more than a passing knowledge of its use. Percy echoes the views of Bédier, Nykrog, and Muscatine among others when he asserts that many fabliau poets “belonged to that class of *clerici vagantes* who, in however desultory a way, had spent some time at a university and had acquired some familiarity with the main issues of logic, psychology, and the other disciplines of the conventional undergraduate curriculum,” (“Obscene” 169).¹⁵⁷ It is an intriguing fact that fabliaux flourished in Northern France, close to the University of Paris, during the rise of the university in the thirteenth century. It is not unlikely that its students would have circulated in the area, composing tales in a similar vein as the *carmina burana*. If the creators of fabliaux possessed a university background, memory technique would have been a fundamental part of their education, so it is not surprising to find it in the genre.

The brevity and economy promoted by fabliaux, for example, are an essential part of the mnemonic art, serving as an *aide mémoire* in the crucial last stage of learning: retention of the lesson. As Hugh of St. Victor observes, “the memory rejoices in shortness (‘*memoria brevitatem gaudet*’),” for it is easier to recall that which is uncomplicated (Carruthers, *Memory* 79). The advice of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* to imagine backgrounds for memory images “in a deserted [rather] than in a populous region, because the crowding and passing to and fro of people confuse and weaken the impress of the images” speaks to how an absence of complexity aids in memorization (III, 19.31). If the structural and stylistic simplicity of fabliaux reflects one aspect of

¹⁵⁷ The classic study is Stephen Wailes’ “*Vagantes* and the Fabliaux” in Cooke and Honeycutt’s collection of articles. Bédier confidently asserts that “Nous tenons pour assuré qu’un grand nombre de fabliaux ont pour auteurs des clercs errants” (389). Nykrog speaks of the writers’ “carefree days in and around the schools” (64) and in *The Old French Fabliaux* Muscatine dedicates a large portion of his second chapter to the subject of clerical authorship.

medieval *artes memoriae*, the emphasis of the genre on settings that are “spare if not bare” does so as well (Muscatine, *Old French Fabliaux* 62).

To create the clean, manageable memory spaces against which to situate mental images, the *Ad Herennium* advocates envisioning not just uncluttered open areas, but small, limited sites like “a house, an intercolumnar space, a recess, an arch, or the like” (III, 17.29) which extends to “a bedroom, a monastic cell, a closet” in other memory manuals (Carruthers, *Memory* 197). In sixty-nine of the ninety-five fabliaux (nearly three-quarters) that feature interpretation as their central point, the creation of the main semiotic problem and its results occur in either an unpopulated outdoor space or a small enclosed one (see Appendix B). In this count I am including only interpretative situations where the main characters are depicted alone within a deserted or enclosed milieu and where we get a definitive sense of place, not just where the action incidentally takes place. “La Male Honte” is therefore excluded because verbal misunderstanding takes place among a crowd at court, as is “L’Esquirielle” (VI, 58), where manipulation of language takes place between the main characters in some unspecified area in a house or garden. A tale like “Le Cuvier” is included, on the other hand, because deception is perpetrated by hiding the lover under a tub in the main room of the house, and the action centres on getting first the husband, then the lover out of the room. Likewise, in “Le prestre qui ot Mere a Force,” one misunderstanding takes place at episcopal court, a crowded public space, but the culmination of the deceptions in the tale—a priest’s offering to take back his own mother, whom he passes off as a stranger, in exchange for money—occurs on an empty road where the only apparent actors are the three characters involved in the situation.

Although Marie-Thérèse Lorçin has observed that very few fabliaux are set exclusively outdoors (a half dozen by her count), among our subset of 95 tales, problems of interpretation occur *al fresco* in fifteen, and consistent with the advice of the *Ad Herennium*, they tend to happen in unpopulated places, mainly deserted roads or open fields.¹⁵⁸ For Lorçin, these settings (and a centripetal movement toward “l’abri de la maison”) suggest the dangers of travel in the thirteenth century (*Façons* 20). Vacant thoroughfares are places fraught with danger, from the con game of “Les trois Aveugles de Compiègne” where a clerk tricks three blind travelers by pretending to hand them alms, to the attempted roadside robbery of “Le Prestre et les deus Ribaus (V, 45). But this is not always the case. In “La Sorisete des Estopes,” there is no threat: a mouse mistaken by a naïve husband for his wife’s private parts simply gets lost in the brush at the side of a country road. And, after the wife of “Le Vilain Mire” convinces three messengers in search of a doctor that her husband is a physician who must be beaten before he admits his vocation, they first find him alone in his own farm field and pummel him there (II, 13).

What all these outdoor settings do have in common is the impression of large, empty space they create, much like the ideal mnemonic background described in the *Ad Herennium*, against which appear only the characters involved in the situation of semiotic confusion. If there are other workers in the field or other travelers on the road, we get no real sense that they are there. Description of the outdoor setting is spare but emphasizes the notion of solitariness in vacant space. In “Berangier au lonc Cul” the feckless husband creates the false signs of battle by beating his own shield in a “bois mout grant et

¹⁵⁸ Lorçin counts only those tales that have “*pour seul cadre* (my emphasis) *la forêt, la mer, les grands chemins*” (*Façons* 17).

mout plénier” (90) The robbers of “Le Prestre et les deus Ribaus” meet on a “chemin grant et plénier” (29) while the handsome youth subjected to the lies of “La vielle Truande” meets her as he “chevauchoit tout une lande” (33). In “Les trois Aveugles,” we are told that

Troi avule un chemin aloient.

Entr’aus trois un garchon n’avoient

Ki les menast ne condesist,

Ne le chemin lor apresist (12-16)

[Three blind men were going along the road.

Among the three there was no boy

To lead them, guide them

Or show them the way]

When a “clerc” and his servant encounter the sightless travelers, they are the only two parties on an apparently desolate stretch of road. This places the situation of semiotic confusion and its participants at the centre of interest without the distraction of a busy background or additional actors.

Should the action of fabliaux occur indoors, as it more frequently does, we continue to get a distinct sense of background space, but one that is more clearly delimited and conspicuous despite its spare details for its direct significance to the plot. In the economy of fabliaux, one often gets the impression that the action takes place in a house comprised of a single small multi-purpose room where characters enter and depart, eat, greet visitors, and make love. In the absence of a detailed interior geography, the title character of “Le Vilain Mire” appears to beat his wife in the main room of his house,

from whence he departs for the fields; his lamenting wife later receives messengers in the same room, provides them with food, and invents a lie about her husband there as well.

In a tale like “Le Cuvier,” this compressed sense of space is even more important to the narrative events. While a woman and her lover are preparing to bathe, her merchant husband returns home unexpectedly with business colleagues compelling the wife to conceal her lover beneath the overturned tub. Entering the same room, her husband sees the tub, tosses a tablecloth over it, and sits down with his associates, waiting to be served a meal. There may be other areas in the house, but audience attention is riveted on this one room, which is not described in any detail, and more immediately on the space surrounding the single prop of the “cuvier.” Numerous fabliaux make use of similarly compact spaces in which lovers are concealed “dans un solier, un tonneau de plume, un lardier, une cuve ou un coffre” (Brusegan 57). The sense of confined area is crucial to the tension of the plot and “c’est l’élément clôture ... qui a les conséquences narratives les plus importantes” (Brusegan 57).

For Rosanna Brusegan, the interest of fabliau poets on indoor space reveals “une attention particulière et originale pour la vie privée” and the movement from exterior to interior serves as a metaphor for illicit sexual activity (62). Though this may be true, a new focus on private affairs does not explain why intimate interior venues and the bedroom in particular are the loci of semiotic manipulation and confusion. A wife can hide a lover from her husband in her private bedroom (“La Saineresse” [IV, 36]) and even in the bed itself (“Le Pliçon,” “Aloul”), or one bed can be confused for another (“Gombert et les deus Clercs”). Given the context of deception tied to the bed(room) and small, circumscribed space in general, it is possible that directing audience attention to

such an intimate and sexualized setting contributes to the mnemonics of the genre. More often than not, the space of the bedroom tends to be sparsely described as the attention of the reader or audience is confined entirely to the bed and a small group of characters in or around it. This may recall an example from the *Ad Herennium* of an individual in bed with another standing at his bedside as an image conducive to memory (III, 20.33).¹⁵⁹ When fabliaux restrict the gaze of their audience to a narrow enclosed space in a like manner, the confusion of signs that takes place there is readily visualized and accordingly remembered.

This intensely focused field of vision created by fabliau settings is perhaps best illustrated by “Le Prestre qui abevete.” Here, the visual and verbal deception upon which the plot revolves is limited to what can be seen through a keyhole. Though a peasant and his wife are eating supper in their home, an itinerant priest shouts that he sees the couple engaged in sexual intercourse when he peeks through the keyhole. The peasant denies it but is encouraged to go outside and see for himself. The priest enters the house and actually copulates with the wife, while the peasant peers through the keyhole and sees that what the priest had said was true. Again, this vaguely described small space, its extent circumscribed by the device of the keyhole, is the locus of all narrative action.

The keyhole-width gaze of “Le Prestre qui abevete” exemplifies Paul Theiner’s observation regarding “La Borgoise d’Orliens” that “the actual setting ... is never at any time larger than a space that could be covered by a spotlight” (128). Theiner means to evoke the theatrical associations of the genre, a connection first made by Edmond Faral,

¹⁵⁹ The exact position of the figures “grouped against a plain background in an active scene” isn’t critical in the fabliaux as it is in most locational mnemonic techniques, as the images do not act as cues for other material to be remembered in order, but are to be remembered in their own right (Carruthers *Memory* 133)

who posited the origins of fabliaux in Roman comedy.¹⁶⁰ Faral's claim neglects the possibility of independent thematic similarities and has since been discredited by Nykrog (*Fabliaux I-III*) and others, but the dramatic character of fabliaux remains apparent. Grace Frank surmises that a trouvère accustomed to reciting fabliaux could have "decided to turn his narrative into dialogue and add thereto impersonation, mimetic action, a more pretentious script, and some *mise en scène*," changing recitation into fuller performance (215) as often happened with twelfth-century romance.¹⁶¹ Fabliaux that contain "dramatized observers"—audiences of some kind looking on the action of the plot—whether a tribunal, members of an aristocratic court, a group of diners at a feast, a sexual voyeur, or a peeper like the priest in "Le Prestre qui abevete," hint at the theatrical potential of the genre (Lacy, "Subject to Object" 17).

I have previously noted in my discussion of sacred drama how the visual *res* of the stage—its use of sets, scenes, props, and costumes—resemble the mnemonic art of images in places, sharing its ability to install information in memory and subsequently recall it. If fabliaux were indeed enacted on occasion, their reliance on *res* would render their content visually memorable in much the same way and amplify their ability to convey meaning beyond a reliance on fallen *verba*. If we admit that most of the time fabliaux were only recited or read and did not make direct use of visible signs, the authors of the genre nevertheless capitalize on the didactic advantages of *res* by depicting a limited group of characters in settings that can be easily taken in by the mind's eye. These scenes appear designed to invite mental visualization, which is the next best thing to physical sight.

¹⁶⁰ See "Le Fabliau latin au moyen âge," *Romania* 50 (1924): 321-85.

¹⁶¹ In *Orality and Performance in Early French Romance (passim)*, Evelyn Vitz discusses how the romances of Chrétien de Troyes in particular were readily subject to dramatized performance.

Of course, within the *ars memoriae*, the ideal memory image is not just any visual scene against a clear background, but “something exceptionally base, dishonourable, extraordinary, great, unbelievable, or laughable that we are likely to remember a long time” (*Ad Herennium* III, 27.35). Certainly, fabliau images fit the bill in their treatment of the low (the manure-hauling and dung-tasting peasants of “Le Vilain Asnier” [VIII, 92] and “La Crote” respectively), the incredible (lovers hiding in the guise of life-size crucifixes in “Le Priestre teint” and “Le Prestre crucefié”), and, of course, the humorous, which Cooke deems “the most memorable aspect of the story” (138). The didacticism of signs in fabliaux may be bound to its humor, but the laughable nature of the genre also aids significantly in retaining what is taught. A common denominator in all of these examples of the ideal mnemonic image is the graphic nature of description that also happens to be a “determining trait of fabliau style” like its spare settings (Muscatine, *Old French Fabliaux* 59). Sacred drama creates a lasting visual impression through colourful costuming, prosthetics like long beards or masks, and props like staves or tablets. In fabliaux, vividness is created through scenes that are either graphically violent or graphically sexual, evoking the two most common categories of effective mnemonic imagery promoted by the *artes memoriae*.

As we have seen in discussing the didacticism of the Middle English Passion plays, shocking violent imagery is an important tool to create a lasting mental impression. The *Ad Herennium* recommends imagining a certain Domitius being lashed as one of its memory images (III, 21.34). Thomas Bradwardine’s thirteenth-century mnemonic for the zodiac includes the image of a ram kicking a bull and “causing a copious infusion of blood,” a lion attacking a virgin, and a woman giving birth to twins “from her uterus as

though ripped open from the breast” (Carruthers, *Memory* 283). There is no shortage of similarly violent scenes in fabliaux. Using the *NRCF*, Yves Roguet determines that there is “un protagoniste tué dans 4% des textes, frappé dans 37%” (457). By my count, threats or scenes of violence feature in approximately 40% of the corpus, and in 38 of the 95 tales that treat interpretation (see Appendix B).

Typical of earlier fabliau criticism, Johnston and Owen see the prevalence of such violence in the genre as offering socio-historical insights, in this case into “the rather cruel streak in the medieval character” (ix). According to Yves Roguet, the violence of fabliaux is part of its humor, for dehumanizing the victim of physical abuse, “en la réduisant à un corps, un animal, ou une chose” disallows close identification and permits laughter at that which is disturbing but other (458). While violence in fabliaux certainly contributes to a morbid sense of humor, its use in the genre also appears calculated for mnemonic effect. In “La Dame escoliee,” one of the most widely represented fabliaux and one of the most violent, a lord decides to teach his wife a lesson of obedience by having his dog and horse decapitated, his cook mutilated, and his wife herself beaten so badly with a spiked club that she was “carried to bed unconscious and nearly dead, where she lay for three whole months” (VIII, 83.369-71). When his visiting mother-in-law evinces wilfulness, she is held down and undergoes a mock castration, during which the lord’s retainer slices “a half foot into her thigh” with a razor (481-82). The experience of violence is meant to be a lesson remembered by the women of the tale and visualizing it makes the point that men should “chastise their wicked wives” (566-67) memorable to the fabliau audience.

The example of “La Dame escoliee” shows that while violence can be mnemonic in the genre, unlike traditional memory images that refer to specific ideas external to themselves, violent fabliau imagery only renders memorable the narrative context in which it appears. Since acts of violence in those fabliaux that deal with signification are situated in close narrative proximity to scenes involving problems of interpretation, to remember them is to remember the fallen nature of signs, which is the didactic point; violence is generally the direct result of manipulated signs, such as an undeserved beating due to mistaken identity or justified abuse as punishment when semiotic deception is uncovered.¹⁶² In “Estormi,” a married woman deceives three priests into coming to her house with the promise of sex for money; the husband kills them one after the next by striking them so hard on the skull that their “blood and brains flow out” in gruesome fashion (185). He then tricks his nephew Estormi into disposing of all three bodies individually, pretending that they are all the same corpse returning again and again through supernatural means. When the young man encounters an innocent fourth priest on the road, he kills that cleric too by bludgeoning his brains out. The first act of graphic violence, a triple homicide, occurs after the priests are lured by a false story, and Estormi’s last murder is the result of mistaken identity abetted by his uncle’s fabrication and the obscurity of early morning.

Like violence, the use of sexual imagery as a mnemonic device also has a long history.¹⁶³ Clerical authors since Augustine have visualized the female body as a means

¹⁶² “Le Provost a l’Aumuche” (4, 24) which is not included in my count of tales relating to misrepresented signs, is a case where a character attempts to disguise an object (hiding stolen lard under his hat) but is revealed by a sign (grease running down his forehead). In this case, the tale ends with a vicious beating that is punishment for merely attempting to manipulate *res*.

¹⁶³ Even today, according to <http://www.everything2.org>, an online, user-compiled repository for pop cultural knowledge, students in the sciences and medicine continue to promote obscene imagery as the means of recalling abstruse knowledge. Thus, a biology student remembers the taxonomical hierarchy

of stimulating memory. Though he expresses some anxiety over its eroticism, Augustine comments on the image of the Church as a beautiful woman for its didactic virtues originating with the pleasure it inspires in the (male) reader (*De doctrina* 2.6.7). Albertus Magnus's discussion of the Book of Isaiah over eight centuries later pauses on the phrase "revela crura" ("with revealed thigh") and invents a mnemonic connection with the "custom of prostitutes to reveal their legs in order to incite desire" (qtd. in Carruthers, *Memory* 142). As Carruthers also notes, Peter of Ravenna admits in the fifteenth-century *Foenix* "that he marked his memory places with images of seductive women, for 'these greatly stimulate my memory'" and he was not atypical in doing so (*Craft* 306 n.109).

Perhaps the most widespread and systematic medieval use of sexual mnemonics occurs in twelfth-century grammatical manuals and thirteenth-century marginal illustrations. Latin grammars capitalize on the sexual innuendo present in technical terms like "copula," "supine," and "conjunction" to develop fuller visual images that help recollect them. One grammar handbook again evokes the fallen woman: "Femina lasciva retro cadit abseque ruina,/Lapsa gerundiva recipit prebetque supine"(Ziolkowski 1), while Alain de Lille's *Complaint of Nature* speaks of how "Venus should put that organ characterized by the signs of the masculine sex in the seat of the adjective" (Prose V, 96-98) and uses homosexuality, transsexuality, and adultery as metaphors for the corruption of grammatical laws (Metre I). Ziolkowski also discusses the use of sexual puns for

(kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, species) through the mnemonic "kinky people can often find good sex," an engineer recalls the colours of resistor wires (black, brown, red, orange, etc.) with "bad boys rape our young girls, but Violet gives willingly; get some," and, in a construction that recalls twelfth-century grammatical manuals, a medical intern recollects the branches of the external carotid artery (ascending pharyngeal, superior thyroid, lingual, facial, and so on) with "as she lay flat, Oscar's penis squirted madly."

grammatical terms by the *vagantes*, suggesting that fabliau poets from the similar circles were likely familiar with them (62-66).

But the use of sexual mnemonics that best parallels fabliau imagery in its graphic nature appears in the explosion of obscene marginalia that also peaked during the thirteenth century. Gothic manuscripts containing secular and sacred texts alike are filled with “obscene” illustrations of copulating couples, nuns observing male genitalia, and, in the realm of scatology, men defecating in front of women (Randall, *Images* figs. 405, 525, and 530). Like fabliaux, marginalia were long deemed unworthy of scholarly consideration for their apparent frivolity and for their frequent obscenity. When Lilian Randall assumed the serious study of these images in the late 1950s, she promoted the idea that they were diverting “visual manifestations of themes popularized through fabliaux and exempla,” though she sees both of these genres as equivalent in their shared concern with moral indoctrination (*Images* 8).¹⁶⁴ More recently, Michael Camille has promoted a complex understanding of marginalia as reflecting new medieval thinking on the role of images vis-à-vis words, but reinforces the point that they represent “the visualization of proverbial experience” (“Labouring” 436). Since many fabliaux are also about problems of language, Camille’s view of marginalia offers an excellent parallel for how the former use obscenity to teach about the problems of poetic meaning, as I will later discuss. However, the basic notion that vivid marginalia, including *obscaena*, can

¹⁶⁴ Randall’s “Exempla as a Source of Gothic Marginal Illumination,” *Art Bulletin* 39:2 (June 1957): 97-107, provides a detailed analysis of specific exempla themes in marginalia.

grab a reader's attention through a visual image that recapitulates a lesson presents a mnemonic parallel for the obscene imagery of fabliaux.¹⁶⁵

Among the 95 fabliaux in the *NRCF* that deal with interpretation, 60 or roughly two-thirds contain scenes that are either suggestively erotic, explicitly sexual, or scatological. Those of a sexual nature range from nudity ("Les deus Changeors" 92-99) or a couple sporting in bed ("Le Chevalier a la Robe vermeille" 63-79) to explicit descriptions of genitalia and the mechanics of sex ("Li pautoniers, qui to gros vit,/La fot mout viguerosemant" ["Le Maignien qui foti la Dame" VI, 73.73-75]). Scatological imagery, rarer in the corpus, ranges in extremity from explosive defecation ("Jouglet" [II, 10]) to kissing of the anus ("Berengier"). Like the placement of violent scenes, descriptions of sex in this subset of tales always occur either directly before a manipulation of signs needed to disguise illicit relations or as a direct result of semiotic manipulation (lies, hiding, disguise) that subsequently allows sex to take place. Scatological imagery tends to represent either mistaken signs, like a fart in the darkness confused for someone blowing on hot soup ("Les deus Vilains" [IX, 107]), or a punishment for lies and trickery as in "Jouglet" or "Berengier." As in the case of violent imagery, obscenity accompanies the theme of problematic interpretation, drawing a mnemonic association between image and context.¹⁶⁶

If the placement of obscene imagery is not enough to demonstrate its contribution to the didacticism of many fabliaux, the strongly visual aspect of sex and scatology in the

¹⁶⁵ In "Visualization and Memory: The Illustration of Troubadour Lyric in a Thirteenth-Century Manuscript," Sylvie Huot discusses how the illustrations of Pierpont Morgan M. 819, a collection of troubadour poems, recapitulates conventions of the *artes memoriae*.

¹⁶⁶ Both kinds of imagery are conflated in about twenty fabliaux. "La Saineresse," for example, where a wife describes her sexual liaison as violent medical treatment: "Granz cops me feroit et sovent,/Morte fusse mo nescient" (IV, 36:78-79.)

genre should. When a fabliau poet makes use of “scènes grivoises ou . . . mots grossiers,” Nyrkog observes that “il a tendance à le faire en y insistant très fortement, à l’aide de détails souvent orduriers, ou de implémentes propres à renforcer l’impression qu’il fera sur le lecteur” (*Fabliaux* 213). This special tendency to provide “une description détaillé” (Nyrokog, *Fabliaux* 212) such as a penis “plus long d’un coutre” (Nyrokog, *Fabliaux* 211), makes an image more obscene and thus more visually memorable. Adherence to the techniques of the *artes memoriae* also offers an explanation other than pornographic or prurient interest for the large number of fabliau settings where “one character is watching another, or two others, who are most often engaged in, or preparing to engage in, sexual activity” (Lacy, “Subject to Object” 17). Viewed from the new perspective of mnemonics, such scenes of rampant voyeurism are invitations for the audience to look on sexual imagery (often against the spare background of the bedroom) and simultaneously internalize the surrounding context. Seeing sex with the mind’s eye may be titillating but “titillation... is a necessary component of the art of memory” (Carruthers, *Memory* 137).

Although sex or violence feature in more than three-quarters of the 95 fabliaux with a focus on signs (23 tales contain both), a similar ratio occurs in the remaining tales in the *NRCF*, suggesting that mnemonics are not limited to lessons of interpretation. In some cases, like “Le Vallet aus douze Fames,” sex and violence may support a lesson unrelated to signs. In this tale, a young man brags he should have multiple wives and is sexually exhausted after trying just one. At the end of the tale, a male wolf that has been killing livestock is caught in a trap and his captors debate whether he should be skinned, drowned, starved, swung by a chain, or burned to ashes (103-111). The young man suggests the wolf should be given a wife as a punishment, which is what happens at the

conclusion. Sex and violence are used in tandem to enforce the point that “no one should boast/Of anything he cannot accomplish” (157-58).

Yet, because the morals of “Le Vallet” and other tales often seem inauthentic, it is also possible to claim that fabliau poets use mnemonic imagery only to help audiences remember their jokes, not any inherent meaning in their texts. Neither of these possibilities minimizes the didactic contribution of violence or obscenity in fabliaux that promote the fallen nature of signs, however, for whenever either occurs in conjunction with interpretative situations it cannot fail to make these more memorable. Furthermore, since the didacticism of fabliaux in these cases remains fixed to their humor, it is impossible to separate a desire to promote the joke from a desire to highlight a situation of semiotic confusion.

Fabliau Style and the Rejection of Courtliness

Speaking of the memorable as it pertains to amusing narratives, Thomas Cooke discerns two types of remembrance desired by authors. The first “allows us to recall, with varying degrees of skill and accuracy, a story we have read or heard, taking as our goal the recreation of that story in sequence, as process” (19). For Cooke, “[n]o medieval storyteller who thought of himself as an artist would have been content to have his tale remembered in only that way. An itinerant tavern minstrel maybe, but not a professional” (19). The second sort of remembrance sought is memory of the deeper meaning or message present in the narrative. Based on their thematic interest in signs and their handling of structural elements that contribute to didacticism, many fabliau poets appear to have an abiding interest in promoting more than the remembrance of a literal narrative.

It is thus not surprising that the brevity and obscurity in the genre reflect more than just memorial technique: these attributes also reinforce the notion of *verba* as fallen.

First, consistent with this perception of verbal signs, the economy of expression in fabliaux and their absence of stylistic adornment represent a rejection of rhetoric, and therefore of the literary genres like courtly romance that make use of artful language, on the grounds that these amplify the deception inherent in words. Although *artes poeticae* like the *Poetria Nova* of Geoffrey of Vinsauf describe the mastery of rhetorical tropes as an essential part of poetic composition, heavy use of rhetoric was also criticized as exploiting the duplicitous nature of fallen language. In the *Didascalion*, Hugh of St. Victor disapproves of those poets who enjoy “taking some small matter and dragging it out through long verbal detours, obscuring a simple meaning in confused discourses” (qtd. in Sturges 17). Making continued use of sexual imagery, Alain de Lille’s personified Nature explains the confused understanding of a homosexual relationship between Zeus and Ganymede as the result of rhetorico-poetic art that has “distorted the ultimate categories of love for purposes of literature” (Prose IV, 235-36). Thus, in enlisting Venus as her helper, Nature forbids the “metonymic uses of the rhetoricians...lest if, in the pursuit of too strained a metaphor, she should change the predicate from its protesting subject into something wholly foreign, cleverness would be too far converted into a blemish, refinement into grossness, fancy into a fault, ornament into a gaudy show” (Prose V, 174-85). Alain’s complex venereal metaphor raises a fear of the negative transformative power of rhetoric, and ultimately makes an equation between rhetorical or poetic excess and sexual vice; it is wrong that “a plain and simple style does not please man, who instead enjoys *tropus*, or literary contrivance,” just as it is

a sin when man “scorns Nature’s natural and unpretentious art (heterosexual intercourse directed toward the goal of reproduction) for Venus’s magic art (homosexual intercourse)” (Ziolkowski 16).¹⁶⁷

Dangerously manipulative rhetoric of this sort is most commonly associated with the language of courtly literature. The serpent in the Paradise of the twelfth-century *Ordo representacionis Ade* woos Eve in the courtly idiom as “fresher than the rose... whiter than crystal,/Than snow” (488-90). Eric Jager shows how both the *Ancrene Wisse* and the secular *Livre du Chevalier* warn their female audiences against “the dangers often concealed by courteous speech,” sexual seduction couched in the eloquent style of courtly love lyrics (226). Not only does such literature furnish a language of seduction, but romances in particular evince the “full panoply of rhetorical colors” (Pitts 99) and thus trade in the tricks of fallen language.

Nykrog’s proposition that fabliaux and works in the high style like the *roman* share the same creative context recognizes that the former function as “an essentially reactive genre” working against courtly models through parody (Vaszily 525).¹⁶⁸ But what are they poking fun at specifically? There is no systematic one-to-one parody of a single work of courtly literature among fabliaux, though narratives of some tales parody isolated aspects of romance and *chansons de geste*, as “Le Chevalier a la Corbeille” (IX, 113) evokes the basket scene in *Floire et Blancheflor*, or reduce the elevated ethos of courtly love itself to gross sexuality. But if we turn away once more from the literal content of fabliaux to assess their style, it appears that because the “diction of the

¹⁶⁷ Patricia Parker discusses how metaphors of sexual corruption were also used to criticize the “Ciceronian *copia* of style” (210) in ancient Rome as “effeminate” and “impotent,” a view later adopted by early modern authors like Montaigne and Jonson (202).

¹⁶⁸ See Nykrog’s third chapter, especially pp. 72-85.

fabliaux is just about the reverse of courtly” (Muscatine, “Courtly” 3), a specific opposition to the use of language and rhetoric in courtly genres is at work.

Generally concerned with the problems of *verba*, fabliaux set themselves in opposition to the rhetorical excesses of courtly works. Fabliau poets purposefully shun stylistic ornament in favour of narratives that relate events “teus comme il sont,” that is, plain and unadorned, “Sanz colour et sanz leonime” [“without rhetorical colour and leonine rhyme”], “sanz bons moz” [“without *bons mots*”] (“Les trois Dames qui troverent un Vit” VIII, 96:4-8), and “sans batel et tout sans lime” [“without poetic art and entirely without polish.”] (“De la viellete” *Montaignon* V, 129:10).

Furthermore, as Muscatine observes, “[m]ore sustained and elaborate description, suggesting the catalogues and the rhetorical *descriptio* of learned or courtly literature, is rare enough to be noticeable” in fabliaux (*Old French Fabliaux* 62). Instead, the tales favour *abbrevatio*, which though a rhetorical technique in its own right, eschews the verbiage of ornament. Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s choice of “L’Enfant qui fu remis au Soleil” as a model for *abbrevatio* (713-17) illustrates just how well fabliaux lend themselves to a simple style.¹⁶⁹ Within the genre itself, a number of fabliaux include authorial interjections abbreviating descriptive passages. The poet of “Les deus Chevaus” seeks to get to the business of his narrative “por ma matere abregier” (22), while the author of “Le povre Clerc” opens his work with “Ge ne vol pas faire lonc conte” (VII, 79:1). Other tales raise questions about the need for lengthier narration with “que vous diroie? Cest la fins!” (“Les trois Boçus” 116), “que feroie plus lonc conte?” (“Le Vilain au Buffet” Variant A, 52), “que vos iroie plus contant?” (“Le Vilain Mire” 354)], and the like.

¹⁶⁹ The text reads “Her husband abroad improving his fortunes, an adulterous wife bears a child, On his return after long delay, she pretends it begotten of snow, Deceit is mutual. Slyly he waits. He whisks off, sells, and—reporting to the mother a like ridiculous tale—pretends the child melted by snow.”

Occasions like these pass up an opportunity for the extended description one might find in romance; whereas Chretien de Troyes spends some thirty-nine lines describing Enide's beauty at her first appearance (402-41), the author of "Les trois Boçus" introduces the hunchbacked husband of the tale as a rich man in town, breaking off the description there after having earlier dismissed the need for a fuller catalogue of his ugliness (37). When the knight of "Le Chevalier qui fist parler les Cons" comes upon a castle, the poet remarks "Ne sai que feïsse lonc conte" (337), and omits describing the edifice in marked contrast to the prolonged architectural *descriptio* of "châteaux enchantés aux salles sans nombre des romans de Chrétien de Troyes" (Bédier 347).

It is true that a few fabliaux, like "Le Prestre qui abevete" and "La Borgoise d'Orliens" call themselves "courtois" (VIII, 98:3) or "une aventure assez courtoise" (III, 19:2). Since these tales do not relate to situations at court, and furthermore lack the rhetorical complexity of other courtly genres, the reference seems to be ironic, designed to be funny or to highlight the slippage between claim and content in a humorous way. A fabliau that does have content reminiscent of courtly forms, "Le Chevalier qui recovra l'Amor de sa Dame" (VII, 78), actually provides an opportunity to witness the *abbrevatio-descriptio* relationship as an indicator of generic opposition. Existing in a single manuscript, "Le Chevalier" has been counted among fabliaux because it concludes with a husband cuckolded and happily oblivious, but its plot involving knights, a lady, a joust, and a courtly love relationship is primarily one of romance or *lai*. As if fighting against the courtly register that threatens to overtake the fabliau elements of his tale, the poet insists three times on *abbrevatio* in a 253-line text, stating "Je ne voil pas lonc conte faire" (12) after noting that he wishes to narrate his story "Sanz plus longuemant

deslaier” (1). When he indulges in a long *descriptio*, a picture of tournament combat reminiscent of *chansons de geste*, the poet again attempts to rein in his material with “Que vos feroie plus lonc plait?” (84).

This impetus toward truncation could stem mainly from a desire to promote ease of learning and memorization and not from any criticism of verbal excess, but this is not the only critique of courtly rhetoric in the genre: fabliaux also represent the role of figurative language in exploiting the indeterminate nature of *verba*. As Vazsily points out, courtly metaphors can promote the “forced introduction of ambiguity into essentially unambiguous ‘signs’: women are described as goddesses, sexual desire as divine worship, frustrated sexual desire as fatal” (531). One of the most common manifestations of figurative language characteristic of courtly works is the use of euphemism to replace frank sexual terminology. Nykrog sees euphemism as “propre au langage courtois” (*Fabliaux* 213) and echoing him in several studies of medieval vulgarity, Muscatine asserts that the “rules of clean speech . . . came along with the new courtly rules of feeling and behavior” (“Vulgarity” 288).¹⁷⁰

Since his agenda is to demonstrate the courtliness of fabliaux, Nykrog must assert that “il est plus fréquent de voir un poète garder le bon ton que d’y manquer” (*Fabliaux* 209) in the genre, and he is correct that tales with other close stylistic and narrative affinities to romance and *lais* like “Le Chevalier qui recovra l’Amor de sa Dame,” “Le Chevalier a la Robe vermeille,” and “La Dame qui se venja du Chevalier” (VII, 82) tend to omit describing the sex act entirely, replace it with vague terminology, or a combination of both as in “Ele le prist entre ses braz. . . / D’autre joie, d’autre soulaz / Ne vos quier fere mencion” (“Le Chevalier a la Robe” 70-72). According to “La Dame qui se

¹⁷⁰ Also see Muscatine’s “Courtly Literature and Vulgar Language,” *passim*.

venja,” care must be exercised even when using euphemism in a courtly context: the lady of the title bears a grudge against her lover for describing his desire to make love as “cracking nuts,” a metaphor that she finds unforgivably vulgar (23).

However, a count of those tales with plots that relate to genitalia, the sex act, or scatology and which compel the poet to choose between euphemistic and explicit expression reveals that the numbers slightly favor obscene language, including graphic description and use of words like “con” and “foutre.” Though slightly less than half of the fabliaux that deal with risqué subjects, and especially those that with courtly affinities, still seem to promote euphemism, we cannot overlook the majority of fabliaux that are frankly obscene and particularly those that directly address the use of metaphoric language as part of their plots; these invariably present euphemism in a negative light as a source of manipulation and deception. As in the critiques of courtly rhetoric discussed by Jager, indirect speech is used to accomplish or cover up illicit sexual behavior. In some of these tales, woefully naïve girls are seduced after being misled with euphemisms. Perhaps the most innocent of the bunch is the girl of “La Pucele qui voloit voler” (VI, 65) who is seduced over the course of an entire year by a young man who describes his lovemaking as a means of giving her the tail and beak that will fulfill her strange desire to fly.

A reversed situation occurs in “La Saineresse” where a wife deceives a literal-minded husband by describing her difficult medical treatment (in actuality, her sexual encounter with a lover) as blows to her loins and multiple applications of ointment that issued from “une pel mout noire et hideuse” (95). Both male seducers in “Aloul” (III, 14) and “Le Maignien qui foti la Dame” (VI, 73) refer to their genitalia in similarly medicinal terms as a curative root, which ultimately coerces their victims into sexual

situations. The author of “Aloul” comments that, like the husband of ‘La Saineresse,’ the lady “didn’t understand the metaphor” (“n’i entent nule figure” [91]) before she is seduced, though her request to see if the root is between her would-be lover’s legs suggests she may simply be playing coy.

False modesty is the motive in “De cele qui ne pooit oïr parler de foutre” where a young girl favours euphemistic speech to the point of fainting whenever she hears the word “foutre.” However, when a young man of the household approaches her sexually, she is perfectly willing to engage in a game of touching and naming body parts using the metaphors of a horse drinking at a guarded fountain, a kind of verbal foreplay that culminates in intercourse. The point here appears to be that how one describes sexual topics matters little, and if anything, linguistic deflection is more an erotic and seductive facade, a notion borne out in “La dame qui aveine demandoit pour Morel sa Provende avoir” (IX, 108). In this fabliau, a husband encourages his wife to indicate her desire for lovemaking by stating that Morel, a euphemism he creates for her vagina, needs his oats. At first, the wife, like the lady of “La Dame qui se venja” expresses disgust at the vulgarity of even this indirect nomenclature, but ultimately the use of figurative language boosts her libido to the point that she exhausts her husband.

None of these examples from fabliaux represent a grave warning against using euphemisms, but they make a point through laughter that recapitulates serious clerical advice against fair speech. Beyond these direct critiques, the way fabliau obscenity tends to be situated as a sudden stylistic change after a stretch of proper language also suggests linguistic critique through stylistic parody. As an example, the short introductory description of “Le Pescheor” treats the domestic circumstances of a fisherman and his

new wife, their economic circumstances, and the mutual love they share, but ends with the unexpected information that “he fucked her as best as he could” (“Et la fouti au mieus qu’il pot” [17]). “Cele qui se fist foutre sur la Fosse de son Mari” and “Le Chevalier qui fist parler les Cons” each start with the courtly situation of a knight errant and his squire encountering a lady or ladies on their travels, but instead of chivalric exchange, the former narrates how the knight receives the ability to talk to “cons” and “culs” while the latter concludes with graphic sex between the squire and a widow on her husband’s grave.

This sudden subversion of proper speech participates in what Leslie Dunton-Downer has rightly termed a “punchline effect” (32), a surprise that makes one take notice of the moment in which it occurs and absorb its message on some level. Usually, this jarring juxtaposition is understood as a simple desire on the part of fabliau poets to shock an audience, but something more sophisticated is at work. Reactions to this change of tone can range along a graduated scale from complete disgust to ready laughter, reactions that raise the listener’s or reader’s attention to something in a memorable way—either, as we have discussed, a scene of deception in which the obscenity participates, or to the nature of verbal expression itself. Discomfort may accompany a sense of shame or embarrassment at applying frank terminology to sexual *res* and laughter can mark a release from this feeling to some understanding that obscene speech can be safely enjoyed. Both of these responses indicate a connection between fabliaux and other philosophical considerations of verbal signs.

Speaking of Rutebeuf, who also authored fabliaux, Dunton-Downer notes that “in cases of obscenity, as distinct from pornography, [there] is a recurring criticism of or

reflection on the inadequacies of a given available language” (27), primarily the limitations or deflections of non-obscene language that impede complete expression. In patristic thought, this deficiency is a result of the Fall and the use of euphemism is one of its symptoms. Augustine observes in the *City of God* that the distinction between proper and improper speech did not exist before the Fall, when talk had “free scope, without any fear of obscenity, to treat any idea that might come to mind when thinking about bodily organs... Nor would there be any reason for calling the actual words obscene (14.23). Consequently, euphemism is a reminder of the Fall in several ways: it is the equivalent of a verbal fig leaf disguising the naked referent of a sign, and so symbolizes the opacity of post-lapsarian human language;¹⁷¹ further, the need to use euphemistic language rehearses the shame resulting from the first sin. Finally, though euphemisms appear to shield their audience from visualizing sexual matters, they depend on the fact that one has already “fallen” into a knowledge of such things in order to be fully understood. If an innocent child read “La Damoisele qui ne pooit oïr parler de foutre, ” rife as it is with concealing metaphors, “il ne pourra pas arriver à savoir ce qui se passe” (Bégin 21). “Pour comprendre la véritable signification du langage à double sens,” Bégin notes, “il faut posséder un certain savoir”: the carnal knowledge that came with the Fall (28).

Taken to the next logical step, the antithesis of euphemism—using frank obscenity—comes close to recovering an aspect of pre-lapsarian communication like the use of *res* on stage or visual imagery in written works. For example, Dunton-Downer finds evidence that the frank obscenity of Rutebeuf’s poems, which are contemporaneous with fabliaux, is a reaction to the idea that “language has fallen from some pristine God-ordained state...into a cacophonous urban mess where language can mean whatever a

¹⁷¹ See Jager 69 on the fig leaf metaphor used in patristic thought to reflect the opacity of writing.

particular group of speakers wants to mean” (35). Considered alongside the other evidence we have seen of an interest in the fallen condition of language, the unabashed obscenity of fabliaux also marks an attempt to regain pre-lapsarian communication. Perhaps then the number of critics who maintained well into the twentieth century that “the era of the fabliaux [was] . . . a lost paradise” (Bloch, *Scandal* 8-9) characterized by a naturalistic innocence of expression (Nykrog’s “franche et naïve pornographie” [*Fabliaux* 216]), were misconstruing a semiotic point made by fabliau poets for an unselfconscious characteristic of their writing.

Critics seeking evidence of naturalistic speech acting against courtly euphemism inevitably cite the famous passage from the *Roman* where the Lover berates Reason for using the word “coilles” to describe the castration of Saturn; he finds this inappropriate coming from the mouth of a “courteise pucele” (6931) and suggests she should have “glossed the word with some courtly term” (“Au meins quant le mot ne glosasts/Par quelque courteise parole”) (6933-34), a suggestion Reason dismisses.¹⁷² Reason’s reply that the Lover is really objecting to the thing signified and not its name echoes nominalist views on the purely arbitrary nature of verbal signs in the absence of pre-existent ideals. Percy finds the specific influence of nominalism in Reason’s claim that frank language signifies “particularized, concrete reality” unlike the euphemisms “reliques” and “riens” which signify in “so vague a way that the specific referent is lost sight of completely” (“Modes” 193, 172). Like Jean de Meun, who was educated at the University of Paris, the

¹⁷² In an article written decades after he remarked the innocent expression of fabliaux, Nykrog would connect Reason’s perspective to language before the Fall, surmising that the debate “may be a dialogue between a being who is close to God in prelapsarian innocence and a human being who has to live in an imperfect world under postlapsarian conditions,” and where Reason holds the Lover to her purer linguistic standard (“Obscene” 320). Nykrog does not pursue the implications of this as a basis for fabliau obscenity, however.

clerici vagantes who composed fabliaux were likely exposed to Aristotelian developments relating on verbal signs; Percy goes on to identify the same philosophical emphasis on tangible referents in the fabliau penchant for explicit and detailed sexual description, its preference for describing a *vit* “lonc et gros” instead of the highly abstract and vague “riens” (“Modes” 170).

The Meaning(lessness) of Fabliau Scatology

Although it is apparent that the stylistic characteristics of unadorned brevity and frank obscenity are another means by which fabliaux voice their particular view of signs, it is important to consider not just what obscene imagery does but what it means as well. For instance, Bloch has discussed how the amalgam of sexual and violent imagery that is castration serves in fabliaux as “less the sign of bodily mutilation than of a mutilation in language, of language” consistent with a semiotic interest in fallen *verba* (*Scandal* 74).¹⁷³ This is based on a traditional clerical equivalence of testes with the dissemination of *sen*, meaning both “seed” and “‘signification’ ou ‘interprétation’” (Nitze 15), so that “from Adam on, men were sowers of seed in field, womb, and text alike” (Jager 73). On this basis, castration or its threat in fabliaux like “Le Prestre crucefie” and “Connebert” can be construed as punishment for both misuses of *sen*: as much for adultery as for the dissimulation or creation of false signs it involves.

Of course, using symbolic obscenity in a work of literature to indicate that literary signs are unreliable in presenting deeper meaning borders on self-contradiction: only if this claim is false could it be true, or if it is true, the claim is weakened. Yet,

¹⁷³ Bloch’s pioneering work in *The Scandal of the Fabliaux* also identifies a preoccupation with tattered garments, theft, persistently circulating corpses, and chunks of meat among other things as emblems for the problematic signs of poetry.

contradiction is the essence of comedy and since comedy is the instructional method used by fabliaux, ignoring the inconsistency only helps to further the semiotic point; furthermore, because the didactic approach of the genre and its content both differ from the concrete moral lesson ascribed to literature, fabliau poets can debunk the notion of poetic truth in its conventional sense and sidestep any apparent contradiction. Thus, recurrent fabliau imagery, particularly that of an obscene nature, can serve as metaphors for the flawed nature of the *verba* used by fabliaux themselves.

Where castration pertains to words it represents an inability to generate absolute meaning in language or in narrative. “Les trois Dames qui troverent un Vit” illustrates this indeterminacy of meaning through the symbolic severed penis three women find on the road: the abbess who is expected to rule on possession of the member is able to lie and claim it for herself as the lost key to the abbey because its nature is in some way mutable. Likewise, when the fisherman of “Le Pescheor” castrates a dead priest he finds floating in the Seine, he can give any meaning he likes to the tumescent member he brings home; as in “Les trois Dames,” the *sen* he gives it—that it is his own—is a false one. Indeed, reiterating the association of euphemism with meaningless signification, the fisherman’s wife only calls her husband’s penis “rien” after she thinks it is severed (Version A 142).

Bloch also notes that fabliaux feature a type of female castration that is related to uncertain meaning in such tales as “La Sorisete des Estopes” and “Le fol Vilain” where deceptive narratives—a newly married wife’s story that her pudendum has been left elsewhere—accompany the idea of disembodied genitalia (*Scandal* 74-75). This variant is interesting in seeming to attribute the metaphorical possibility of productive

signification to female genitalia in a genre that has often been labelled misogynist: much the way a properly attached penis figuratively engenders meaning, a vagina would presumably give birth to the same.¹⁷⁴ The detachment of female genitalia is not a widespread theme in fabliaux beyond these few tales, but the notion of the productive *con* does appear elsewhere, particularly in symbolic opposition to another orifice, the *cul*. The antithesis of a vagina that productively gives birth to meaning is another type of “faux con,” the anus. In this juxtaposition, the *con* stands for fictional tales (*contes*) that claim meaningful *content*, while the anus, an orifice associated with the vagina in Old French poetry, is a *faux con(te)*, or literature without any deeper truth.¹⁷⁵

Bloch speaks of the fabliau “Guillaume au Faucon” (VIII, 93) in terms of how this pun depicts language “cut off from univocal meaning” (*Scandal* 75), for the husband of the tale unwittingly grants his soon-to-be adulterous wife (in vulgar terms, his “faux con”) to a retainer believing that he is surrendering his “faucon.” The lady of the tale who abandons her resolve not to commit adultery illustrates in misogynist terms that all *cons* are ultimately duplicitous, just as the pun reveals all language to be; yet, the play on words extends further to suggest that all literature is ultimately revealed to be anal, a *faux con(te)*.

“Guillaume” itself, for example, begins as a courtly tale involving a lord, his lady (whose beauty is introduced with sixty-nine lines of *descriptio* [50-119]), and her suitor. Should the narrative continue in this vein one might expect rich allegorical content and a

¹⁷⁴ Christine de Pizan would use the image of childbirth to describe her own production of books in *Lavision Christine* (III, 10).

¹⁷⁵ On the confusion of orifices, see Burns 34. Citing Luce Irigaray, Burns also observes the connection between castration and the absence of a penis with a perceived absence of significance, for from a misogynist perspective because a woman “lacks the signifying phallus, [she] also lacks access to meaningful speech” (34).

clear moral; what we get instead is a story in which adulterous “actions are freed from their moral significance” (Eichmann 75). Facing a choice between committing adultery and allowing a man to die, the lady appears to have no viable option, and so the author “decided that the only way to bring his story to a conclusion is to shift it to a fabliau” (Eichmann 75). The lady’s noble husband is suddenly depicted as abusive and violent like his fabliau counterparts, and we get more than a hint of anti-courtly obscenity in wordplay surrounding “faucon.” Instead of courtly literature that possesses some readily accessible truth, we are left with a “faux con(te)” presenting no clear lesson, which reinforces the semiotic point made by the dubious and discontinuous end morals of the genre.

Perhaps the best representation of how fabliau poets situate their work in the *con-cul* dichotomy occurs in “Le Chevalier qui fist parler les Cons.” If the power to be amusing for money (the knight’s first magical gift) and the ability to make *con(te)s* speak (his second gift) are for Bloch “those of the poet or jongleur” (*Scandal* 108), the knight’s curiously overlooked third talent to make *culs* speak stands for his ability to create tales without clear moral value, or fabliaux. Appropriately enough, this power only comes into effect should the genitalia refuse to speak, thus equating a *con(te)* that says nothing with a fabliau. Indeed, after the countess of the tale stuffs her *con* to keep it silent, the knight demonstrates his talent to make her anus speak “après disner” (460), recalling Rychner’s famous definition of fabliau as an “after-dinner story” (qtd. in Schenck, *Fabliaux* 13); the knight is essentially creating his fabliau. Inevitably, the tale tells us, literature degrades from *con* to *cul*; “Le Chevalier” exchanges the possibilities of deeper moral meaning suggested by its courtly plot of a knight errant for the anal antics of fabliaux,

“Le sot Chevalier” is another fabliau that uses scatological imagery to deny its own moral value. The tale begins with the author’s intriguing opposition of “conter” and “fabloier” which sets the stage for a confrontation between a meaningful and non-meaningful tale (2).¹⁷⁶ Unclear on another distinction—the difference between his wife’s *con* and her *cul*—the knight of the title is educated to understand that the *con*, like courtly literature with moral content, tends to be “plus haus” and “plus lons” (70-71) than the *cul* or fabliaux, which is “plus cours” (73). The perversion of meaning associated with the *faux con* may be based on an implicit but unspoken association with anal sex as a dangerous corruption of reproductive intercourse, like Alain de Lille’s identification of perverted grammar with homosexuality. Just as medieval poets who seek to follow the ideal Horatian literary standard must aim to compose works with moral content, so the “sot chevalier” also learns that the *cul* should be avoided at all costs lest one commit a “granz mesfais” there (76). Nevertheless, the knight does not follow this last piece of advice completely and ends up using a hot brand to enact a rectal violation on one of his guests; with this, any potential of the tale to maintain a courtly focus or present a true moral breaks down into fabliau obscenity, farcical violence, and a completely incongruous end moral (76). The poet’s concluding remark that the naïve knight “eut apris a foutre” followed by the comment, “A cest mot est li fabliaus oltre” (321-22), marks an admission that the outré tale has degraded from a meaningful *conte* and like the poker-wielding knight has penetrated into the fabliau realm of *cul*.

“Berengier au lonc Cul,” makes the same distinction between “contes et fableaus” (1) that appears in “Le sot Chevalier” and the feckless husband of the tale also confuses

¹⁷⁶ “Le Covoiteus et l’Envieus” is a third fabliau that contrasts a desire to “fabloier” with telling a tale that possesses a deeper lesson (VI, 71:1), though it approaches the distinction from the opposite perspective as a moral tale tending toward *exemplum* rather than fabliau.

con and *cul*; this mirrors his perverted social status (he is a usurer who buys a marriage into the nobility and a knighthood along with it) and the blending of courtly and fabliau themes in the tale. To deal with his wife's reproaches concerning his less than knightly idleness, the moneylender dons armour and heads out to a desolate spot where he dents his own shield and shatters his lance, simulating combat with a real opponent. When his wife becomes suspicious and confronts her husband disguised as the fearsome knight "Berengier au lonc Cul," she compels her husband to kiss her anus or die. He chooses the first option, but has difficulty differentiating between his wife's *con* and *cul* when he sees them: "Do cul et del con: ce li sanble/Que trestot se tienent ensamble" ("of asshole to cunt it seemed to him that they were both entirely together") (243-44). This is ultimately an inability to recognize the difference between true courtly behavior and that which is not, or the failure to distinguish between a romance narrative and actions that are really the stuff of farce. When the wife later reveals that she knows her husband's shame, she dispels this confusion: in kissing Berangier's *cul*, her husband has revealed his true status as an ass and a usurer, not a knight; and, like him, the concluding circumstances of the tale show that it is not lofty and true but a fabliau with no such pretense. Unlike the husband's situation in "Berengier," this revelation is not necessarily a negative one, for the absence of univocal truth in the genre works to promote its humor and its view of fallen signs.

Further evidence that fabliaux purposely cultivate their absence of meaning through scatological imagery appears in tales that feature the products of the anus—farts and excrement. In medieval thought, the fart occupies a place as "l'anti-langage" (Aubailly 13), an often diabolical inversion parodying oral speech with its meaningless

anal equivalent. Though farting does not figure in very many fabliaux, when it does occur it is emblematic of communication stripped of its proper significance, nether-speech that is not so much the inversion of verbal language as it is indicative of its fallen state. Hence its appearance accompanies circumstances of indeterminate or absent meaning. I have already mentioned “Les deus Vilains” as general evidence for scatology signalling circumstances of semiotic confusion; to be more specific, when one peasant mistakes the fart of his sleeping companion for his blowing on hot soup, we have a case where a meaningless afflatus is mistaken for a meaningful sign.¹⁷⁷

Several other fabliaux relate the non-meaning of a fart more directly to the empty signs of literature. In “Gauteron et Marion,” the significance of a new bride’s fart on her wedding night is perceived by her husband as evidence that she is not a virgin; she co-opts his interpretation with a competing narrative that it is a sign her virginity is just now escaping. Both claims confuse *cul* and *con*, meaninglessness with truth: Marion’s explanation is definitely a fabrication and the truth behind Gauteron’s initial suspicion is unknown; thus, the afflatus remains an indeterminate sign that generates a tale of dubious truth for both the husband and the fabliau audience. There is no culminating lesson here.

“Les trois Meschines” continues the semiotic *con-cul* opposition. Having purchased a cosmetic powder, the three girls of the title must add urine to make it efficacious, and so one of them, Agace, squats over the preparation; however, she accidentally lets escape “un tres grant pet” (61) that disperses all of the powder. Another of the girls attributes the mishap to the fact that Agace’s “cul est si pres du con” (85);

¹⁷⁷ An interesting cross-cultural parallel exists, once more, in Zen Buddhism, where Sengai’s (1750-1837) comic sketch entitled “The one Hundred Days Teaching of the Dharma” illustrates a monk “leaning over to relieve himself of intestinal gas” (Hyers, *Zen* 106); Zen represents the defiance of conventional didactic wisdom through a fart.

thus, we have a situation where the two orifices are again confused and an unproductive fart substitutes for what could have been the fruitful product of the *con(te)*. Along with the loss of the powder we get a loss of any univocal meaning in the tale itself, which ends with a request for audience judgment on the uncertain question of who is liable for the incident, she who farted or she who held the powder too close to the *cul*.

Perhaps the most explicit connection made between flatulence and the nature of literary signs appears in the misogynist mock-etiological fabliau “Le Con qui fu fait a la Besche” (IV, 22). Here, the Devil’s fart on Eve’s tongue is provided as an explanation for the garrulousness of women; however, the explanation “Por ce a fame tant de jangle. Por ce borde ele et jangle tant” draws a clear equivalence between the meaningless chatter of the female sex and “jonglerie,” the empty (but funny) recitations of poets, both of which are an oral displacement of a demonic fart (66-67). Immediately reinforcing the windy nature of his work, the author of “Besche” follows Satan’s fart with a moral anathematizing those who would speak anything but good of women and their genitalia (76-79), then summarily undermines his point with a counter-moral that does precisely what he had forbade in observing that many good men have been “destruit...Honi...et confondu” (80-81) by the *con*. Interestingly, just as this tale begins with the creation of a *con* and ultimately becomes the story of a fart, so too it begins with what appears to be a serious etiological tone rehearsing the creation of man and woman (1-10) that rapidly degrades into nonsense and contradiction.

More prevalent than flatulence in fabliaux is the concept of literature as excrement, which Bloch has discussed primarily as an emblem for the nature of poetic performance. In his reading, poetry is akin to “dead—fecal, inert—matter” that

“circulates and recirculates” incessantly in the telling and retelling (*Scandal* 55). Yet, the metaphor functions beyond concerns with originality and plagiarism to encompass the essence of poetic signs. If we recognize “faecal production as creative power” (Camille, *Image* 115), it is also essential to recognize that what is created is a useless waste product, and so the fecal metaphor presents literature as worthless. The common clerical trope of consuming books when reading them participates in this analogy and is specific in identifying certain characteristics of written signs that make them excremental. The moral lessons of a text are digested and absorbed by the reader are while everything without *usus* is figuratively excreted. Therefore, in written works without Christian or moral *sententia*, all that remains is shit. Carolyn Larrington has shown how images of defecation and the disgusting contents of the privy are symbolically “evoked to stigmatize requests for and narration of heroic material” as opposed to Christian texts (27). Though she speaks within the context of Old Norse texts, Larrington’s findings are useful to this study: since fabliaux actively promote their lack of conventional meaning, it is only fitting they should also flaunt the stigma of their fecal nature.

This use of scatology is exemplified by the peasant woman of “La Crote” who reaches into her *cul* until she has “trouvé” (“found” or “composed”) a turd (28). In essence, her guessing game involves interpreting the undefined material she has generated. Her husband’s first guess, that it is dough, assumes she has created something productive, for unformed dough is the stuff of wheat, not the chaff, and can become bread.¹⁷⁸ This, however, is an improper reading, a “fausse parole” (44). The second guess, that it is wax, also has literary connotations, though that which is written on wax

¹⁷⁸ The image of baking is incidentally used as a metaphor for Nature’s creation of human beings in *Le Roman de Silence*, in language that connects it to literary creation: a masterpiece or “ouvre forcible” containing “matyre” of fine flour is contrasted with that which contains chaff or straw (1795-1860).

tablets is temporary and perhaps less likely to contain meaning that is worthy of preservation on parchment. When the *vilain* finally tastes the ball of feces—his version of consuming his wife’s text—he is able to determine that all he has is a bit of *merde*: interpretation yields nothing but the awareness that he has eaten shit, and so reading literature, and “De la Crote” in particular leaves its reader with no great moral truth or didactic lesson except an understanding of the fecal nature of literature.

“Charlot le Juif,” a fabliau by Rutebeuf, whose concern with the nature of language we have already discussed, is another tale that uses scatology as a means of overturning the idea of literature with hidden moral significance. After losing his horse on a hare hunt, the knight Guillaume le Panetier tells the jongleur Charlot he will reward him with something that costs “plus de cent souz” (87) (the value of his dead horse) then gives him the worthless hare skin. Here the “pel du lievre,” a kind of parchment, is a medium embodying the deceptiveness and multifarious meanings of *verba* (91). Charlot reinforces the connection of this duplicity to literature by defecating in the skin and returning it, telling his patron that there is something in it. The fact that the animal skin is a hare’s further calls to mind ancient connotations of fertility like *cons* and testicles, suggesting the possibility of productive content that is then rudely shattered. Guillaume’s subsequent act of reaching below that surface of the hare-parchment and coming up with only a handful of excrement reflects the futility of looking for something of value hidden in the works of jongleurs.

Excrement is situated in distinct opposition to images of fertility to represent the meaningless nature of verbal or literary signs in several other fabliaux besides “Charlot.” The scatology of “La Coille noire” is often overlooked, but is an important part of its

humor and semiotic point. The wife's charge that her husband's testicles (and his *vit*) are black in this tale is essentially an accusation that he is impotent. He counters her assertion by implying that they are black because they have come in contact with her unwashed *cul*. The episcopal court hearing the case rules in favour of the husband because his explanation is funny, but there is no notion that the ruling has been made on the basis of truth. The moral of the tale, that a prick of any colour is good, likewise ignores the need for a real lesson. Once the "coille noire" is placed in real or imagined contact with excrement, any concern for meaning—whether the husband or the fabliau can generate *sen* or not—vanishes.

Such punchlines featuring defecation signal an abandonment of the possibility that literature can embody serious moral content such as that supposedly present in longer courtly genres to an understanding that poetry inevitably collapses into the meaninglessness of fabliaux. In "Jouglet," which Jurgen Beyer has termed "a disagreeable scatological fabliau," resistance to the idea that literature is meaningless is depicted as a form of anal retention, while its acceptance is represented as a veritable explosion of defecation (39). Like his counterpart in "Berengier," the new husband in this tale, Robin, is low-bred and foolish but able to marry into disenfranchised nobility because of his family's money. Beyond what it may reveal about social currents in the thirteenth century, this mixed marriage suggests the potential for cohabitation between the foolery of fabliau and high literature.

Unfortunately, Robin's mother makes the mistake of entrusting her son's sexual education to the jongleur Jouglet. Since poets generate excrement, not *sen*, Jouglet's education consists of forcing Robin to eat an excess of unripe pears then telling him that

it is forbidden to defecate on his wedding day. This forced act of restraint mirrors the temporary reluctance of the tale to abandon itself entirely to fabliau. Though it is unlikely that Robin will be able to quell his diarrhea, the possibility remains along with a chance that the tale will contain some moral meaning. Robin is left neither able to relieve his bowels nor to perform sexually due to his discomfort, and the fabliau, like him, remains in a temporary state of stasis, neither generating meaning nor its absence. However, the author of the tale broaches a desire not to wait any longer—with the customary “Que vos iroie je contant” (96)—to truncate his tale and bring it to its conclusion; this is equated with Robin’s ultimate evacuation of his bowels, for his wife uncovers Jouglet’s trick and directs him to defecate freely on three sides of the sleeping jongleur’s bed, on his pants, in the fire, in a bucket, and finally, in Jouglet’s fiddle case. Here, *abbrevatio* does not bring meaning but an abundance of excrement.

Moreover, in a narrative “loose end” that Lacy has commented on as “unusual” (*Reading* 107), we never hear whether Robin is able to perform in bed once he relieves himself—the author states “ne voil alognier le conte” (292) and expresses a total lack of concern for how the consummation turns out (293). Yet, the scene is passed over not out of modesty (the frank scatology of the tale precludes a concern for euphemism), but because the point of this second *abbrevatio* is again not an ability to generate *sen* but a revelation of the excremental. The tale ends when Jouglet accidentally covers himself in Robin’s waste and ultimately with the resistant jongleur’s crippling beating at the hands of peasants who demand a performance and are instead smeared with the feces in his viol case. We thus receive a last assertion that the tools of the poet’s trade are always fecal in nature. With this comes the understanding that the tale too is entirely a fabliau, for the

supposedly courtly wife is revealed to have a lover already and is the one who is responsible for releasing the scatological; along with this twist, we get a twisted closing moral—“He who wants to shit on others, is shit on first” (419-20)—that is extremely literal and limited in application that Beyer terms “not a teaching comparable to that of the didactic exempla” (39). This moral does not so much oppose “one of the most fundamental convictions of the Middle Ages, namely, the belief that a useful lesson could be derived from every event” as Beyer claims; it, and the presence of fundament in fabliaux, work more specifically against the idea that there is any *usus* in literature.

“La Dame qui Aveine demandoit por Morel sa Provende avoir” is a more direct example of a fabliau in which “excrement is presented as the alternative to sex or to semen” (Lacy, *Reading* 88), representing the supplantation of *sen* by feces (Muscatine, *Old French Fabliaux* 129). The narrative begins with an idealized portrait of a husband and wife with obvious parallels to Erec and Enide, and whose great love is compared to that of Tristan and Yseult (30-31). Sexual relations between the two is described in similarly courtly terms as “le solas et le deduit” (45). This penchant for euphemism continues when the husband of the work requests that his wife refer to her desire for intercourse from then on as the horse Morel’s need to be fed his oats. Initially, the wife finds even this euphemistic expression vulgar and refuses to go along with the idea. However, her libido eventually takes precedence and she exacts oats for Morel to the point that her husband becomes exhausted sexually. Eventually, he stifles her libido by defecating on her, with the comment that since the oats are spent, she will receive only bran. Thus, semen is literally equated with productive seed or grain, and defecation with its non-fruitful external husk; the tale, which begins in a courtly register implying the

possibility of *sen*, ends by washing away any kernel of possible truth in a flood of feces.¹⁷⁹ This turning point where the narrative definitively becomes fabliau is incidentally accompanied by the first uses of direct obscenity in the tale (“cul,” and “merde” [299-301]) and is followed by a tacked-on moral for married people that does not seem to entirely fit the tale.

Based on an examination of obscene imagery in fabliaux, and particularly images of a scatological nature, we can safely dismiss the idea that there is an “absence totale de...valeur symbolique” in the genre (Jodogne 22). Beyer’s claim that “[t]he fabliau...does not offer an alternative” (39) when it does away with standard moral edification is likewise untrue. If fabliaux aim to derail attempts at hidden interpretation and make ruins of allegory as Sarah Buchanan asserts, they do not leave nothing behind, but develop a different use of symbolism on the rubble they have created. There may be no “allegorical movement toward a ‘higher’ plane of truth” (Buchanan 14) in terms of Christian or ethical meaning, but the genre is not merely entertaining: fabliaux create a new awareness that such elevation is not available from literature. To see this and their larger didactic point regarding the dangerous nature of signs requires a shift of critical perspective to seek instruction in unconventional places: in the literal content, humor, structure, and style of the genre, in other words, to recognize that semiotic interest permeates almost every aspect of fabliau except its explicit declarations of *moralitas*. The absence to date of critics systematically considering this didacticism reflects either the failure of its message or its utter success.

¹⁷⁹ “Porcelet” (VI, 67) is a close analogue that replaces oats and bran with wheat and straw, which comes closer to the more traditional clerical opposition of wheat and chaff. Defecation is also replaced by a fart.

CHAPTER 4: SIGNS AND LEARNING IN THE *LIBRO DE LOS ENGAÑOS****The Purpose of the Engaños***

If the complex instructive approach of Old French fabliaux and the overt preaching of sacred drama represent divergent approaches on the didactic spectrum, the exemplum collections of medieval Spain would appear to occupy a middle ground between these two poles. Some of the most important works of medieval Spanish literature are collections of wisdom tales lacking the doctrinal emphasis of religious drama;¹⁸⁰ much like the fabliaux, works like *Calila e Digna*, *Conde Lucanor*, and the *Libro de los engaños* or *Sendebat* focus instead on practical, secular lessons, but are bound by a more uniform and explicit claim of didactic purpose.

For example, the first and most influential of the collections compiled in Spain, Pedro Alfonso's Latin *Disciplina clericalis* (c. 1135), paved the way for the acceptability of "practical ethics" (Parker 63), providing a series of fables and parables that illustrated "ways and means of living successfully and of escaping the dangers of the world"; of these, "scarcely more than three...deal with ethics which one can truly consider Christian in tone" (Jones and Keller 18). The Castilian translation of the Arabic *Kalila wa-Dimna* from 1251 follows this tradition of promoting a "manera de vivir cuerdo y enterado" (Keller and Linker XVI), and the purported aim of the *Libro de los engaños* or *Sendebat* translated a mere two years later is similarly secular in nature—to teach "los engañados e los asayamientos de las mugeres" (ll. 15-16). So is the practical advice of Don Manuel's fourteenth-century *Conde Lucanor*, provided in response to specific ethical quandaries

¹⁸⁰ The translators' introduction (17-32) to *The Book of Count Lucanor and Patronio* provides a fine overview of the exemplum tradition in medieval Spain.

raised by the Count of the title and bound by the aim “that all men should accomplish in this world such deeds as would be advantageous to their honor, their possessions, and their stations” (*Book of Count Lucanor* 49). Although these collections may not emphasize Christian doctrine, their didactic features still make a more explicit case for instructional purpose than the heterogeneous fabliaux; after all, the Spanish exemplum collections are self-contained compendia of tales assembled for the stated purpose of instruction and feature frame stories that also support this goal.

Despite the presence of an instructional focus in these collections, they have been seen as “pseudo-serious” and “pseudo-didactic,” containing tales that are “primarily...meant to amuse” (Esten Keller, *The Scholar’s Guide* 18). The *Libro de los engaños*, in particular, has been targeted as a work where the “recreational...completely obviates the didactic,” perhaps in reaction to Robertsonian criticism that seeks some hidden *moralitas* in all medieval literary texts (Esten Keller, “The Literature of Recreation” 24).¹⁸¹ Contemporary critics at the other extreme, such as Menéndez y Pelayo who promoted the *Engaños* as a “grave y doctrinal” (I, 51) in purpose, do seem to be ignoring an important aspect of the text, but it seems equally shortsighted to dismiss all meaning from the collection.

Both sides set up a very contemporary dichotomy where didacticism and recreation are placed squarely at odds with the strong presence of the one taken to exclude all possibility of the other. This is not necessarily the case. As Catherine Brown has observed about the didacticism of another problematic medieval Spanish text, the

¹⁸¹ Jaunzems cites just such an elaborate allegorical reading of the Seven Sages from the eighteenth-century. In it, the king “signifies the world, and his only son stands for all mankind” while the stepmother emblemizes Sin and the “Seven Wise Masters represent the seven liberal sciences, by whose aid man frustrates the intention of sin” (58-59).

Libro de Buen Amor, “[p]rofoundly modern is the unease apparent in the scholarly tendency to divide neatly on whether or not...[a medieval text] is didactic, as if the problem were a simple question of *either/or*” (118). The need to separate aims of instruction and entertainment and classify the *Engaños* as “primarily” one or the other was not likely as pressing a concern for the translator(s) who rendered it into Spanish (Parker 9); it is not inherent in the medieval understanding of Horatian literary criticism, which prescribes the blending of edification and instruction. It is more reminiscent of now-discounted critical responses toward other humorous works of the thirteenth century, the *fabliaux*, which were long considered merely “*contes à rire*” because of their entertainment value (Bédier 30). Like the *fabliau*, the *exemplum* tale operates in an indirect fashion, “less explicit in its operations and less predictable in its effects” than other didactic modes (Weiss 5, n. 8). This suggests that any conception of its didacticism must be adjusted to recognize that the instruction it contains may be located elsewhere than in its direct declarations of meaning.

Translated from a now lost Arabic original at the behest of Prince Fadrique, brother of Alfonso “El Sabio,” in 1253, the *Engaños* is an *exemplum* collection recapitulating tales from the Eastern branch of the Seven Sages folkloric tradition. In brief, its frame story relates the situation of a prince who has taken a seven-day vow of silence. After the prince rebuffs his wicked stepmother’s offer to murder his father and rule with her, she accuses him of rape. While his father, King Alcos of Judea, decides the fate of the completely silent prince, the youth’s stepmother and a group of seven court sages tell competing tales of deceitful women, hasty judgment, or untrustworthy counsel designed to convince the monarch to kill or spare his son. Finally, the week of silence

ends, the prince reveals his innocence, and tells several exempla of his own, before the *Engaños* ends with the stepmother's execution.

Though this summary of the *Engaños* hardly seems to invite comparison with the French fabliaux, this link is made in Alan Deyermond's characterization of the former as "the first substantial collection of fabliaux in Spanish" (*Literary History* 98), in María Jesús Lacarra's comparison of the works as "textos antifeministas" centering on adulterous relations (163), and even in Menéndez y Pelayo's claim that the *Engaños* lacks the "cinismo grosero de los *fabliaux*" (I, 51). And, although the *Enganos* is considerably less vast and varied a collection than the 150 or so fabliaux, the proposed transmission of the Eastern Seven Sages tradition is nearly the same as Gaston Paris' tortuous *schema* of fabliau origins: from "an original (lost) Sanskrit text translated into *pehlvi*, the language of Ancient Persia," to a Syriac version, then an Arabic manifestation that was rendered into Hebrew, then into Latin and finally "into various vernacular languages" (Bloch, *Scandal* 20); the only difference is the substitution of an additional Greek source for the Latin (Fradejas Lebrero 14).

Such a generic parallel cannot be drawn merely on the basis of purely recreational intent however, for the fabliaux are not without some form of didactic content, as I have demonstrated. A more appropriate connection between the genres is hinted at in Lacarra's claim of a common antifeminist focus and in what Deyermond calls a shared "concentration on women's sexual guile" (*Literary History* 98). This is not an indication of their inherent misogyny, as "the majority of fabliaux are not antifeminist—or profeminist, or even essentially about women" (Lacy, "Fabliau Women" 326).¹⁸² The

¹⁸² Lorçin argues as well that the fabliaux are not "plus antiféministes que bien d'autres genres littéraires" (174)

tales of the *Engaños*, as well, are “uneven with regard to their success or appropriateness as examples of the theme” of deceitful women (Cooper 177); only the frame story and nine out of twenty-three tales present a negative impression of women. In others, including the frame, women are presented in a positive light as givers of good advice or as innocent victims. The opening tale, for instance, features a virtuous married woman who offers moral correction to a lascivious king and ends up being shunned by her suspicious and fearful husband, while “Del palomo e de la paloma” (tale 15) shows an innocent female dove brutally slain by her mate. Given this mix of positive and negative female characters, the purported misogyny of the text “se revela pues como un instrumento, un medio para aleccionar al individuo, enseñándole las maldades del mundo” (Orazi 42). “Sexual guile” in the tales is rather a device, part of a thematic interest shared with fabliaux in illuminating semiotic deception practiced often, but not exclusively, by women.

That deception is central to the message of the *Engaños* is hardly surprising. The generic roots of the frame tale lie partly in the Arabic and Hebrew *māqamā*—rogue’s tales based on deception, trickery and disguise (Wacks 42). This general focus on deceit is emphasized further in the prologue of the collection. Unlike earlier extant versions in the Eastern branch of the Seven Sages tradition—the Syriac *Sindban*, Greek *Syntipas*, and Hebrew *Mishlei Sendebār*—the *Engaños* contains a short preface focusing the purpose of the text firmly on exploring the aspect of deception and trickery; such a central aim is absent from the titles of its predecessors and from their openings.¹⁸³ The Syriac text, for example, begins simply with “In the Name of our Lord, the History of the wise Sindban

¹⁸³ Of course, it is impossible to know the start of the lost Arabic version, of which the *Engaños* is purportedly a direct translation.

and of his comrades” (100), while two Hebrew manuscript variants commence with “We [or I] will begin the tales of Sendebar” (l. 1). By contrast, the Spanish prologue explicitly notes that Prince Fadrique was pleased to have the book translated from Arabic into Castilian “para aperçebir a los engañados e los asayamientos de las mugeres,” making no mention of the sage (ll. 11-12).

I elect to see this declaration as announcing a broader interest in interpretation, though this reading is not crucial in light of testimony given in the content that follows. Prior to later scribal emendation attributing both “deceits and wiles” (“los *engaños* e los asayamientos”) to women, this original statement of purpose can be read as projecting two separate yet related aims: “to instruct the deceived (*engañados*) and [to teach] the wiles of women”(12).¹⁸⁴ The stipulated aims are to teach those who are tricked—not necessarily by women—as well as reveal the machinations of the female sex; this removes the incongruity of those tales that do not relate directly to the behavior of women, including, as I will discuss, those addressing the poor counsel of male *privados* or the need for careful judgment in general.¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, this split purpose reduces objections concerning the didactic uselessness of lessons based solely on misogyny, such as the assertion that “sophisticated, educated, and wily rulers and politicians anywhere [would not] rest the fate of their governments upon the ‘wisdom’...that women are deceitful” (Keller, “The Literature of Recreation” 197).

¹⁸⁴ In this construction, the verb functions separately with each object: “aperçebir a” addresses the deceived as receivers of instruction and “aperçebir...los asayamientos” indicates that which is also taught.

¹⁸⁵ Artola also splits this scribal declaration for other reasons of comprehensibility but alters it to “para aperçebir a los engañados. E *los asayamientos de las mugeres*, este libro, fue trasladado...” [my italics], but he sees the *engañados* solely as the victims of women’s ploys (“Review” 40). While this continues to emphasize the purported antifeminism of the text, it also continues the emphasis on deceptions present in the narratives that follow.

By emphasizing both duper and duped, the two-fold purpose attributed to Fadrique's translation also foregrounds the bipartite semiotic process innovated by Augustine, in which there must be makers of signs and receivers who try to interpret them. The prologue thus raises a widespread medieval concern with semiotic interpretation that also features in the didactic content of genres as wide ranging as religious drama and fabliaux and which now governs the didacticism of the *Engaños*.

Teaching about the dangers of interpretation is not limited to the *Engaños* in medieval Spanish literature, for it appears later as the didactic focus of Juan Manuel's *Conde Lucanor*, which De Looze has shown to be heavily invested in exploring the search for true signification in the world (*Manuscript Diversity* 113). This is not surprising considering that the *Sendebār* tradition, along with *Kalilah wa-Dimna*, served as a model for Juan Manuel (Wacks 148). Anxiety about the risks of interpreting signs, a "pan-European preoccupation" (De Looze, *Manuscript Diversity* 119), is brought to the forefront in Manuel's fourteenth-century text following philosophical (Ockhamist) and social upheavals, though its presence in medieval thought of the previous centuries is apparent as we have seen.

The particular sort of trickery implied by "engañ(ad)os" involves altered appearances (*res significandi*)—sometimes purposeful, sometimes natural—often abetted by the ambivalent nature of verbal signs.¹⁸⁶ When it is accomplished willfully in fabliaux, this "quasi-magical" power of manipulation (termed "engin," the Old French parallel for *engaño*) is an object of fascination because it generates enjoyable plots (Percy,

¹⁸⁶ The concept of *engaño* would be firmly identified with the duplicity of signs in Book I of the later *Conde Lucanor* (De Looze, *Manuscript Diversity* 120).

“Sentence” 232).¹⁸⁷ However, while discussing its prevalence in romance, Robert Hanning remarks on “the educative function of *engin*” and “its effect...to heighten awareness” in a literary audience (123). Indeed, “aperçebir a” does not imply conventional instruction as much as it carries the sense of “to make aware” or “to create perception in” the deceived by showing examples rather than by preaching. The “engaños” to whom this is addressed can include members of the audience who are reminded of the need to carefully interpret signs in a fallen world, often through the vehicle of entertaining and humorous tales as in fabliaux. Keller is therefore right that serious moral edification is not prevalent in the collection, though practical lessons on semiotic interpretation saturate the text. This is surely a broader lesson of greater practical worth to an aristocratic audience than the limited point that women are tricky.

The Prince’s Inscrutable Silence

When narratives emphasizing the confrontation of ambiguous situations like those of the *Engaños* have appeared in other compendia, they have been seen as extolling the virtue of Prudence. In the quest for a holistic assessment of Spanish exemplum collections, James Grabowska finds *prudentia* at the thematic center of many medieval exemplum collections, noting that the prudent possess a certain perspicacity enabling them to anticipate future consequences based on past experience and personal knowledge; they then use this skill as well as the advice of friends to act wisely and perform good works (37-38). Citing Joseph Pieper, Margaret Parker isolates the two main

¹⁸⁷ As Hanning (83) notes, *engin* stems from the Latin *ingenium*. *Engaño* is a derivation of the Vulgar Latin *ingannare* or the Latin *engannum/enganare*, which also originates from *ingenium* according to Du Cange (“Ingenium”). This link is apparent in the phonetic resemblance of the words and shared definitions related to trickery and machinery (Jenkins 235)

components of Prudence as illustrated in *Calila e Digna*: nearly preternatural judgment based on “the objective perception of reality” and a “willingness to take advice from a desire of real understanding” which itself leads to a wise decision (67-8).

To be sure, the counsel given to King Alcos by his *privados* urges prudence as, in fact, do the warnings of the monarch’s wicked wife; Çendubete too displays a near-magical foresight in his apparent knowledge of the Prince’s destiny and how the crisis will finally play out. Yet, the *Engaños* does not dwell on all facets of *prudencia* and particularly not on the positive ones. Friendship barely registers in the text. Alcos never actively seeks understanding and he hardly weighs advice he passively receives, taking all counsel, good and bad, readily and equally. Nor does he consider the future, turning choice into definitive and right action, for he sways repeatedly between ordering and staying the execution of his son and sole heir.

It seems then that the elements of Prudence identifiable in the *Engaños* are those pertaining specifically to interpretation, and the text focuses more on those challenging worldly conditions that require perspicacity than on illuminating some virtuous ideal. According to Keller and Linker, the Indian *niti-shastra* tradition from which works like the *Calila e Digna* and the *Engaños* originate, has a positive component (the wisdom of rulers, the communication of ideas among friends, “el uso digno de la inteligencia”) and a negative component: “la seguridad” (XVII). It is this last need to bolster oneself in a world of fallen signs that is central in the collection. Indeed, George Artola, a specialist in the Seven Sages tradition goes as far as to say that the Spanish version focuses on the aspect of deceit rather than on “demonstrating the wisdom of Çendubete and the other sages as emphasized in all the other texts of both Oriental and Occidental traditions”

(“Review” 40). In other words, the emphasis is on problems rather than solutions, not on Prudence as a whole but on the conditions that demand it. Along these lines, scholars like Harriet Goldberg have pointed to the vice of deception as the unifying principle within many exemplum collections. Her functional analysis of tales from the fifteenth-century *Libro de los exenplos por a.b.c.* identifies a shared interest in trickery. Given the vast range of sources for Sánchez de Vercial’s work, Goldberg suggests that their common focus must derive from “the cumulative popular tradition” and so are extensible to other collections (“Deception” 36). Yet, deception still fails to accommodate signs that are naturally ambiguous without the intervention of an active manipulator, and so the broader category of semiotic *deceptiveness* continues to be the most inclusive rubric under which to place tales of this sort.

Nowhere is the connection between interpretative puzzle and didactic purpose more evident than in the frame story of the *Engaños*, specifically seven-day silence of the prince. In the introduction to his edition of the text, Fradejas Lebrero reads this as a ritualistic test for initiates, possibly of Pythagorean origin (16) and thus the last stage in the prince’s education. In a similar vein, since the prince has completed his studies, one can perceive his muteness as a form of “enlightened silence” within the Eastern philosophical tradition that informs the *Engaños* (Dauenhauser 110). However, these readings overlook the fact that Çendubete requests the prince’s silence for purely practical, not philosophical, reasons—the stars indicate his life will be in danger if he speaks. Should this be a test for the prince, he fails it right away, for he speaks in the worst possible way, telling his stepmother the exact conditions of his silence and putting himself at risk solely because of this.

If anything, the test is designed by Çendubete for Alcos and his counselors who are confronted with the completely indeterminate and “irrecusably polyvalent” sign of the silent youth (Dauenhauser 137). The master goes so far as to hide (“yo esconderme” [l. 208]) to keep himself from being compelled to explain his charge’s behavior, which no one manages to read correctly: the sages wrongly speculate that the prince has been given a performance-enhancing drug and is now experiencing a side-effect (ll. 222-24). Even the immediate interpretative task of determining whether the prince tried to rape his stepmother is contingent on properly deciphering his silence, as the very unwillingness to speak is taken by Alcos as the primary sign of guilt. Conversely, once the prince is able to respond, he is automatically acquitted because the king freely takes his son’s word as the truth. The prince’s eagerness to share his knowledge immediately before a public audience further discounts an equation between taciturnity and his enlightenment, echoing Çendubete’s statement that “the greatest wisdom in the world is to speak” (“mayor saber que en el mundo ay es dezir” [l. 1150]).

The circumstance of silence thus represents a “negation of explanation” in this case (Dauenhauser 88), a state of indeterminate meaning without clues akin to the puzzle of an utterly silent Christ before Herod in the York, Wakefield, and N-Town Passion sequences.¹⁸⁸ But, whereas Herod seeks to wrest understanding of Christ through interrogation and torture in the plays, here the “zones of obscurity” (Dauenhauser 23) created by silence cause the sages to abandon specific interpretation altogether and generate exempla encouraging careful analysis of signs in general. They abandon trying

¹⁸⁸ The original passage in Luke states “interrogabat autem illum multis sermonibus at ipse nihil illi respondebat.” Another famous medieval equation between silence and semiotic ambiguity is, as Peter L. Allen reminds us, the *Roman de Silence*, with its protagonist of ambiguous gender who is named Silence.

to get at the truth and instead concentrate on teaching the king how to look for it. The didactic focus is on the dangers of signs and the need to scrutinize them closely

Dangerous Signs in the Tales

When the actual tale telling of the sages and the king's wife takes place, the emphasis is again firmly on polyvalence of signs and the risks of interpretation. This is immediately apparent in the first tale told to Alcos by his sages, which, as the opener, presumably dictates the tenor of their tale-telling enterprise as a whole. The only one to involve a monarch as the receiver of signs in need of interpretation, "La huella del leon" is chosen as the opening exemplum because "[e]l paralelismo con la conducta del rey Alcos es apreciable" (Lacarra 87). In it, a king is dissuaded from raping a married woman when he understands that the words of a book given to him by his intended victim are meant as advice against the impropriety of such behavior. However, in his haste to depart, the king leaves behind his slippers, which the woman's husband later falsely interprets as a sign that she has been seduced. To redeem their daughter, the woman's family then chooses the didactic technique of an allegorical exemplum ("e agora demosle enxemplo" [ll. 306-07]) to reveal her husband's fears to the king. "If he is wise," they observe, "he will understand it," and he does (ll. 307-08).¹⁸⁹

In the course of this narrative, "La huella del leon" itself embodies the shifting nature of signification, as Biaggini points out (40-62). It begins with a king whom we assume to represent Alcos. However, as the tale develops, it becomes clear that this identification is false; Alcos is represented by the husband who misjudges the meaning of the slippers in his house as a *res significans* of his wife's guilt, a parallel to Alcos's likely

¹⁸⁹ "[S]i el entendido fuere, luego lo entendera"

misunderstanding of his son's behavior. Then, when the husband's marital doubts are related to the king using the allegory of a lion that he believes has trampled through his field, the grounds for signification shift completely: among other representations, the king is signified by the lion, the wife becomes the field, and the king's slippers become the tracks the lion left behind. Understanding the metaphors, the king in the tale continues the semiotic game and assures the husband his field is safe. The first interpretation by the husband is replaced by a new one accepted as truth "parce qu'elle prend en compte la totalité des signes" (Biaggini 61).

We, and perhaps Alcos himself, may have started off with a misreading of the *privado*'s equivalencies. The audience—both we and Alcos—then (hopefully) understand the actual intended association of Alcos with the husband of the tale as well as the interpretative lesson it presents. Finally, the allegorical passage, through which the king evinces his mastery of reading signs, presents a model that the extra-diegetic audience (we and Alcos again) should strive to emulate. The ultimate point, however, embodied in the shifting, polyvalent nature of signs in the tale is that interpretation is tricky and that "[l]a vérité jaillit de la concordance des signes" (Biaggini 62).

This notion is consistent among the remaining narratives of the *Engaños*. One of the most apparently bizarre and puzzling tales in the collection is the "Enxenplo del ladron e del leon, en commo cavalgo en el" (ll. 855-891), which Escobar believes "can not strike the reader as anything but amusing" (52). Despite this claim, the elements of the plot represent various aspects of semiotic interpretation that appear throughout the collection. In this exemplum, a thief sets out to steal an animal from a caravan during a night of torrential rain. Limited by great darkness ("gran escuredat"), "començo de

apalpar qual era la mas gruesa para levarla e puso la mano sobre un leon e non fallo ninguna mas gordo pezcueço que el; e cavalgo en el [“He began to feel which was the fattest to carry it off; he put his hand on a lion and since there was none with a fatter neck, he rode off on him”] (ll. 865-69).

But just as the thief mistakes the lion for a mule, the lion apparently thinks he is being ridden not by a man but by the storm itself, “la tenpestad que dizen los omnes” (l. 870). When day breaks, the thief realizes his mistake and leaps with great haste into the canopy of a tree, though the lion still remains ignorant concerning the nature of his rider. A monkey tries to show the lion the truth by pointing out the thief in his hiding place, but before he can do so, the thief seizes him by “los cojones” (l. 884) and kills him. The tale ends with the lion fleeing for his life, praying God to save him from what he still terms “la tenpestad.”

Critical reactions to this tale have primarily addressed its earlier variants in the Eastern Seven Sages tradition (Artola, “Nature” 23-24) or have broached the incoherence of its narrative elements. Fradejas Lebrero, for one, points to “una cierta incongruencia” as to why a lion should fail to recognize a human being, and to a “contaminación” of the tale in the inclusion of the monkey’s ignominious death (108). Yet, these moments of incongruency are more than a reflection of stylistic lapse, for they highlight the issue of problematic interpretation in the tale and hint at its presence throughout the tales.

First, the catalyst for the plot is the failure of both lion and thief to identify one another because the darkness of a stormy night impedes the ability to scrutinize visual signs; other signifying qualities or *res significandi* like a thick neck are insufficient to derive a correct referent. This high potential for opacity in a post-lapsarian world is, as

we have seen, a key aspect in the consideration of signs among fabliaux, and one of the primary symptoms of the Fall in patristic tradition. Of the twenty-three tales in the *Engaños*, fifteen, or approximately two-thirds, feature as their central focus signs that are inherently difficult to decipher.¹⁹⁰ As in the tale of the thief, proper interpretation of a *res significans* can sometimes be the result of some concomitant obscurity. In “Del bañador e de su muger” (tale 9), for instance, a bathkeeper assumes the impotence of a corpulent prince whose genitals, the sign of his sexual prowess, are apparently hidden by his obesity; only after prostituting his wife to the prince does the *bañador* learn that he has interpreted incorrectly.

Even in the absence of other sensory obstruction, what appears to be a reliable visual sign often is not. Within the supernatural context of a tale like the sixth of the collection, where a succubus disguises herself as a young woman, physical appearance remains deceptive even when directly observed. Yet, the natural world presents its own obstacles to interpretation, as in “Del palomo e de la paloma” (tale 15). A male dove warns his mate not to eat any of the fresh wheat stored in their nest, but returns to find some gone; after beating and pecking his mate to death for disobeying, he discovers that the volume of grain expands and sinks depending on the amount of moisture in the air; thus, natural signs, which Augustine had presented as examples of *res* that reveal their own qualities upon empirical observation in the *De magistro* (10.32) are not transparent signifiers in the *Engaños*.

Often the circumstances in which a visual sign appears, rather than creating an accurate interpretative context, abet false understanding of a *res significandum* that would

¹⁹⁰ A sixteenth tale, the eighth in the collection, which details the magical transformation of male into female, could be added to this count though arguably the change of appearance itself never comes up as a semiotic conundrum.

otherwise be open to multiple interpretation. This is the situation in the opening tale as well. Seen elsewhere, the “arcolcoles del rrey” (l. 304) might signify only the prior presence of the king, but found in the context of a married woman’s room they suggest adultery. So too, the thief quite reasonably assumes that among the beasts of a caravan any thick neck he encounters would be that of a pack animal, not a lion.

A similar misunderstanding occurs in “Del perro e de la culebra e del niño” after a father leaves his infant son for a short time in the protection of his hunting dog. He returns home and is greeted by the dog whose muzzle is soaked with blood, a visual sign that could signify a number of things in the absence of a particular context. But, in the present circumstance which appears to include only the two parties of dog and child, the father immediately slays the dog for mauling his son. Only later does he find the child resting safely beside the corpse of a snake the dog had slain.

The lion’s mistaking the thief on his back for “that which men call ‘the storm’” marks yet another sort of interpretive error, an inability to attach the proper signifier to an unknown referent, in other words, a misnaming (“que dizen los omnes”).¹⁹¹ This linguistic component is absent from analogues in the contemporaneous Hebrew *Mishlei Sendebār* (ll. 616-49) and the late fourteenth-century Persian *Book of Sindibad* (*Sindibād-nāmah*) (69-70), but appears in the Syriac text (mid-eighth to eleventh centuries), where the lion mistakes his rider for “the one of whom I have heard that people call ... the night-watchman” (120, my translation). If this misunderstanding is more plausible than that of the *Engaños*, the bizarre nature of the beast’s error in the Spanish text serves to

¹⁹¹ Keller (*The Book of the Wiles of Women* 35) omits this connotation in his amended translation of “tenpestad” as “the fiend.” Whether or not the text represents scribal misunderstanding, as Keller suggests, the confusion of naming remains central.

exaggerate his inept interpretative skills in a humorous fashion likely to draw the notice of an audience, thus foregrounding the breach between verbal sign and referent.

Varieties of linguistic error feature in two other tales as well. The inexactitude of language appears as a danger in the “Enxenplo de...los tres dones” (tale 17) when a man granted three wishes by his demoness lover first asks to be gifted with women only to find that the non-specific nature of his request has burdened him with too many. Using his second wish to be rid of them, he finds he has no women at all, and so having wasted two of his wishes because of imprecise wording must spend the third restoring all to the way it was before.

On the other hand, rather than promoting the shortcomings of language the eighth tale in the collection presents a situation in which the multifarious nature of verbal signs proves a saving grace. A prince is tricked into drinking from a fountain that changes him into a woman. Because of his comeliness, he wins the sympathy of a demon who agrees to assume the prince’s condition temporarily while he settles his affairs. When the prince returns to satisfy the vow he finds the demon in the form of a pregnant woman and therefore argues that the terms of their oath are invalid based on the demon’s violation of the original wording. The demon had told the prince he would become a “dueña como tu eres” (l. 587) which the latter understands to mean “donzella e virgen” (“damsel and virgin”) excluding the condition of a “muger preñada” (pregnant woman) (ll. 594-95), either because the honorific “dueña” precludes pregnancy by fornication or because the condition of “como tu eres” (“just as you are”) no longer applies. In either case, the demon’s error is precipitated by the possibility of taking the same words in several ways, either generally or in a very exact sense. He assumes the bargain to mean that he must

maintain femaleness in general as opposed to a specific behavioral condition and thereby loses his case. Thus, polysemy provides the prince with the escape clause he needs.

While certainly beneficial for evading demonic obligations, the subjectivity of language also facilitates its exploitation for purposes of deception. The intentional alteration of words (lies), often in conjunction with manipulated *res significandi*, features more often in the *Engaños* than the inherently opaque nature of signs themselves as a threat to interpretation. The “Enxenplo del ladron e del leon” enforces this idea through its monkey episode. Medieval etymologists, drawing on a perceived connection between *simia* and *similitudo hominis*, consistently perceived apes as “endowed with a share of that precious gift, *ratio*, which Augustine had established as the only property that distinguishes man from the beasts” (Janson 76). However, Augustine also established that understanding (*intellectus*) was a property of higher reasoning beyond *ratio*, something apes would not possess (*In Ioannis Evangelium* XV:19).

It is not surprising, then, that monkeys were commonly affiliated with poor interpretation. One marginal image depicts an ape in the guise of a copyist/scribe misinterpreting, consciously or not, the division of “cul-pa” as an obscene pun, while exempla collections describe “the ape who discards the nut on account of its bitter rind,” a common metaphor for the exegete ignorant of deeper signification (Randall, “Exempla” 104). Thus the ape, so frequently depicted in manuscript illuminations, “came to signify the dubious status of representation itself, *le singe* being an anagram for *le signe*—the sign,” calling attention to the easily altered nature of words even as it “draws attention to the danger of mimesis or illusion” in the fallen world (Camille, *Image* 13).

Though the nature of this particular plot demands that the monkey interpret correctly, his fate binds him nonetheless to the notion of semiotic danger and the destruction of meaning. His self-appointed project in seeking out the object of the lion's fear involves verifying the connection between verbal sign and physical referent through visual evidence. Identifying the thief in his hiding place, the monkey attaches a different and more appropriate signifier—"omne"—to the object that had been on the lion's back (l. 882). Unfortunately, the thief undermines this effort at establishing true signification by killing the monkey, perpetuating the post-lapsarian detachment of sign and referent—the lion flees in continued ignorance, calling for liberation from "the storm." The monkey's fall from the tree appropriately enough mirrors the original Fall into a world where the promotion of false signification is intimately allied with sin: here, murder precipitated by an initial theft.

The monkey's ignominious mode of death—by having his testicles crushed—similarly evokes a broader association of castration with the adequacy of verbal signs. Language in medieval texts is commonly imagined in male sexual terms as the begetting of meaning. This connection is plain in a fabliau like "De pleine bourse de sens," where *sens* is a pun referring to testes as well as to the meaning of the tale itself, as in Chrétien de Troye's famous distinction between *matière* and *sen* (Bloch, *Scandal* 73). The severing of meaning from name or referent from sign, "a mutilation in language," is a form of castration, as we have seen regarding the fabliaux (Bloch, *Scandal* 74). The well-known debate in the *Roman de la rose* over whether euphemism or overt naming more accurately conveys the meaning of an object likewise centers on the "coilles" of the castrated Saturn (III, 30). "El bañador" makes a similar equivalence as the theme of

impotence (a metaphorical castration) propels a plot centered on misinterpretation though ultimately the bathkeeper himself is rendered impotent by his misreading when the prince beds his wife. Not coincidentally then, the thief's detachment of meaning in the narrative is accompanied by his genital mutilation of the monkey who had sought to promote a true relationship between name and object.

In eleven other stories, appearances are altered and/or a lie is told to abet similarly unsavory desires like robbery, attempted murder, rape, and adultery. In many of these cases, the interplay of ambiguous appearance and verbal dissimulation is emphasized when a lie is told to force a false interpretation of what has just been seen. Thus, the succubus who disguises herself as a weeping young woman in the midst of a wasteland explains that she is a princess who fell asleep riding her elephant and got lost from the rest of her traveling party. In the tale of the sex-changing fountain, the wicked counselor who abandons the prince explains the latter's absence to the king by observing that he was likely devoured by wild beasts. And, in what is probably the most inventive manipulation of words and appearance in the *Engaños* (tale 10), a procuress woos a married woman for her client by first feeding her dog hot pepper which makes it weep. When her would-be victim wonders at the meaning of this unusual and otherwise inexplicable visual sign, the procuress offers up a suitable false interpretation: the dog was once a beautiful woman who refused the advances of a sorcerer and was subsequently transformed by him into the dog who now bewails her condition. The married woman agrees to submit to the procuress's client for fear of suffering a similar fate.

When these various obstacles to interpretation presented in the “Enxenplo del ladrón e del león” are tallied across the collection, they are found in 19 of 23 tales (see Appendix), suggesting that the ability to gauge the truth of what one sees or hears is the main focus of the text. Those that do not conform to the majority (“[l]as pocas excepciones”) either represent other minor arguments or can be owed to “las características de la transmisión” (Lacarra 87). Whether these situations are entertaining and prompt laughter or not—and some are tragic as we have seen—they surely constitute the “narrative hinge” of the *Engaños*, drawing audience attention specifically to interpretative situations (Goldberg, “Deception” 33). If readers or listeners do laugh at these circumstances, they likely do so, as in fabliaux, both from the uncomfortable recognition that the world is replete with semiotic deceptiveness and from relief that they are able to see through it unlike the victims of the plots. One feels superior to those who remain ignorant while reserving something like awe or admiration for those who possess *engin*, “the virtue *par excellence* of fallen man” and use it to negotiate signs well (Hanning 106).¹⁹² As Goldberg observes, “ingenuity itself is attractive and satisfying to an audience which is privy to the deception, and of course, is not its target” (“Deception” 34). An audience can recognize that they inhabit an absurdly dangerous and unpredictable world where signs are not what they seem and safely “draw back from the abyss” since what they encounter remains fictive (Dettweiler qtd. in Goldberg, “Sexual” 73).

If this directed interest and the responses it can awaken furnish a didacticism of signs in the collection, the *Engaños* also offers morals that reinforce what it otherwise

¹⁹² In his consideration of fabliaux, Roy Percy calls this power to penetrate and make use of opaque signs “mana,” noting that it tends to create “intellectual fascination and the emotional pleasures of laughing at fellow victims and laughing with the expert practitioners of mystifying skills” (“Sentence” 232)

teaches by illustration, a luxury not afforded by the fabliaux. The reasons given for telling the nineteen stories centered on interpretation vary, but the morals most often repeated by the king's counselors and son are that women's actions and words are not to be trusted (2, 5, 10, 13, 16, 17, 18, 19, 23) and that one must weigh things carefully before acting (1, 4, 9, 12).¹⁹³ The king's wife counters with several tales illustrating the untrustworthy advice of privy counselors (6, 8). Though nine tales put forth a possibly "antifeminist" message, the majority do not, so again a critique of women cannot be the unifying theme of the collection. Instead, these morals can be assimilated to an emphasis on the need to carefully decipher the meaning behind words, deeds, and scenes one encounters, to make indeterminate situations determinate; these purposes reinforce the content of the plots they summarize, which is often not the case in the fabliaux.

Where other morals are stated in this group of tales centered on interpretation, they offer more general caveats like a warning against the "artes del mundo" (l. 1464, tale 22) or an observation that the king would surely suffer should he make an error of judgment and execute his son (tale 15); these still do not contradict their plots detailing the manipulation of signs. Such a consistent narrow emphasis is not as evident in other major exemplum collections from medieval Spain. For instance, the twelfth-century *Disciplina clericalis*, which contains many of the same narratives as the *Engaños*, is a book of "tales, moralizations, maxims, and proverbs" (Jones and Keller 16) addressing a wider range of issues including the nature of friendships, the suitability of certain

¹⁹³ Tale 15, "Del palomo e de la paloma," includes a second point reminding the king "quel engaño de las mugeres es la mayor cosa del mundo" (ll. 920-21), which has no relevance to the story preceding it unlike its first moral. Keller omits it from his English translation, presumably because it is a scribal interpolation. I therefore exclude it from those tales reiterating the manipulative power of women. Another tale (number 7), of the honey drop that caused a war, concludes with the notion that one ought to learn the truth before acting and so might be added to this group. Since its plot does not seem to offer this possibility, I do not count it at all among the nineteen narratives that deal with interpretation.

associations (I, II) and proper table manners (XXVI) alongside ruminations on mortality (XXXIII). The later *Conde Lucanor* likewise treats a variety of conundrums related to statecraft including relations with neighbors (39), acquiring land (12), and coping with territorial crises (37).

The Insufficiency of Verbal Instruction

The purpose of an exemplum collection like the *Engaños*, and, as I have shown, of medieval *doctrina* more generally, is not only teaching a particular lesson but “drawing attention in more explicit fashion to the process of teaching and acquiring understanding” itself (Weiss 7). This second facet is made apparent in the emphasis on the pairings of Çendubete/the prince and *privados*/Alcos, in other words on the “dynamics of the relationship between master and pupil” that become an opportunity to explore the nature and limits of instruction (Weiss 7). Ultimately, the central point of the *Engaños* concerning instruction is that the difficulty presented by signs manifests itself in a failure even to teach the need for interpretation; despite Çendubete’s flattering of Alcos’s “entendimiento” and “enseñamiento” (1113) to deflect blame from himself, there is little evidence that the monarch has internalized the perspicacity recommended in the tales told to him. Based on his pattern of fluctuation between ordering death and reprieve, Alcos would likely have changed his mind in favor of execution once more upon hearing another narrative from his wife if the prince had not begun speaking again. Thus, the tale-telling exercise succeeds only in instituting delay, not in inculcating an understanding of interpretation. As the king himself admits, only by the grace of God did he not execute his son (ll. 1104-05).

By attributing the resolution of the crisis to divine intervention, Alcos introduces what appears to be the broader pessimistic point about interpretation in the text: because signs are so ambiguous, complete understanding is rarely, if ever, possible through purely intellectual means. The “[r]idiculous and even hilarious” nature of the king’s vacillation, its repetitive outlandishness, which seems to undermine the didacticism of the *Engaños*, actually directs considerable attention to the limits of learning from the verbal signs of exempla (Keller, “The Literature of Recreation” 198). No matter how strongly convincing or poorly related a particular tale is, for the king “toute narration lui semble valide” (Biaggini 15); every story told sways Alcos either to condemn or spare his son. Moreover, when the prince finally speaks, he clears himself of his stepmother’s accusation not by any demonstrative argument but simply by declaring himself. Because words, for Alcos, seem to have this “vertu d’auto-légitimation” they ultimately have little signifying force and interpretation does not take place (Biaggini 15). Indeed, the tales are interchangeable and are often reordered or attributed variously to the king’s wife or his advisors in other versions of the collection (Weisl-Shaw 736).

The monarch’s ineptitude reflects a textual emphasis on the impossibility of complete comprehension. This point is reinforced in a crucial section of the frame story when the central predicament has been solved and the court is engaged in reflecting on its lessons. Alcos seeks to prolong the interpretative exercise by asking who would have been blameworthy had he executed his son. His sages posit various individuals—the wife, the king, Çendubete, the prince—but again can come to no definitive answer, so the prince enthusiastically offers to show off his knowledge (“mostrar mi fazienda e mi rrazon” [l. 1155]) concerning the puzzle. This is significant because, having attained

complete enlightenment, there was “no one in the world wiser than he” [“en el mundo...non ay mas sabio que el”] (l. 1202); thus, it is a reasonable expectation that his exempla, also the last told in the collection, represent the crystallization of his wisdom, meant to sum up the meaning of the work in some way.¹⁹⁴

The first tale he tells is another slightly more complex version of the same puzzle; this time a number of guests at a feast are killed by drinking milk brought by a maid who did not notice venom drip into it from a snake held in the talons of a raptor flying overhead. After soliciting various guesses from the sages on who is to blame, the prince observes that no one is since it was simply time for each of the victims to die. The ability to make rational judgments from evidence is summarily negated, replaced by fatalistic submission to the mystery of difficult *res significandi* that is hyperbolically lauded as the pinnacle of wisdom. The lesson of this game, and of semiotic deceptiveness in the collection as a whole, thus involves recognizing that conventional interpretation can collapse in the face of difficult signs. Interpretations remain multiple and not one can be said to represent authoritative truth.

This point is also made earlier and most obviously in the final tale told by the sages. Combining manipulated appearance with a direct consideration of interpretative limitations, this narrative acts as a bridge to the discussion of the concluding frame. In it, a scholar who has dedicated himself to studying the wiles of women is tricked by the wife of the man with whom he is lodging. Realizing that he has wasted his time seeking what he assumed was complete understanding, something no man alive can fully comprehend,

¹⁹⁴ In the Syriac version, the boy downplays his wisdom, indicating that it is but that of a fly compared to what the sages know (126). In the Hebrew *Mishlei Sendebār* he tells no tales at all. It is not known, of course, what is in the Arabic text.

he burns all of his books (ll. 1059-63). Despite being voiced by one of the king's advisers, this tale is emblematic of what Keller considers a humorous satire of sages in the work, though its emphasis on scholarly ineptitude makes a philosophical point that ranges beyond simple mockery ("The Literature of Recreation" 197). The remarkable failure to interpret correctly among those who are supposed to be learned constitutes the rejection of a purely rational approach to deceptive signs. This extends to conventional didactic methods as well: the scholar who desires to master the deceptions of women finds only imperfect understanding in books, and Alcos never learns perspicacity by listening to the exempla told to him, for the verbal signs used for instruction are subject to the same limitations as other fallen signs. Their truthfulness, for instance, can vary depending on the reliability of the teller, which is difficult to assess; the king's duplicitous wife can tell stories containing useful lessons about the need to scrutinize advice while lying about the *privados* and the prince, rendering the didactic value of her words suspect.

Conversely, there is no assurance that well-crafted arguments told truthfully are more efficacious. The very first story of a ruler who is an expert interpreter, recognizing both the intention and meaning of exemplum told to him, is clearly meant to furnish a model for what Alcos himself needs to do. He changes his mind after hearing the tale, but had he truly achieved the perspicacity suggested by the narrative, multiple iterations of the same advice would not be needed later. The telling would have ended where it began. As it is, if a transparent point in a well-crafted tale is not internalized, there is little hope that verbal signs themselves can teach.

Perhaps the error of the initial tale lay in its inclusion of good advice from a woman, which primes Alcos for his wife's competing narrative. The queen is able to

undo the sages' teachings with her first foray and can convince by telling one tale to every two related by the *privados*, a total of only four additional tales (3, 6, 8, 11, 14) to their thirteen. Often her tales are of "relatively poor narrative quality...far shorter and less developed" than those of the sages like the incongruous tale of the Boar and the Ape (11) that is a mere nine lines long (Weisl-Shaw 735). Moreover, she often convinces Alcos of his son's guilt entirely on the basis of pathos rather than *verba*. In tale 11, the king is swayed only because he is afraid his wife will take the poison she is carrying in her hand, not because of any logical arguments she makes ("ovo miedo el rrey que se mataria con el tosigo que tenia en la mano" [ll. 739-40]).¹⁹⁵ In fact, she dispenses with tale-telling altogether on the seventh day and simply makes preparations to burn herself alive, which brings the prince closest to being executed (ll. 950-54). This spectacular act is equally if not more successful than any persuasive narrative. These instances further diminish the value of exempla, as the quality of instruction is not the final arbiter of how well one obtains interpretative skill; rather, the talent of perspicacity seems fully dependent on individual capacity, which appears to be a pre-existing quality. Simply put, some get it and some do not, in a manner quite similar to Augustine's Platonic conception of understanding in the *De magistro* where "an individual cannot be taught truth, only led to discover it within himself by means of his intellect" (Gerli, "*Recta voluntas*" 503). This point is made in the remaining tales of the concluding frame.

After revealing his wisdom, the prince acknowledges that there are two in the world wiser than he: a four- and five-year old child whose stories he then narrates (ll. 1208-09). There is no inclusion of children in the variants of *Mishlei Sendebār* (Epstein 285) and the Syriac text simply introduces them and an old man as examples of others

¹⁹⁵ The queen similarly begins tale 6 by weeping and ends it with a threat to kill herself.

who are wise (127). Indicating that children of these particular ages are the wisest essentially proclaims the inspired nature of understanding and the superiority of knowledge that comes without formal education; the prince only begins his studies “a edat de nueve años” (l.88), at which time he still fails to learn anything. Çendubete is able to succeed years later not because he is necessarily a wiser instructor but because he allows the prince to teach himself: the initiative lies entirely with the student. The philosopher’s method involves allowing the boy to absorb on his own the information written and drawn on the walls of his sumptuous classroom; and, because the prince is already “de buen *engeño* and de buen entendimiento” (ll. 183-84, my emphasis), he is guaranteed to learn. Like *engin* and its Latin root *ingenium*, *engeño* implies an “innate or natural quality,” a pre-possessed genius that empowers the prince’s learning much as natural ingenuity enables some to negotiate signs in the tales while others remain ignorant (“Ingenium”).¹⁹⁶ But if the nearly supernatural *engaño* is an ambivalent skill in the exempla, the equally intangible *engeño* reflects its positive equivalent in the process of comprehension.

Ultimately, placing the burden of understanding (to whatever extent it is possible) on the learner resolves the paradox of using a text comprised of verbal signs in need of interpretation to teach the difficulties of interpreting signs, and of using tale-telling to illustrate the didactic insufficiency of the tale-telling enterprise. This conception of instruction also results in a didactic mode like that of the *Engaños* “characterized by its ambiguity and absence of direct admonition” (Gerli, “*Recta voluntas*” 504). The creators or translators of the work can present illustrative stories and statements of purpose

¹⁹⁶ This emphasis on the prince’s mental capability is absent from the Syriac (101) and Hebrew versions (ll.136-39).

emphasizing the component of semiotic interpretation, but there will always be the possibility of missed and multiple readings: those who perceive only the literal content (figured elsewhere in medieval poetics as the nutshell) and those who penetrate the surface plots to grasp some kernel of meaning beneath.¹⁹⁷ The vision we are left with by the frame and its diegesis is “one in which certain rare people just ‘know’ what things mean” whereas others simply do not “get it” (De Looze, *Manuscript Diversity* 121).

If Alfonso “El Sabio” and his learned court were sophisticated readers who “realized that any book could have a variety of meanings,” we may wonder to what degree this immediate audience saw beyond the recreational to the interpretative focus in the collection (Keller, *Alfonso* 55). The timing of the translation right after Alfonso’s coronation makes it tempting to surmise that the lessons of the *Engaños* were intended by Infante Fadrique for a very specific audience: as a *speculum principis* for the new king of Castile, León, and Galicia. Perhaps the otherwise “irresponsible and unstudious” Fadrique, recognizing some fraternal tension and his older brother’s penchant for Arabic popular tales after the recent translation of *Kalilah wa-Dimna*, wished to encourage perspicacity in rulership especially where he was concerned (Keller, *Alfonso* 52).

Eventually the “story of a power struggle at court” represented in the frame of the *Engaños* would play out in the succession disputes and revolts that marred Alfonso’s later reign, with disastrous results for the Infante (Deyermond, “*El libro*” 160). Fadrique was compelled to seek exile in Tunis with his other brother, Enrique, and, though he reconciled with the king in 1272, met his demise five years later, executed on the basis of the king’s interpretation of *res significandi* (O’Callaghan 241). According to

¹⁹⁷ The analogy is at least as old as pseudo-Fulgentius’s *Super Thebiaden*, which observes that “[j]ust as there are two parts to a nut, the shell and the kernel, so there are two parts to poetic compositions, the literal and the allegorical meaning” (239).

Ballesteros, the increasingly irrational Alfonso arrested and hanged his brother out of fear that a close relative would lead a revolt against the throne, a prediction that he had ironically “learned by means of astrology” like his astrologically inclined counterpart in the *Engaños* (qtd in Keller, *Engaños* 55 n. 35). In this case, however, no tale-telling endeavor would delay the king’s interpretation of the prince’s behavior.

The ongoing debate over the purpose of the *Libro de los engaños* has itself generated multiple critical readings overlooking the didacticism of signs in the text; these hardly bear fatal consequences. Nevertheless, reading the book in light of semiotic interpretation offers a valuable means of approaching the themes of deception and prudence identified in the major Spanish exemplum collections such as the *Conde Lucanor* and on their overall instruction. Critics like E. Michael Gerli have also looked closely at Juan Ruiz’s *Libro de buen amor* for its “fascination with the ambiguities of its own meaning,” its exploration of “the temporal nature and limits of language,” yet this same exploration also takes place in the *Engaños* (“The Greeks, the Romans, and the Ambiguity of Signs” 418). Like the Archpriest’s text, the *Engaños* is “both jokebook and textbook” and also should be situated within the broader medieval interest in semiotics and particularly in the fallen nature of signs (Catherine Brown 118). Edmund Reiss’s words concerning the *Libro de buen amor*—“wisdom comes about through recognizing complexity, not through insisting that it be removed; through realizing that apparent signification is not necessarily final or total signification; and through acknowledging that *myrth* and *doctrine* remain intertwined” (134) could very well be describing the *Enganos*. Recognizing this sort of message earlier in medieval Spanish literature

confirms the extent of this focus in didactic genres ranging beyond the doctrinal instruction of religious drama to the practical lessons of the popular tradition.

CONCLUSION: CONTEMPORARY RESONANCE

The popularity of medieval religious drama as a didactic form, the prolific representation of fabliaux in manuscripts, and the broad appeal of tales from the Spanish exemplum collections provide a vast ground in which to examine the importance of teaching semiotic interpretation during the Middle Ages. These genres evince Augustinian preoccupations with how to communicate meaning through signs even as the primary meaning they offer is the skill of interpreting signs itself, whether for the purpose of salvation in religious drama or the practical function of negotiating a fallen world in fabliaux and exempla. This includes an equally Augustinian interest in exploring the relative efficacy of verbal versus visual signs in the communicative process as well as a concern with the pedagogical merit of the literary medium.

Beyond their usefulness for our understanding of medieval didacticism, these genres anticipate important questions that continue to be a part of pedagogy and communication theory to the present day, particularly in an age where visual media are increasingly employed in the creation of meaning. The debate over the didactic value of fictive forms, for example, and the role of visuals, including graphic ones, in learning, persists today. A recent example of violent imagery in the service of *doctrina* is Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, a piece of contemporary filmmaking that most closely resembles a medieval Passion play. In fact, when examining the parallel of the movie to its forebears, Jennifer Trafton comments explicitly on the old issue of generic appropriateness for instruction: "To what extent the medium of drama—whether on a portable stage in medieval England or on the big screen of a modern movie theater—can

and should be used to tell the Christian story is a question still worth debating.” Beyond the issue of genre, much of the controversy over this film related to its extreme violence. Critic Roger Ebert called it “the most violent film I have ever seen” (41) while New York Times reviewer A.O. Scott remarked that it “essentially consists of a man being beaten, tortured and killed in graphic and lingering detail” (E1). At the heart of the negative polemic is the gratuity of Gibson’s violence, called by some “a kind of pornographic catalogue of Christ’s sufferings” that threatens to overwhelm the message of the movie (qtd.. in Goodacre 34).

However, even in the face of such criticisms, there is also recognition that Gibson “has exploited the popular appetite for terror and gore for what he and his allies see as a higher end” (Scott E5). This appears to be the promulgation of Christian instruction through a contemporary affective piety that can only be achieved through visual spectacle. As Scott observes, “By rubbing our faces in the grisly reality of Jesus’ death and fixing our eyes on every welt and gash on his body, this film means to make literal an event that the Gospels often treat with circumspection and that tends to be thought about somewhat abstractly. Look, the movie seems to insist, when we say he died for our sins, this is what we mean” (E1). In so doing, he has “departed radically from the tone and spirit of earlier American movies about Jesus, which have tended to be palatable (if often extremely long) Sunday school homilies” (Scott E1). In other words, Gibson has not only selected the visual medium to best achieve doctrinal instruction; he has also innovated the use of ultra-violent imagery in a manner of medieval religious drama to drive his message home and make it unforgettable. Thus, the technique of the shockingly gory image as an exemplary mnemonic device finds new life at the movies.

Though *The Passion of the Christ* may have created potential opportunities for direct Christian instruction via the big screen in the future, the likelihood of this happening on a wide scale is slim. However, there is no doubt that the makers of visual media, both moving and static, continue to draw on the lessons of the *artes memoriae* beyond the violent scene, particularly in the arena of advertising. The notion that sexual images sell products and that such images are prevalent in ad culture needs little support, though their connection to the mnemonic imagery offered in manuals like the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, thirteenth-century marginalia, and the fabliaux deserves mentioning.

Even the idea that strange or unusual images provide the best value for recollection has a place in contemporary visual advertising. As Paul Messaris observes “[i]n a medium whose very essence is the ability to reproduce the look of everyday reality, one of the surest ways of attracting the viewer’s attention is to violate that reality” (5). A spate of television viewing quickly reveals that “some violation of physical reality is a very common convention in advertising”: a man’s touch turns everything to Skittles candies, a talking gecko interacts with human co-workers as he sells car insurance, and a young man transforms into Betty White on the football field (Messaris 10). Though the specific purpose in such cases is neither to bolster a rhetorician’s memory nor to implant instruction in a student’s mind but to sell products and services, an ancient recall technique continues to be used, though now with the added justification of science. Cognitive psychologist Roger Shepard explains that if we encounter “an object that is novel and yet similar” to something we know in reality, like a face or body that is somehow morphed by software, in essence something surreal, our brains are programmed to take notice (qtd. in Messaris 8).

The need to get attention and remain memorable is in these cases a function of the sheer pervasiveness of images in contemporary American culture. As a nation, “we are exposed to hundreds, even thousands of images and ideas not only from television but now also from newspaper headlines, magazine covers, movies, websites, photos, video games and billboards” on a daily basis, all clamoring for attention (Stokes 13). This differs considerably from the experience of people during the Middle Ages, who, “depending on the social class to which they belonged, may have seen only the relatively few images in their local church throughout their lives” (Miles, *Image* 9). In light of the ubiquity of images, the exploration of visual signs vis-à-vis verbal language and the communicative power of *verba visibilia* that so interested the makers of medieval didactic genres is all the more relevant today.

Contemporary images are “so compelling that we cannot not watch them. They are so seductive that they have revolutionized human social communication. Oral and written communication are in decline because a new form of communication, communication by image, has emerged” (Davis). Cultural critic Sut Jhally goes so far as to propose that media images, specifically those circulated on television, serve as the primary venue for our making of meaning, how we “arrive at answers to the questions of who we are, where we fit in and how the world works.”

Why has this happened? First, we have the widespread availability and popularity of visual media like television, films, and websites for both entertainment and information. Technology makes the further promulgation of images easier than ever before. Anyone with a computer and basic software can create and edit photographs and video, then add his or her content to the existing body of image culture. With

globalization and the concomitant need for interaction, images become sort of a universal idiom with fewer communicative impediments than words, as can be seen in the language-independent visual assembly instructions of multi-national corporation IKEA. Ultimately, though, the motivation lies once more in the brain.

Visual communications scholar Anne Marie Barry has presented research showing that images and even verbal imagery (such as Augustine's woman with teeth "like a flock of shorn ewes" from Song of Songs) are more readily accepted and processed by the human brain, whereas ordinary written text, "experientially remote and less directly emotionally involving" than images is not (56). Such findings show that human evolution built brains "to process visual images with great speed and alacrity. They did not evolve written verbal symbols in the same way" (Barry 56).

But perhaps the most direct cognitive support for Augustine's privileging of imagery in learning comes in the dual-coding theory promoted by Allan Paivio. Widely supported by numerous empirical studies involving students (Sadoski and Paivio Chapter 8), this idea holds, in simplified terms, that verbal imagery is encoded twice by the brain, once in the visual and once in the verbal memory. This quality leads to greater retention and recall with profound implications for educational psychology. Such neurological and cognitive research on human perception "adds new medical information to the study of visual communication and helps us assess the efficacy of existing theories of communication," in this case, the Augustinian notion that *verba visibilia* come closer to natural language (Barry 45). Augustine's supposition has been credited by neuroscience, and the contest between verbal and visual signs seems on the verge of being settled. Indeed, even as he remarks on the rapid decline of reading in *The Rise of the Image, the*

Fall of the Word, Mitchell Stephens expresses enthusiasm about the communicative possibilities of video as a replacement (8-11).

If “[i]mages are fast replacing words as our primary language” as contemporary trends suggest, we must continue to examine the interpretation of visual signs and be concerned with developing and teaching this skill as was done in religious drama, fabliaux, and exempla (Avedon qtd. in Stephens, *The Rise* 11). And so, “we are presented with a new set of challenges: to understand how images and their viewers make meaning...and to consider what it means to negotiate so many images in our daily lives” (Sturken and Cartwright 1). For the authors of medieval didactic genres that foregrounded interpretation, negotiating signs meant recognizing the inherent semiotic dangers in a fallen world, and similar risks must be addressed today with the multiplication of visual signs.

Primary among these is the misconception that images are perfect and vastly superior to words in their communicative power when visuals are also easily manipulated. The same technology that enables home users to create visuals also facilitates their manipulation. Photo-editing software, like Adobe Photoshop, “in effect, democratizes the ability to commit fraud” (Rosen 52). Numerous examples exist of doctored photographs purported to be real and circulated online, most famously those of a tourist atop the World Trade Center on 9-11 as a terrorist-piloted aircraft bears down on him and a great white shark attacking a military helicopter:



(“Tourist Guy,” “Helicopter Shark”)

Such examples of pranks or demonstrations of photo-editing talent are relatively harmless when compared to the manipulation of photos for political purposes as occurred in 2004 when Democratic Presidential candidate John Kerry was added to a photo of Jane Fonda at a Vietnam-War-era protest (Hafner G11) or when committed by journalists like Adnan Hajj, who increased the amount of smoke in an image of Beirut following Israeli bombing in 2006 (Malkin 11).



(Casimiro 76)



(“Fake Smoke Over Beirut.”)

The implications of belief in such cases are potentially more serious. As Ken Light, who took the original photo of Kerry, asked, "What if that photo had floated

around two days before the general election and there wasn't time to say it's not true?" (qtd. in Hafner G11). Doctored photos are not new, of course—dictators like Mao Zedong and Josef Stalin famously airbrushed former friends turned political enemies out of photographs—but the digitization of images, the ease of making sophisticated forgeries and circulating them widely present a particular challenge, especially when coupled with the human tendency to “accept the ‘actuality’ of what we see in the image” (Mirzoeff 125).¹⁹⁸

Beyond photo alteration, professionally produced computer generated images (CGI) continue to blur the boundaries between virtual and simulated reality, as recently witnessed in the movie *Avatar*. Meanwhile, so-called “reality television” is manipulated in the editing room to make situations more dramatic as the need requires to “preserve an illusion: that the shows are authentic and true to life” (Poniewozik). The end result is that “[w]e may find ourselves in a world where...our understanding and acceptance of what we see is questionable” (Rosen 48). Here the biology of the human mind is a negative factor, for although images may be handled better than words in the brain, “visual messages are mostly processed by the unconscious regions of the brain that do not understand that art and mass media are not reality” (Barry 65). In other words, we tend to accept what we see on television or in photographs as “direct copies of reality” the way we would something we encounter in the physical world (Messaris vi). And so, the “adage ‘seeing is believing’ is often applied, not just to natural objects that are being directly perceived, but often to visual representations of objects, people, and events, as

¹⁹⁸ On Stalin’s manipulation of photographs, see David King’s *The Commissar Vanishes: the Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin’s Russia*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 1997.

well” (Hill 124). The warnings of fabliaux and the *Libro de los Engaños* to exercise caution in apprehending visual signs are clearly pertinent in today’s image culture.

The tendency to see and believe may be particularly prevalent among those of the generation who have been exposed to the intensification of visual culture during their formative years. Charles Hill, for one, identifies a dearth of interpretative ability among college students when it comes to analyzing images. Speaking not only of falsified visuals but of those designed to persuade, Hill observes that “[w]hile we are all being increasingly exposed to highly manipulated images meant to influence our beliefs, opinions, and behaviors, very few of us are adequately prepared to analyze and critique these images in order to make informed decisions about them. In fact, many people seem unaware of the rhetorical power of images and of their mediated nature” (119). Camille Paglia further remarks that “young people today are flooded with disconnected images but lack a sympathetic instrument to analyze them as well as a historical frame of reference in which to situate them” (qtd. in Rosen 55).

Given this deficiency, interpretative skills need to be taught to negotiate the visual signs dominating the cultural landscape, a desideratum met by calls for hands-on instruction in visual literacy where currently there is “a neglect of the visual” in college curricula (Hill 124). “Since so many of the texts that our students encounter are visual ones, and since visual literacy is becoming increasingly important for everyday social functioning and even for success in the workplace,” Hill writes, “it would seem obvious that our educational institutions should be spending at least as much time and energy on developing students’ visual literacies as these institutions spend on developing students’

textual literacy” (124).¹⁹⁹ Douglas Kellner echoes this idea as part of his general emphasis on fostering at an early age multiple literacies appropriate to contemporary life (visual, computer, media, environmental, and multicultural literacy among them) beyond the logocentrism of education solely “organized around books and gaining literacy in reading and writing” (“Reading” 33). This develops “a group of competencies that allows humans to discriminate and interpret the visible action, objects, and/or symbols, natural or constructed, that they encounter in the environment” (Education Resources Information Center [ERIC] qtd.. in Stokes 12). Essentially, we have an urgent call to expand semiotic instruction.

The ultimate goal is a practical one notably similar to the didactic purpose I have identified in Spanish exempla (and Old French fabliaux): to furnish a kind of “*sabiduria práctica*” useful for living in a world of signs (Lacarra 192). As Paul Willemen asserts, “education must concentrate, not on the transfer of information nor on the reproduction of value systems, but on the urgent task of equipping people with the necessary ‘thinking tools’ ... so that individuals may become better at assessing the ‘likely’ verisimilitude of any account or representation of the world,” in essence to interpret signs (20). Instructors who teach interpretation “are teaching a way of experiencing the world, a way of ordering and making sense of it” (Berlin qtd. in Duffelmeyer and Ellertson). Such an aim recalls the project of medieval authors engaging a nominalist world full of duplicitous signs; though some of the philosophical underpinnings have changed, the semiotic anxiety remains.

¹⁹⁹ A contrary view is expressed by Stephens, who suggests that we already are capable of understanding what is real and what isn’t in media: “We already watch movies in which bicycles fly and television commercials in which it snows in the desert. For most of us, seeing has already stopped being exactly equivalent to believing” (“Let Pictures Speculate” 115).

Along with this conception of educational content comes an alteration of pedagogical approach. Just as medieval religious drama used *verba visibilia* (props, gesture, scene) to promote the didactic value of visual signs in teaching semiotic interpretation, contemporary instructors are urged to “evolve teaching methods that [appeal] to students’ visual literacy as a means of cultivating greater verbal literacy” and presumably visual literacy as well (Wack 64). This goes beyond running the occasional in-class film to the deep integration of visual media with the aim of making “complex subject matter accessible and engaging” for students accustomed to images as the dominant mode of expression in their lives (Kellner, “Multiple Literacies” 114). Studies show the effectiveness of visual media in achieving these aims; Stokes (14-16) describes a half dozen that illustrate concretely how “using visual treatments in lessons enhances learning” to varying degrees (14). These range from better conceptual understanding when reading a summary with visuals as opposed to one without to improved learning of facts through graphics. Evidence like this is hardly surprising given the long-held belief in the pedagogical usefulness of images and recent neurological findings about how the brain processes them.

For all its proposed benefits, the increased reliance on visual signs for communication, in which education also participates, is not without its detractors. One concern about this expanded role is that the sheer proliferation of images will diminish their emotional impact, that is, their ability to get attention and be evocative and memorable. Writing twenty-five years ago, Margaret Miles warned that “our capacity for vision is—or will shortly be – congenitally fatigued by the sheer volume of images with which most modern people cope” (*Image* 9). Rosen cites the repetitive replaying of the

World Trade Center bombing to the point where a horrific scene is rendered commonplace, but her point applies equally to the depiction of graphic violence and sexuality: images “have, by their sheer number and ease of replication, become less magical and less shocking—a situation unknown until fairly recently in human history” (46). In a nutshell, viewers are becoming jaded, a development that targets the very characteristics responsible for the expansion of visual signs in the first place; whether saturation of images will reach a critical mass upon which they lose their efficacy remains to be seen.

Another prominent criticism is one that revisits Augustinian concerns of genre (in this case, medium) and, specifically, the concept of *usus* versus *fructus* concerning the content of television. The nature of the objection, expressed most vocally by the late Neil Postman in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, is that visuals on television are not conducive to communicating meaningful content. The problem lies in the expectations of those viewing the medium, which are to be entertained above all. Catering to this desire, information on television--whether in a political debate, a newscast, or a documentary--is presented as a series of brief snippets without sufficient (read: boring) context, sensationalized, and dramatized toward the end of entertainment. Thus, it is impossible to arrive at any depth, since in the pursuit of creating amusement for its audience even the content of televised news is “decontextualized and discontinuous, so that the possibility of anyone’s knowing about the world [through it] as against merely knowing *of* it, is effectively blocked” (Postman 113).

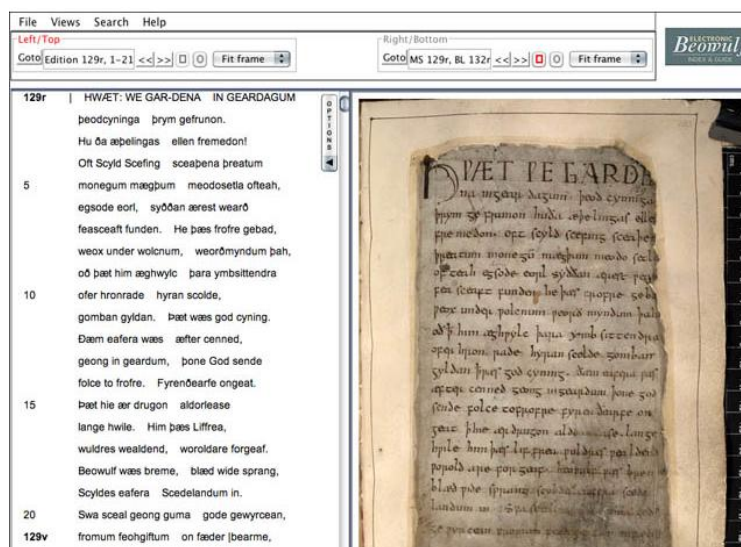
At its crux, this is a matter of superficiality: the issue is that “‘good’ television has little to do with what is ‘good’ about exposition or other forms of verbal communication

but everything to do with what the pictorial images look like” (Postman 88). Postman is not speaking specifically about fictive forms or literature, but his points echo Augustine’s objections to *fabulae* as a venue for instruction. Because audiences view television as amusement they focus only on surface appearance at the expense of any depth. It is difficult, in other words, to delve below the veneer of entertainment and extract any meaningful information from TV.

Postman also explicitly extends these concerns to education via television, as in children’s shows broadcast on public stations. To him, the medium is simply inappropriate for instruction; regardless of whether a program like *Sesame Street* teaches children the alphabet, it first teaches them the larger lesson to assume school will be like television—“that teaching and entertainment are inseparable”—which Postman sees as a concept unprecedented in the history of educational theory (146). This desire for constant entertainment presents a competing notion of what ordinarily takes place in schools and is responsible for a number of social ills including an inability to engage in activities centered “around the slow-moving printed word” (Postman 145). And, indeed, today’s students “very quickly can become bored by slow-moving, traditional lectures and static textbooks; and effecting learning has become even more difficult” (Howard et al 432).

It is difficult to make a case, despite the apparent decline of logocentric learning, that words will cease to be used either in education or in contemporary society, that reading or the teaching of verbal literacy will come to an end. Until we develop some sort of mental communication such as the pre-lapsarian inner language envisioned by Augustine, words always will remain necessary in communication even if their role is diminished. We will never be “forced to communicate via gesture and expression rather

than language” (Rosen 47). The push among proponents of visual media in instruction conceive of it not as a replacement for words but as a supplement to a curriculum grounded in *verba*, a supplement that aims to “achieve an optimal balance between verbal and visual cues in education, interdependence between the two modes of thought” (Stokes 11). Particularly in the study of literary texts, verbal signs will remain primary, but multimedia can be used to enhance “the comprehension of historical, social, and material contexts, which in turn facilitates informed analysis of the texts” themselves (Williams 81). A upper-level course in Anglo-Saxon literature, for example, can involve teaching with digitized sources enriched with multimedia content such as the *Electronic Beowulf*, which includes individual manuscript facsimile pages alongside an edition that provides a glossary, word definitions, Old English grammar, and translation on mouse-over as well as links to additional resources. In this case, students still learn to read and interpret a written text but have the material supplemented with enhanced, primarily visual content “to learn more thoroughly” (“addiscere” in the words of Gregory the Great) (XI, 10:23).



Screenshot of *Electronic Beowulf 3.0* (“Studying *Beowulf*”)

Part of the balance between textual and visual instruction also involves developing an educational approach that counteracts the dangers of television. Drama was also considered dangerous for Christians on account of its surface *fructus* until Hrotsvit “despoiled” the form for Christian indoctrination, a project that would later evolve into its widespread *usus* for semiotic instruction. Just as medieval religious drama brought a visual medium into the service of teaching interpretation, television can be used in a classroom environment as a tool to create critical awareness of what television and media in general do. Rather than preaching a reactionary return to purely verbal instruction, educators like Kellner propose to “teach students to read, analyze, and decode media texts, in a fashion parallel to the cultivation of print literacy” (“Multiple Literacies” 113). There is little chance of visual culture disappearing and so the most appropriate response is to enlist it toward optimizing *doctrina*, the paramount didactic consideration now as it was for Augustine and his medieval followers.

Learning how to use, teach about, interpret, and negotiate signs remains a requisite skill set, an indispensable foundation for the formation of an effective teacher and an educated student alike, whether addressing Scripture, literature, or empirical reality. When we teach students, they must interpret our signs, and our pedagogical rhetoric—the media we choose to present our ideas—is no less determined by the desire to maximize student understanding. Nor are we liberated from the concerns with signification first voiced by Augustine. How to achieve success in semiotic instruction is a pedagogical concern that foregrounds the continued relevance of questions first posed by Augustine and explored in medieval didactic literature.

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APPENDIX A:

Detail of "Christ in the house of Simon the Pharisee." from the *St. Alban Psalter*, St. Albans Psalter Project



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APPENDIX B:

Table of Tales with Semiotic and Mnemonic Emphasis in the *Nouveau Recueil complet des fabliaux*

		Sensory	Verbal	Memory Space?	Obscene Imagery?	Violent Imagery?
Estomi	1	X	X	Bedroom, Deserted Road	No	Yes
Constant du Hamel	2	X	X	Bedroom	No	Yes
Auberee	4	X	X	Bedroom	Explicit	No
Barat et Haimet	6	X	X	Strall House	No	No
Bovir de Provins	7	X	X	Bedroom	Explicit	Yes
La bourse pleine de sens	8	X	X	No	No	No
Les trois aveugles de Compigna	9	X	X	Deserted Road	No	Yes
Joulet	10	X	X	Bedroom	Explicit	Yes
Les trois dames qui troverent l'anel	11	X	X	No	No	No
Le chevalier a la robe vermeille	12	X	X	Bedroom	Euphemistic	No
Le vilain mire	13		X	Strall house, Field	No	Yes
Alouf	14	X		Bedroom, Storage Area	Explicit	Yes
Le Chevalier qui fist les Cons parler	15	X		No	Explicit	No
La Housse partie	16	X		No	No	No
Les braves au cordelier	17	X	X	Bedroom	Euphemistic	No
Le bouchier d'Abeville	18	X	X	Bedroom	Euphemistic	Yes
La borgoise d'Orleans	19	X	X	Bedroom, House	Euphemistic	Yes
Cele qui se fist foutre sur la fosse de son mari	20	X	X	Deserted Graveyard	Explicit	No
Les perdus	21	X	X	No	Euphemistic	Yes
Le jugement des cons	23		Audience Judgment	No	Explicit	No
La damoisele qui ne pooit oir parler de foutre	26		X	Bedroom	Explicit	No
Le prestre cuceffe	27	X		Workshop	No	Yes
Le pescheor de pont seur Saine	28	X	X	Strall House, river	Explicit	Yes
Cele qui fu foutue et desfoutue	30		X	Enclosed Tower	Explicit	No
Les trois mechines	32		Audience Judgment	No	Explicit	No
Le chevalier qui fist sa fame confesse	33	X	X	Bedroom	Suggested	Threat
Berengier au lonc cul	34	X	X	Deserted Woods	Explicit	Threat

		Sensory	Verbal	Memory Space?	Obscene Imagery?	Violent Imagery?
Gombert et les deus clerics	35	X	X	Bedroom	Euphemistic	Yes
La saneresse	36	X	X	Bedroom	Euphemistic	Yes
La vieille truande	37	X	X	Deserted Road	Euphemistic	No
Estula	38	X	X	Sheep pen	No	Threat
Brunain	40		X	No	No	No
Le prestre qui ot mere a force	41	X	X	Road	No	Threat
La male honie	43		X	No	No	Threat
Le curier	44	X	X	Srall House	No	No
Le prestre et les deus ribaus	45		X	Deserted Road	No	Threat
La colle noire	46	X	X	No	Explicit	No
Les trois bocus	47	X	X	No	No	Yes
L'enfant qui fu remis au soleil	48	X	X	No	No	No
Le vilain de Baillieu	49	X	X	Srall house	Euphemistic	No
Les deus chevaux	50	Audience Judgment		Stable	No	No
Les deus changeors	51	X	X	Bedroom, Small House	Explicit	No
Le vilain au buffet	52		X	No	No	Yes
Le sor chevalier	53	X	X	Bedroom	Explicit	Yes
La dame qui fist trois tours entor le moustier	54		X	Srall house	Euphemistic	No
Le pet au vilain	55	X		Bedroom	Explicit	No
Frere Denise	56	X	X	Monastery, private room	Euphemistic	No
La crote	57	X	X	Srall House	Explicit	No
L'esquiritel	58	X	X	No	Explicit, Euphemistic	No
Le chapelain	60	X		No	No	Yes
Brifauf	61	X	X	No	No	Yes
Le vilain de farbu	62	X	X	No	No	No
Celui qui bota le pierre	63	X		Srall House	Explicit	No
La pucele qui voloit vlier	65		X	No	Explicit, Euphemistic	No
La sorsete des estopes	66	X	X	Bedroom, road	Explicit, Euphemistic	No
L'evesque qui beni le con	68		X	Bedroom	Explicit	No
Les tresces	69	X	X	Bedroom	Euphemistic	Yes
La vieille qui oint la pame au chevalier	72		X	No	No	No

		Sensory	Verbal	Memory Space?	Obscene Imagery?	Violent Imagery?
Le maignien qui fôti la dame	73		X	Srall House	Explicit, Euphemistic	No
Le sacristain	74	X		No	No	Yes
La plantez	76		X	No	No	No
Le chevalier qui recovra l'amor de sa dame	78	X	X	Bedroom	No	No
Le povre clerc	79	X	X	Srall House	No	No
Le meunier et les deus clers	80	X	X	Bedroom	Euphemistic	Yes
Le prestre teint	81	X	X	Bedroom, Workshop	Explicit	Threat
La dame qui se venja du chevalier	82	X	X	Bedroom	Euphemistic	Threat
La dame escollee	83	X	X	No	Explicit	Yes
Gauteron et Marion	84	X	X	Bedroom	Explicit	No
Les quatres prestres	85	X	X	See Estormi	No	Yes
L'oue au chapelain	86	X		Srall Chapel	No	No
Le prestre et le mouton	87	X		Bedroom	Euphemistic	Yes
Les deux Anglois et l'anel	90		X	No	No	No
Le prestre et Alison	91	X	X	Bedroom	Explicit	Yes
Le vilain Asnier	92	X		No	No	No
Guillaume au faucon	93	X	X	Bedroom	Suggested	No
Le prestre qui dist la Passion	94	X		No	No	No
Le prestre et la dame	95	X	X	Srall House	Explicit, Euphemistic	No
Les trois dames qui troverent un vit	96		X	Monastery, road	Explicit	No
Le povre mercier	97		X	No	No	No
Le prestre qui abevete	98	X	X	Srall House	Explicit	No
L'anel qui faisoit les vis grans et roides	99	X	X	Garden, open country	Explicit	No
Le prestre comporte	102	X		Rooms, storage, deserted street	Suggested	No
La ferne qui cunquie son baron	104	X	X	Celar	Euphemistic	No
Le fol vilain	106	X	X	Deserted Reads	Explicit	No
Les deus vilains	107	X		Bedroom	Explicit	No
Le meunier d'Arleux	110	X		Bedroom	Euphemistic	No
Charlot le juif	112		X	No	No	No
Le chevalier a la corbelle	113	X	X	Bedroom, Enclosed Tower	Euphemistic	Yes

		Sensory	Verbal	Memory Space?	Obscene Imagery?	Violent Imagery?
Les braves le prestre	115	X		Bedroom	Suggested	No
Le pilion	116	X	X	Bedroom	Euphemistic	Threat
La nonete	117	X	X	Bedroom, convent	Suggested	No
Le jugement	118	Audience Judgment		Bedroom, convent	Explicit	No
Le clerc qui tu repus cerriere l'escrin	119	X	X	Srall house	No	No
Les trois dames de Paris	122	X		Empty street	Explicit	Yes
Un chvalier et sa dame et un clerk	123	X	X	Bedroom	Euphemistic	Yes
La vesceie a prestre	127		X	Bedroom	No	No

Semiotic Interest:

95 of 127 (75%) fabliaux in the *MRCF* involve some kind of interpretative puzzle, visual, verbal or both.

74 involve difficulties of interpreting *res empirically*, almost always abetted by manipulative language.

18 involve manipulation of *verba* alone.

Memorability:

69 of the 95 (73%) create a sense of space similar to that of the *ares memoriae*.

60 of the 95 (63%) contain obscene imagery. 48 involving sexuality, 9 with implied sexual intercourse, 3 with scatological content

29 include violence, 9 more a threat of violence (40%)

75 contain either violence or obscenity (79%)

Just over 20 include both

APPENDIX C: Table of Semiotic Themes in *El Libro de los Engaños*

	Teller	Type of Semiotic Deceptiveness			Depiction of Women
		Linguistic	Sensory	Intentional	
Lion's tracks	Sage	Y	Y	N	Positive, Victimized
Talking parrot deceived by adulterous wife	Sage	Y	Y	Y	Negative
Father's Indulgence leads to son's drowning	Wife	N	N	N	N/A
Bread made from flour used for a poultice	Sage	N	Y	N	N/A
Two trapped lovers helped to escape by adulterous wife	Sage	Y	Y	Y	Negative
Lost prince encounters damoness in wilderness	Wife	Y	Y	Y	Negative
Honey drcp	Sage	N	N	N	N/A
Prince transformed into woman	Wife	Y	N	Y	N/A
Bathhouse manager sells wife to obese prince	Sage	N	Y	Y	Victimized
Crying dog used by procurress for seduction	Sage	Y	Y	Y	Negative, Victimized
Pig dies awaiting figs tossed by monkey	Wife	N	N	N	N/A
Dog mistakenly killed by master after saving child	Sage	N	Y	N	N/A
Cloth used by procurress for seduction	Sage	Y	Y	Y	Negative, Victimized
Thief rides lion	Wife	Y	Y	Y	N/A
Male dove kills female unjustly	Sage	N	Y	N	Victimized
Bread shaped like an elephant	Sage	Y	Y	Y	Negative, Victimized
Three wishes squandered	Sage	Y	N	N	Negative, Victimized
Scholar claims to know the ways of women	Sage	Y	Y	Y	Negative
Poisoned milk*	Prince	N	N	N	N/A
Wise Child 1	Prince	N	N	N	N/A
Wise Child 2	Prince	Y	N	Y	N/A
Sandalwood merchant	Prince?	Y	Y	Y	N/A
Adulterous Friar	Prince?	Y	Y	Y	Negative

*While it does not present content dealing with semiotic interpretation, the tale itself offers the audience an interpretative puzzle