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HUMOR IN THE FABLIAUX

DISSERTATION

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The fabliaux have always held an important place in the study of themes and their migrations from country to country, which is the particular concern of the folklorists. Some one hundred and sixty \(^1\) tales in rhymed octosyllabic couplets appeared in Northern France and England between the late twelfth and early fourteenth centuries, a confluence of streams which can be traced back through the obscure substrata of oral tradition to the popular literature of classical antiquity and the orient, forward through the works of such figures as La Fontaine, Molière, and Maupassant to the present day. Early accounts of the fabliaux dealt predominantly with their importance for this branch of literary studies. \(^2\) It remained for Joseph Bédier to render the Cartesian service of postulating

\(^1\) For the purpose of this study I accept the canon established in the most recent major critical work on the fabliaux which deals at some length with the problem of definition of the genre: Per Nykrog, Les Fabliaux (Copenhagen, 1957), pp. 3–19, 311–324.

\(^2\) See, for example, John Dunlop, The History of Fiction (Edinburgh, 1814); Victor Leclerc, "Les Fabliaux," in Histoire Littéraire de la France, XXII (Paris, 1856); C. Aubertin, Histoire de la langue et de la littérature Française au moyen âge..., I–III (Paris, 1875–1878); and Ch. Formentin, Essai sur les Fabliaux français (St. Etienne, 1877).
two distinct approaches to a critical evaluation of the fabliaux,\(^3\) which we might designate the diachronic and the synchronic. Bédier's study divides sharply, diachronic concerns taking precedence in the first part, "La question de l'origine et de la propagation des fabliaux"; synchronic dominating in the second, "Etude littéraire des fabliaux". There is very little interrelation between the two parts. The first division attempts to minimize the importance of source studies in understanding the French fabliaux as we have them by attacking directly the theory of oriental origin strongly favored at the time by Gaston Paris.\(^4\) His second division begins by advocating a novel approach which would obviate the need to consider sources at all:

Une époque est responsable des récits dont elle s'est amusée, même si elle ne les a pas inventés. En effet,—est-il nécessaire de le marquer?—bien que la plupart des contes puissent indéfiniment circuler, chaque recueil de contes révèle pourtant un esprit distinct.\(^5\)

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\(^5\)Bédier, p. 290. Nykrog's recognition of the importance of this statement as a critical principle is worth quoting: "Le mérite principal de cette dernière partie de l'étude de Bédier est...d'avoir signalé avec force que les fabliaux posent un problème, et d'avoir préconisé la méthode qui doit mener à la solution de ce problème...considérer un genre littéraire propre à une époque déterminée, comme l'expression de l'état d'esprit de son publique historique."
The major concern of Bédier's synchronic study of the fabliaux is an attempt to explain the nature of the spirit they reveal, which he does by tracing relationships between them and the literary and social background of the thirteenth century when they chiefly flourished. The present study will be of this type. It has been undertaken in the belief that a thorough analysis of the humor of the fabliaux can illuminate the spirit which animates them in ways not previously recognized.

In attempting to define the nature of the fabliaux as a literary form, Bédier first pointed out certain relationships between the fabliaux and other literary genres prevalent in the thirteenth century; he then distinguished the fabliaux from these others by associating them with a certain social group, the newly ascendant middle class:

La moitié des Œuvres littéraires du XIIIᵉ siécle sont animées du même souffle que les fabliaux. Ils ne sont point des accidents singuliers, négligeables; mais il existe toute une littérature apparentée, où ils tiennent leur place déterminée, comme un anneau dans une chaîne, comme un nombre dans une série.(Page 359.)

As evidence for the close affiliation between the fabliaux and other literary forms, Bédier cited what he called the "mépris brutal des femmes"(page 390), typical not only of the fabliaux but of countless dits moraux, of the Roman de Renart, and of Jean de Meun's
continuation of the *Roman de la Rose*; the same strange hostility directed against individual members of religious institutions by writers sufficiently devout not to question the virtues of the institutions themselves; and the recurrence of that spirit of light mockery, unrestrained in its childlike enthusiasm by artistic or moral pretention, which animates both the fabliaux and the beast fables (pages 362-363). This, says Bédier, is one side of the literature of the thirteenth century, the side with which the fabliaux show direct sympathy of inspiration. But the place of the fabliaux in the thirteenth century is shown as clearly when we compare them with the other side of the literary scene, for here we have, not indeed a sympathy of inspiration, but a detailed and complete antipathy between the realistic spirit of the fabliaux, the *Roman de Renart*, and the second part of the *Roman de la Rose* on the one hand, and the idealistic spirit of the troubadour lyric and the romances of the Round Table on the other (pages 365-368). This dichotomy is to be explained, according to Bédier, by the simple fact that the two groups of liter-
ary works correspond to two distinct publics, as sharply
divided socially as the literary works are aesthetically.
The romances of the Round Table, with their reverence of
women, their supernatural trappings, and their idealism,
reflect the world of chivalry. The fabliaux, with their
irreverence, their ironic view of life, and their down-
to-earth realism, reflect the world of the bourgeois:

Il est exact, en effet, que les fabliaux sont
originrairement l'oeuvre des bourgeois. Le genre
naquit le jour où se fut vraiment constituée
une classe bourgeoise; il fleurit concurremment
a toute une littérature bourgeoise. (Page 371.)

The fabliaux evolved from the middle class, for it and
by it, says Bédier.

The statement is categorical, but very little
evidence to support it is forthcoming, beyond the debat-
able assumption of chronological coincidence, which, as
Nykrog points out, can be extended to cover "toute la
littérature courtoise, narrative comme lyrique, en
langue d'oïl" (page xl). Bédier is forced to recognize,
indeed, in the face of considerable evidence, that the
division of neither social classes nor literary modes
is as sharp as he initially suggests. Almost from its
inception the chivalric epic, and later the romance,
showed signs of "contamination" by the spirit of the
fabliaux. Furthermore, it is clear from the prologues

7To this source Bédier would attribute the comic
boasting in the Pèlerinage de Charlemagne à Jérusalem,
the obscenity in the parody chanson de geste Audigier,
to a number of fabliaux, often not the least offensive, that they were meant, not for the ears of artisans and tradesmen, but for members of the high nobility and their wives. What Bédier calls the "curious historical fact" that such diverse literary modes could give pleasure to the same audience is explained on the basis that both have essentially the same end in view—amusement (page 434), but this is surely to put so much weight on the word amusement that more problems are raised than answered. Whatever the objections, Bédier clings to his central contention, that the fabliaux "étaient le produit de ce double agent: l'esprit bourgeois, l'esprit du jongleur" (page 426).

In spite of the lack of evidence offered by Bédier in support of his theory, it won almost universal acceptance, and became until recently a part of literary historical dogma. Even writers who recognized

the antics of the giant Raincart in Aleschane, the portrait of Ernaut de Girone in Aimery de Narbonne, and the heckling of the hero by the citizens of Crléans in Aiol. One might add certain passages from the Tristan story.

See, among others, La Dame qui se venja du Chevalier (VI, 31), Les trois Ieschines (III, 76), and Les trois Chanoinesses de Coulomne (III, 137). References are to the Recueil Général et Complet des Fabliaux des XIIIe et XIVe siècles, ed. M. Anatole de Montaiglon and Gaston Raynaud, 6 vols (Paris, 1872-1890) hereafter cited as MR.

For example, Hermann Suchier and Adolf Birch-Hirschfeld, Geschichte der französischen literatur von den ältesten zeiten bis zur gegenwart (Leipzig, 1913), state that "im wesentlichen sind die fabliaux...nicht aus den Ritterkreisen, sondern aus dem von Behagen und Wohlstand erfüllten Bürgertum hervorgegangen." C.H.C. Wright, A History of French Literature (New York, 1925), says: "These
objections to Bédier's theory hesitate to abandon the central hypothesis. Jessie Crosland, for example, deals with the fabliaux under the general heading of middle class literature, although she admits the difficulty that they are "so anti-bourgeois, so anti-capitalist, so obsessed with the hatred of wealth and money-making which were precisely the characteristics of the bourgeois community of that time."^{10}

We can surely go much further and declare that none of the qualities characteristic of the fabliaux which led Bédier to attribute them to bourgeois influence can legitimately be so interpreted. We do not know too much about middle class literary taste in the middle ages except what has been deduced by circular argument from the fabliaux themselves. But there seems little reason to assume any such startling change as would be necessary to transform the medieval middle class conscience into that verse compositions...representing, as they did, the spirit of a class which was vulgar where it is now prosaic, ...are an expression of the bourgeois spirit which grew more and more important and stood against the aristocratic society literature." Paul Zumthor, Histoire littéraire de la France médiévale (Paris, 1954), still insists that the fabliaux "semblent marquer l'émersion d'une littérature plus spécialement appropriée à la bourgeoisie citadine." The same view is current among those who have studied the French fabliaux in the course of Chaucer criticism. Thus W.W. Lawrence, Chaucer and the Canterbury Tales (New York, 1950): "The French form of the fabliaux...was particularly the expression of the middle class." Charles Muscatine, Chaucer and the French Tradition (Berkeley, 1957), also sees "the naturalistic style as...adjusted to a particular [bourgeois] cosmos."

of the Tudor period, when its primary features, according to Louis B. Wright, were piety and morality. Even the romances were expurgated to conform to the delicacy of the Elizabethan tradesman's taste.\textsuperscript{11} There were, of course, renegades among the bourgeoisie in Elizabethan times to whom lewd tales appealed, just as there must have been in the middle ages. But in general the best interests of the bourgeoisie are served by preserving the social order as far as it is within their power to do so, by upholding morality and the social conventions, and by strictly eschewing any taint of vulgarity which might threaten to drag them back to the level of the \textit{vilain}, from whom the middle class merchant or tradesman strives to maintain his dissociation. In point of fact the characteristic features of the fabliaux, the iconoclastic mockery, the immorality, the obscenity, which are almost universally present, are just those features which we would expect to be most antipathetic to middle class culture as we know it at any other time. While the fabliaux may have found an audience among the bourgeoisie on occasions, therefore, it seems extremely unlikely that it could have been a middle class milieu which produced them.

Such, indeed, is the contention of Per Nykrog in his recent systematic attack on Bédier's position, where he

\textsuperscript{11}See Louis B. Wright, \textit{Middle Class Culture in Elizabethan England} (Chapel Hill, 1935), pp.100 ff.
uses evidence derived from a variety of sources to argue that the fabliaux, far from being a middle class genre, in fact formed an integral part of courtly literature. He reconsiders the evidence for a courtly audience already admitted by Bédier, such as the prefaces some fabliaux writers obviously address to members of the higher nobility, and augments this with accounts, from other works, of fabliaux recitals before the aristocracy (pages 20-25). He also examines the manuscripts, and discovers fabliaux and courtly genres mixed together in such confusion that those who had the manuscripts compiled seem to have made no distinction between them (pages 25-27). He examines the presentation by fabliaux writers of intimate details from the daily lives of aristocrats, bourgeois, and vilains, particularly, since these are the most common, descriptions of banquets, and discovers that the former are presented seriously as sumptuous feasts, while the latter are treated in a patronising and comic spirit (pages 91-93). An analysis of the plots of the fabliaux shows that a majority deal with erotic themes, the only other significantly large group being that comprised of stories involving a civil or ecclesiastic court case. This is cited as further proof that the taste of the audience for the fabliaux resembled that of the courtly aristocratic society, since "il s'intéressait surtout aux affaires érotiques, mais aussi, quoique beaucoup
moins, aux affaires juridiques ou pseudo-juridiques" (page 58). Further careful analysis of the fabliaux dealing with adultery or seduction shows that, while the priest suffers humiliations far greater than anyone else, the knight, whether as husband or lover, never comes off as badly as the bourgeois or vilain. Perhaps Nykrog's most impressive arguments for an aristocratic audience stem from his discovery and documentation of a good deal of parody in the fabliaux, particularly of the courtly love conventions, which presupposes an audience thoroughly familiar with the literature in which these conventions were treated seriously, familiar sometimes, indeed, with a particular romance. From this evidence Nykrog concludes that the fabliau was "un burlesque courtois":

> La satire se dirige contre les personnages de rang inférieur, qui singent les manières des nobles sans pouvoir arriver à se donner les allures de la vraie courtoisie... le fabliau est très souvent une parodie de la courtoisie, mais loin de viser l'aristocratie, cette parodie se moque des classes qui lui sont inférieures. Le fabliau paraît donc être le genre par lequel les nobles s'amusent au dépens de la "courtoisie des vilains". (Page 104.)

We are justified, on the basis of Nykrog's arguments, in accepting a predominantly aristocratic audience for the fabliaux. At least we can infer that the writers or redactors of fabliaux assumed an aristocratic audience in working for some of their effects,
were familiar with the mores of the aristocratic milieu, took care not to offend its members on points of factual representation of courtly custom, and avoided showing aristocrats in circumstances which reflected disparagingly on their order. This is no more than we would reasonably expect. A *jongleur* could no doubt rely on a bourgeois, or, if hard pressed, even on a *vilain* to provide him with a meal or a night's lodging, but for his livelihood, for gifts of money or clothing of any substance, he would have to depend on aristocratic patronage. Such is clearly the implication of the fabliau *Les Putains et les Lechêors* (*MR*, III, 175), in which God, having formed the three orders of man without considering minstrels and prostitutes, commits the former to the care of the knights, the latter to the care of the clergy. The author's complaint that the knights, in contrast to the clergy, are extremely remiss in their duties, merely emphasizes the fact that, for better or worse, they were the minstrels' only hope of support. Such support would not be gratuitous. An aristocratic taste, therefore, is what the fabliau writer would undoubtedly have sought to gratify.

But establishing the audience for the fabliaux does not necessarily define their nature, and a logical leap is involved in Nykrog's conclusion that they formed "un genre courtois burlesque." Who or what is mocked in the fabliaux can be established only on a
A careful reading of the texts, and Nykrog's interpretations of the comic intent seem questionable at times. It will be necessary to re-examine in some detail a number of examples of parody which he cites as evidence for burlesque humor.

The fabliau Aloul begins with a description of the sweet, gentle month of April, complete with the singing of skylarks, and introduces a young girl walking barefoot in the early morning through the dew of her rose garden. As Nykrog says, one could mistake the fabliau at this point for a lay by Marie de France. Then the priest appears:

Il erent si tres pres voisin,
Entr'aus deux n'avoit c'une selve.
Moult e rt la matinee bele,
Douz et souez estoit li tens,
Et li prestres entra leenz,
Et voit la dame au cors bien fet.
Et bien sachiez que moult li plest,
Quar volentiers fiert de la crupe!

The final line certainly jolts us out of our reverie, but what exactly is the comic effect of this sudden reversal of the tone? To make us laugh at the priest whose vulgarity becomes apparent when he tries to ape his betters at the game of courtly love? No indeed, for the priest has made no such pretension. The pseudo-

\[12\text{MR, I, 255.}^*\text{They were very close neighbors, with just a hedge between them. It was a beautiful morning, the weather mild and delightful, and the priest came out and saw the lady with the shapely body. And you can be sure she pleased him, for he would willingly have knocked her up.}^*\]
courtly tone has been entirely the creation of the author. The effect of relating the ideas in the priest's mind with such forthright indelicacy is to prick the balloon which can only have been inflated for this express purpose. Not the priest, but the courtly setting is the subject of the parodic attack here, for in the harsh retrospective light of the priest's revealed thoughts it seems both chimeric and effete.

A more striking example of misreading, perhaps, is from Celle qui se fust foutre sur la Fosse de son Mari:

Je avoie mis tout mon cuer
En une dame que j'avoie,
Et assez plus de moi l'amoie,
Qui ert bele, cortoise et sage.
Ocise l'ai par mon outrage!
- Ocise l'as? Coment, pechierre?
- En foutant, voir, ma dame chiere!
Ne je ne voudroie plus vivre!

To cite this as an example of burlesque humor, as though the joke were the inadvertant exposure by the squire of his failure to understand what courteous conduct under the circumstances would demand is to hopelessly misinterpret the whole situation. The line which shatters the courtly tone is as perfect in its effectiveness as the conventional lament of the desolate lover which establishes it. They exactly parallel the disparity between the widow's feigned grief for her husband and

13 MR. III. 118. "I had set my whole heart on a lady I had, and I loved her more than myself, for she was beautiful, courteous, and prudent. I killed her with my wildness!" "You killed her? How, you sinful man?" "In truth, by fucking, my dear lady! And now I have no wish to live longer!"
the natural desire which will shortly make a mockery of it, for in the same spirit as that in which she has been approached the woman soon accedes to the squire's solicitations, desiring to die in the same way as his beloved. It is the squire's fictitious complaint and the wife's hypocritical grief which are ludicrous, and the terse, deliberate sabotaging of the one clears the way for the practical dismissal of the other.

Similar arguments could be offered against all the instances of parody which Nykrog accepts as evidence of burlesque, but since the nature of the humor in the fabliaux is the subject of this study, one further example of a slightly different sort will suffice here for the present. The fabliau *Les Deus Chevaus* by Jean Bodel opens as follows:

Cil qui trova del Morteruel  
Et del mort Vilain de Bailluel  
Qui n'ert malades ne enfers,  
Et de Gombert et des .ii. Cleres  
Que il mal atrait a son estre,  
Et de Brunain la vache au prestre  
Que Blere amena, ce m'est vis,  
Et trova le Songe des Vis  
Que la dame paumoier dut  
Et du Leu que l'Oue decut,  
Et des .ii. Enviaus cuivers,  
Et de Barat et de Travers  
Et de lor compagnon Haime,  
D'un autre fablel s'entremet...

Such a recital, says Nykrog, would have been greeted by a gale of laughter when delivered before an audience of

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14MR, I, 153.
nobles, for they would immediately recognize an allusion to the opening of Chrétien de Troyes' _Cligès_:

Cil qui fist d'Erec et d'Enide  
Et les Commandements Ovide  
Et l'Art d'Amours au romanz mist  
Et le Mors de l'Espaule fist  
Del rol Marc et d'Issaut la Blonde  
Et de la Hupe et de l'Aronde  
Et del Rossignol la Muance  
Un novel conte recomance...

The resemblance is striking, and Nykrog is surely right in concluding that parody is intended. But against whom does Jean Bodel expect the laughter to be directed? Against himself, because unlike Chrétien he is not capable of depicting the noble subjects and delicate sentiments of the romance and the _ars amandi_? Or against Chrétien, because when applied to a list of humble fabliaux his pretentiousness is exposed and rendered comic? Surely again the latter must have been Jean Bodel's intention. Self-effacement may have been a standard comic device among medieval authors, but the humor always stems from the fact that it is obviously ironic. It is funny for Chaucer to disclaim all knowledge of love when his reputation as a love poet is already secure, but no such irony is apparent here. The joke, on the contrary, is on Chrétien. While recognition of parody in the fabliaux makes a valuable contribution to understanding their intrinsic nature, it does not justify our classifying them automatically as burlesque.
This is made clearer when we examine those fabliaux, some one in ten, which feature a form of litigation. Significantly Nykrog neglects to examine these in any detail, although he has made a cursory summary of them as a group, and the humorous intent in many of them is obvious. Justice in the romance is treated ideologically, that is with profound seriousness as one of the mainstays of the courtly ethos, which the romance works to idealize, to glorify, and to sustain. Traditionally the feudal lord, as the dispenser of justice, maintained the social order and resolved crises which threatened its dissolution. The issues brought before the courts in the fabliaux, however, are often trifling or absurd, judgment is often arbitrary or perverse, and the end result is generally to reduce the adjudicators to laughter, rather than to impose the decrees of a scrupulous justice upon the plaintives. Why does Nykrog not cite these fabliaux as examples of burlesque? Obviously because they cannot be made to fit into the scheme. It is possible, in dealing with erotic themes, to maintain a sharp separation between the aristocratic lover with his lady, both practiced in the arts of courtly love, and the vilain or bourgeois with his mistress, unsuccessfully trying to emulate their example. Although I do not think it happens, a fabliau writer could give a burlesque description of rustic romance, but in the court trials no such
separation is possible, for the courts are demonstrably the same, whether the case is a serious one or a mockery. We do not have bourgeois trials, only the trials of bourgeois, and consequently the introduction of comic episodes into juridical affairs will serve to mock the institution rather than the litigators.

Nykrog's explanation of the fabliaux as a "genre cortois burlesque" is hardly satisfactory. Even if we could accept his examples of parody as demonstrating a burlesque intention on the part of the author, the number of fabliaux in which such parody occurs is not large, the parodic episodes when they do occur are often sporadic and tangential to the main plot, and there seems no way of connecting the comic intention which Nykrog finds here with that in the great majority of fabliaux which remain. There are also some of the more startling and characteristic features of the fabliaux which the theory leaves completely unexplained. Nykrog glances at the obscenity in the fabliaux, for example, and agrees that it is used in a deliberately comic way, but fails to show how it in any manner

15 There is evidence of clear or extensive parody in eleven fabliaux, Aloul(MR.I,255); Le Prestre et Alison (MR.II,6); Celle qui se fit foutre sur la Fosse de son Mari(MR.III,118); La Dameselle qui ne pouoit crier parler de foutre(MR.III,81); La Sainereuse(MR.I,289); Le Chevalier qui fit parler les Cons(MR.VI,68); Les Deux Chevaux(MR.I,157); Sire Hain et Dame Anieuse(MR.I,97); La Dameselle qui se joit(MR.V,208); La Borogoise d'Orients(MR.I,117); and Le Fol Vilain, ed. Charles H. Livingston, Le Jongleur Gautier le Lou, Harvard Studies in Romance Languages, Vol. XXIV(Cambridge,1951), pp. 147-158. Doubtful or fleeting parody can be found in some sixteen others.
contributes to the idea of burlesque, although one would have expected it to be a principle weapon in the hands of an author exploiting the humor of the vulgarly inferior social orders.

We may suspect that Nykrog is guilty of some overcompensation. Concerned throughout his book to refute Bédier's contention that the fabliaux formed a bourgeois literary genre, he is forced to argue largely on Bédier's ground, and having proved to his satisfaction that the audience was a courtly one, he concludes also that the humor must have a courtly basis, must be, in fact, burlesque. At least Nykrog's thesis explains why the fabliaux were comic poems, which Bédier's thesis failed to do, but he does not satisfactorily explain how they were comic.

We are therefore brought to something of an impasse. Bédier, examining the spirit which informs the fabliaux, that is working from the point of view of authorship, associates them with the bourgeoisie. Nykrog, working primarily from the point of view of the audience, reverses the coin and claims them for the aristocracy. We cannot, obviously, simply combine the two views and explain the fabliaux as a bourgeois product meant for courtly consumption. But it is possible, while granting Nykrog's claim for an aristocratic audience, to escape from the social approach to authorship altogether.

In formulating their explanations of the fabliaux
both Bédier and Nykrog draw attention to chronological coincidences. Bédier points out that the fabliaux appear at the same time as the middle class establishes itself, Nykrog that the fabliaux appear more-or-less synonymously with the courtly romances and lyrics. To these might be added a third coincidence, that the period also witnessed the foundation and rise of the universities, particularly in such northern centres as Paris, Provins, Amiens and Orléans, where the fabliaux themselves blossomed. Jessie Crosland relates the two events: "Of the literature now under discussion [the fabliaux] the authors are largely indigent, semi-literate, witty ex-students, unfrocked monks and wandering scholars, a product of the university towns who had their headquarters at Paris" (page 144). That the universities of the thirteenth century provided a background atmosphere by no means inimical to the manners and morals of the fabliaux may be gathered from contemporary accounts by such writers as Jacques de Vitry and Roger Bacon.  

16 Jacques de Vitry habitually exaggerates to make things seem as bad as possible, but supporting evidence indicates that his account is based largely on fact: "Tunc autem amplius in clero, quam in alio populo, dissoluta, tanquam capra scabiosa et ovis morbida, pernicioso exemplo multos hospites suos undique ad eam affluentes, corrumpet, habitatores suos devorans, et secum in profundum demergens. Simplicem fornicationem nullum peccatum reputabant: meretrices publice ubique per vicos et plateas civitatis passim ad lupinaria suo clericos transeuntes quasi per violentiam pertrahebant. Quod si forte ingredi recusarent, confestim eos sodomitas post ipsoos con clamantes dicebant. Illud enim foedum et
Bédier takes it as certain that a large number of fabliaux were composed by *clercs errants*, that is to say by "ces déclassés, vieux étudiants, moines manqués, défroqués, qui composent la 'famille de Golias,' *vagi scholares, clericici vagantes, goliards, goliardois, pauvres clerces*" (page 390). The skill shown by the authors of fabliaux in handling the octosyllabic couplet and in conforming to the rules of rhyme, and their familiarity with such rhetorical figures as *descriptio* convinces Nykrog that "tous les auteurs des fabliaux avaient passé par les écoles" (page 103). Further evidence for the possibility that fabliaux were written primarily by clerks can be drawn from Nykrog's analysis of the plots of fabliaux with erotic themes, which reveals that "les clercs écoliers...inconditionellement

abominabile vitium adeo civitatem, quasi lepra incurabilis et venenum insanabile, occupaverat, quod honorificum reputabant, si quis publice teneret unam vel plures concubinas. In una autem et eadem domo scholaret superius, prostituta inferius. In parte superiori magistri legebant, in inferiori meretrices officia turpitudinis exercabant. Ex una parte meretrices inter se, et cum leonibus litigabant; ex alia parte disputantes et contentiose agentes clerici proclamabant!" Quoted from Hastings Rashdall, *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1895), II, 690. The whole section "Student Life in the Middle Ages," 593-716, is interesting and well documented. Roger Bacon has nothing like this wealth of detail, and gives a fairly conventional run through of the seven deadly sins, but the attribution of most to the sins of gluttony and lust, which are singled out, is probably significant: "Et ideo cum juvenes so dant peccatis luxuriae et gulae, et per consequens irae, et invidiae, et superbiae, et acediae, non possunt aliquid diemum facere in studio." From "Compendium Philosophiae," Fr. Rogeri Bacon: Opera Quaedam Hactenus Inedita, ed. J.S. Brewer (London, 1859), 1, 412.
partagent le rôle d'amant heureux avec les chevaliers" (page 136). An examination of the portrait of clerks where they appear in the fabliaux confirms the impression of Guerlin de Guer that "les clercs sont bien les figures les plus sympathiques de notre galerie." A passage in the *Chroniques de Saint Denis*, noted by Bédier, is assumed by Charles H. Livingston to tell us that "the clerks were often writers of fabliaux by profession," although this interpretation can hardly


De Normandie sont venuz
.1111. normanz clers escoliers;
Lor sas portent comme coliers,
Dedanz lor livres et lor dras.
Molt estoient mignoz et gras,
Cortois, chantant et envoisiez
Et en la vile bien prisiez
O il avoient ostel pris.

"Four Norman scholar-clerks came from Normandy, carrying their bags, filled with books and clothes, as though they were porters. They were plump and handsome, courteous, singing, and sociable, and well-liked in the town where they took lodging." Such a description can be duplicated in many other fabliaux.

18 Charles H. Livingston, "The Jongleur Gautier le Leu," The Romanic Review, XV (1924), pp. 1-67. The passage from the *Chroniques de Saint Denis* is as follows: "Il avient aucune foiz que jugleor, enchanteor, goliardois, et autres manieres de menesteriex s'assemblent aus corz des princes et des barons et des riches homes, et sert chacuns de son mestier au mieuz et au plus apertement que il puet, pour avoir dons ou robes ou autres joiaus, et chantent et content noviaus motez et noviaus diz, et risies de diverses guises, et faignent a la loangence des riches homes quanque il puent faindre, pour ce que il leur plaisent mieuz." Quoted from The Latin Poetry commonly attributed to Walter Mapes, ed. Thomas Wright (London, 1841), p. xiv.
be conclusive because of the vagueness of such terms as "goliardois" and "risies". Livingston thinks that Gautier le Leu, one of the better known authors of fabliaux, was himself probably a clerk, who may have had some trouble with the church or with one of the religious orders. Less disputable evidence is available from the fabliaux themselves, for we are actually told in some that the author was a clerk. Such is the case in the following:

Uns jolis clercs qui s'estudie
A dire chose de qu'on rie
Vous vuet dire chose novelle.
    Le pauvre Mercier(MR,II,114).

Oiez, seignor, un bon fablel
Uns clers le fist...
    Les trois Dames...(MR,I,168).

Engerrans li clers, ki d'Oisi
A esté et nés et nori...
    Le Meunier d'Arleux(MR,II,28).

There are other fabliaux in which clerical authorship is possible but not certain. The close association of clerks with the fabliaux can sometimes be inferred from casual remarks in the texts of the poems. For example, a clerk is petitioned by his host to tell a story, and replies thus:

    Sire, fait il, ne sai commant
Fables deisse, que ne sai,
Mais une peor que g'i ai
    Que je ai eü, dire bien

19We might add, for example, the author of Le Prestre et Alison(MR,II,8), if Guillaume le Normand is to be identified with Guillaume le Clerc de Normandie, on which question see Bédier, p.481.
Car de fable ne sai rien.  

The obvious implication is that the clerk is expected to know fabliaux, and is almost apologetic that he does not. His disclaimer, of course, may be purely expedient, since the fright he describes is designed to reveal the presence of food, drink, and a lover that the wife has hidden.

There is, therefore, some evidence that fabliaux were actually written by clerks. There is a good deal of evidence, admittedly of a rather negative sort, which suggests that assuming a large number of fabliaux were composed by clerks is not inconsistent either with the texts or with such facts as are known about the lives of the clerici vagantes. This is important, since students who had attended university long enough to acquire some of the literary skills displayed by the authors of fabliaux would also, one must expect, have been exposed to the controversial doctrinal issues of the period, and it is possible that these might have influenced their compositions. When we analyse the basis of the humor in the fabliaux, and discover how large a

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20 Le Povre Clerc(MR,V,192)."'Sir,' he said,'I'm not good at telling stories; I just don't know how. But I would be happy to tell you of a fright I had, for I know nothing of stories.'"

part is played by subtle underminings of the syllogistic method of argument, how many farcical situations arise from confusions of such concepts as substance and accident, how many dupes adopt in their reasoning a position closely related to that of Augustinian realism, we realise the extent to which the fabliaux are pervaded by scholastic interests, and their relationship to the schools appears much closer than attention either to the fictional milieu of the tales or to the probable audience which enjoyed them can indicate. Such an analysis is the main concern of the following chapters.

The first point to be insisted upon is that the fabliaux create a fictional and self-contained world. Lanson's brief but perspicacious account of the fabliaux makes this point clearly, and indicates the distortion which follows too uncritical an acceptance of the fabliaux as historical documents which reflect the society of the period. The authors of the fabliaux, says Lanson, "n'ont pas songé à peindre les moeurs de leur temps." 22 The "realism" of the fabliaux extends no further than the external, superficial details of daily life, and while we may learn, for example, how a game of dice was played in the thirteenth century, the interest of such gleanings is limited. No valid inferences can be drawn about such matters as the immorality of the

people, since immorality is so commonplace as to be evidently a literary convention. Since it provides a fundamental starting point for any investigation of the fabliaux, Lanson's comments on this matter merit quotation:

Vraiment, toutes ces histoires ne sont que fantaisie, et ne représentent exactement qu'une chose: la jovialité française, le tour d'imagination frivole et grossier qui était apte à produire et à gouter ces histoires. La vérité des fabliaux est une vérité surtout idéale... un rêve de vie drolatique et libre, tel que peut le faire un joyeux esprit qui, par convention, élimine pour un moment toute notion de moralité, d'autorité, et d'utilité sociale. (Page 107.)

J. Huizinga makes a similar observation on Les Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles, which, he says, depict an ideal, even if it be that of unchastity, reality being perhaps less refined than the ideal world of courtesy, but also more chaste than it is represented in the vulgar genres commonly regarded as realism.\(^{23}\) That we are dealing with in effect is not life but art, a created artifact which imposes its own values on all the disparate elements which comprise it. They cannot be justly evaluated in isolation from this fictional matrix.

One example will suffice to illustrate the kind of error which can result from a failure to observe this basic precaution. Bédier talks of the "mépris brutal des femmes" in the fabliaux, relating it to a similar

low estimate of women found in other genres, such as the moral dits and the beast fable epic. He is careful, certainly, to stipulate that "les fabliaux ne sont point des documents qui puissent nous renseigner sur la moralité des femmes au moyen âge, et leurs données grivoises ne sont point spécialement caractéristiques du XIIIe siècle." But he finds, intermingled with the superficial bawdy, a choleric dislike of women which exceeds the exigencies of the tale, "un dogme bien défini, profondément enraciné, que voici: les femmes sont des êtres inférieurs et malfaisants (page 321).  

Like other of Bédier's views, this one finds ready acceptance among later commentators. But how justifiable is it? There are indeed numerous scathing attacks on women in the fabliaux. Three examples from what proves to be an embarrassment of riches will serve to give their general character. The author of La Dame qui fist entendant son

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24 Bédier is perhaps somewhat guilty of committing what Francis L. Utley calls "the ascetic fallacy", forgetting that "the ethos of the more rigid forms of monasticism is not the total ethos of the medieval church, which comprised all states, all sexes, and all opinions": The Crooked Rib (Columbus, Ohio, 1944), p. 10. Certainly the clerics who appear in fabliaux, and those who wrote such works, can in no way be associated with rigid monasticism. In fact they seem to have been the roaring boys of the thirteenth century, particularly as far as their sexual morality was concerned. The automatic association of the clerks is with a sexual adventure in the fabliau Les Chevaliers, les Clercs et les Vilains, published in E. Barbazan, Fabliaux et Contes des Poètes français des XII, XIII, XIV, et XVes siècles tirés des meilleurs auteurs, 3 vols (Paris-Amsterdam, 1756), 1, 45.
Mari qu'il sonjoit has this observation to make on the nature of wives:

Or croiz sa une mervoille
Comme fame set decevoir
Et dire manconje por voir. 25

Almost the same comment is made by the author of one of the more courtly fabliaux, Le Chevalier à la Robe vermeille:

Ainsi la dame l'en envoie
Qui li a fet de voir menconge
Et se li a torne a songe
Ce qu'il ot veu a ses iex. 26

Finally a more extended account from perhaps the most obscene fabliau that has survived, La Sorisete des Estopes:

Enseignier voil por ceste fable
Que fame set plus que deiable,
Et certeinement lo sachiez.
Les iauz enbedeus li sachiez
Se n'é à esciant dit voir.
Qant el viaut ome decevoir,
Plus l'an decoit et plus l'afole
Tot solemant par sa parole
Que om ne feroit par angin. 27

25 MR.V,132. "Now hear how marvellously a woman can deceive, and tell lies in place of truth."

26 MR.III,35."Thus the woman sent him packing. She had turned lies into truth, and had made an illusion of what he had seen with his own eyes."

27 MR.IV,158."I want to make known by this fabliau that a woman has more wit than the devil, and that is a fact. Both her eyes would drop out if she ever told the truth willingly. When she wants to deceive a man she can trick him and befoul him more, just by what she says, than could another man with an elaborate ruse."
These descriptions of women certainly support Bédier's view that they were wicked, but do they show the women as inferior? On the contrary, we are told explicitly in the last example that women are far superior to men in the one facet of their character that has been discussed, that is in their skill at deception. Furthermore, although in the context of a moral dit we could accept such statements at their face value, as representing the genuine opinion of the author, there are several factors which should make us hesitate to draw the same inference here. In the first place, the women in the three fabliaux from which the quotations just given were taken, and in many more which contain similar anti-feminist diatribes, are unequivocally successful in deceiving their husbands, in gratifying their lust, and in arranging matters so that such gratification will be readily available in the future. Vice triumphant may, of course, still be vice, and may still be seen as such by the author, although we are in that case justified in asking why he should so picture it.

But let us look, for a moment, at another description, of jongleurs in the fabliau Le Roi d'Angleterre et le Jongleur d'Ely:

Devaunt nostre sire en pleniere cour
Sunt meint jogleur e meint lechour;
Molt bien sevont de tricherie,
D'enchauntementz e genglierie,
E font parroistre par lur grvmoire
Voir come menconge, menconge come voire. 28

The accusation levelled against Jongleurs almost exactly matches that levelled against women, the tone is the same, and the same skill in deception is stressed. That both attacks fall far short of the intensity of invective of which the authors of fabliaux were capable is seen straight away if we compare them with Gautier le Leu's remarks on priests, at the end of a fabliau, Connebert, in which a priest has been forced to mutilate himself to avoid being burned to death:

Car fuissent or si atorné
Tuit li preste de mere né
Qui sacramant de mariage
Tornent a honte et a putage. 29

If we are to take the attacks on women at their face value, we must presumably take a statement such as that in Le Roi d'Angleterre et le Jongleur d'Ely in the same way, so that we are asked to accept, not only a "mépris brutal des femmes" but a "mépris brutal des jongleurs" as well. Are we then to assume that the authors of fabliaux condemned themselves? Obviously not, or at least not without some reservations. Patently, what we

28MR,II,242. "Before our lord in open court assemble many minstrels and many entertainers; they know plenty about trickery, deception, and idle talk, and by their guile they make truth appear lies, lies truth."

29MR,V,160. "Let the same treatment be meted out to every priest born of woman who perverts the sacrament of marriage and turns it to shame and lewdness."
have here is the operation of a double standard, which recognizes and is even prepared to express the attitudes of conventional morality, while at the same time it rejects and subtly undermines them. It undermines them by creating a fictional world in which the conventionally wicked or inferior do triumph, in which the standards whereby they conduct their lives prove infinitely more efficacious of ends they consider desirable than the standards accepted by the contemporary world. The world of the fabliaux, as Lanson again remarks, "est aux rusées" (page 106). It is iconoclastic, but not totally chaotic, for there is discernible, in the actions of those whose natural environment it is, a pattern of behavior neither inconsistent nor meaningless. It is the world of will rather than of idea, of the senses rather than the intellect, of energy erupting into action rather than of form crystallizing into attitudes. Although entirely fictitious, it is, as I hope to show in the succeeding chapters of this study, a historically determined world, which explores the implications of ideas current in contemporary philosophical thought.

In order to understand more fully the fabliau world it is helpful to do as previous critics have done and compare the fabliau to the romance. The arena of the romance is the mind. It is a latent allegory which has not yet found its form. Hence the constant

30 A satisfactory form never is found in the medieval
swithering between psychological analysis, which focuses the conflict where it belongs but lacks the means to develop it interestingly, and the tournament or escapades of the knight errant, which externalize the action and are capable of infinitely varied development, but which fail to achieve the necessary precision to completely satisfy the author's aims. Action in the romance, except in the debased form where it is offered for its own sake, is important only in so far as it alters or confirms attitudes held by the characters. The forest of Broceliande or the fairy court offers the rewards of an intellectual, spiritual search: self-knowledge, self-esteem, and ultimately redemption and salvation in a sense closely approximating the religious. The arena for the action in the fabliaux, on the other hand, is the external world. Mental attitudes are important only in that they can be manipulated to achieve material ends, and they are so manipulated consistently by the period. The one perfect casting is perhaps Guillaume de Lorris' part of the Roman de la Rose, but the mold proves too narrow for Jean de Meun and he breaks it. We really have to wait for the Renaissance and Spencer's Faerie Queene to see the fruition of a plant which, while by no means barren, never seems to give its promised harvest during the middle ages.

The sort of split which results is clearly evident in a short courtly lay, Les III. Chevaliers et le Chainea, which Montaiglon and Raynaud mistakenly included in their collected edition of the fabliaux. In a long psychological debate the hero's prosche and amurs finally banish paurs and coardise, a victory which foreshadows his own triumph in the jousting lists the next day.
characters who personify appetite, for the most part male seducers or lascivious married women, whose sexual voracity is a constantly reiterated theme in the fabliaux. The rewards of appetite—the act of fornication, a comfortable bed, a cloak, a roasted partridge or a side of bacon—form part of the individualized, external world, which is in consequence more immediately present in the fabliaux than in any other literary genre until perhaps the naturalist novel of the late nineteenth century.

The fabliaux not only present us with an imaginary world, but with an imaginary world created for a specific purpose—to amuse. Gaston Paris notes that the authors of fabliaux themselves provide plenty of evidence that the genre was considered primarily comic in its intention:

Leur caractère général est d’être plaisants, et ce caractère est indiqué par plusieurs des noms dont les poètes qualifient leurs récits (une truie, une bourde, une risée, un gab). 32

Bédier defined the fabliaux as "des contes à rire en vers," and that definition has been generally accepted since he proposed it. Were it not for the comic intention of the authors of the fabliaux we should have been given, perhaps, a series of tales more closely resembling the Land of Cokaygne, tales which would give appetite full rein in a kind of hedonists' utopia.

But comedy demands conflict, and so we have placed on stage, in opposition to the wife or seducer, the husband or father, concerned with intellectual abstractions such as fidelity, honor, chastity, and so forth, whose willingness to distrust the evidence of his own senses proves the greatest weapon in the hands of the wife or lover to deceive him. The husband is seldom the shadowy figure in the fabliau which he so often is in the romance. He is generally in the forefront of the action, as the representative of the alien and disparaged point of view, while the wife or lover, depending upon who undertakes to engineer the plot whereby he is deceived, assumes the role of the antagonist, and the third member of the triangle is completely overshadowed. It very seldom happens in the fabliaux that both wife and lover are prominent figures, while in the romances this is almost invariably the case. This conflict of attitudes, exemplified in the struggle between the

33 Nykrog points out that "...c'est le mari qui est le personnage de premier plan dans un fabliau" (page 111). The apparent exception to this general rule in the case of a romance such as the Tristan of Thomas, where Mark certainly does play a prominent part, is explained by the primitive nature of the romance. Despite Thomas's efforts to make it more courtly, there persists in this romance a pre-courtly view of love, which is not so much an abstract ennobling influence as a desperate physical need which has the lovers constantly scheming to find ways of being together. Hence the large number of fabliau-like incidents, and the general air of intrigue.

34 Note, for example, how shadowy a figure the lover is in Les Trasces (MR, IV, 67), or the wife in Le Prestre et la Dame (MR, II, 235), Le Prestre qui abevete (MR, III, 54).
figures described above but by no means confined to them, is the source of most of the humor in the fabliaux, and gives rise to the collision of different mental spheres, to "attitude changing," which D.H.Monro regards as the essence of comedy.\(^{35}\)

The humor of the fabliaux is perhaps best explained, with some important qualifications, by reference to Schopenhauer's theory of humor:

In every suddenly appearing conflict between what is perceived and what is thought, what is perceived is always unquestionably right; for it is not subject to error at all, requires no confirmation from without, but answers for itself. Its conflict with what is thought springs ultimately from the fact that the latter, with its abstract conceptions, cannot get down to...the fine shades of difference of the concrete. This victory of knowledge of perception over thought gives us pleasure. For perception is the original kind of knowledge inseparable from animal nature, in which everything which gives direct satisfaction to the will presents itself. It is the medium of the present, of enjoyment and gaiety.

This describes exactly the conflict around which the plots of a large number of fabliaux are constructed. Schopenhauer, however, regards such triumphs of perception over reason as diversions from the exigencies of a strict and untiring task-master, the reason, to which he obviously gives ultimate intellectual sanction. His theory of humor therefore has much in common with Freud's


"release from restraint" theory. In the fabliaux, however, the values are reversed, and it is the tendency to rely on abstract conceptions which is consistently exposed as intellectually erroneous. Both attitudes are given ample representation and are kept in constant interplay. In fact a guiding principle in the composition of many of the fabliaux seems to me to have been to engineer as many humorous "collisions" as possible, and no critic appears to have given to humor the primacy which it deserves when we examine the fabliaux with some hope of discovering the nature of the Ding an sich.

Bédier, having once established his definition of the fabliaux as "des contes à rire en vers" dismisses their humor as containing "rien de métaphysique," and strangely enough seems to wish to disregard humor altogether. In fact he reverses the position on which he had founded his chapters on the literary study of the fabliaux, that each age is responsible for the stories by which it is amused, and having perhaps in the amusements of the thirteenth century netted what he found to be a rather unpalatable fish, he is happy to throw it back into the cultural stream of "l'incroyable monotonie de l'obsénité humaine" (page 358). Nykrog is prepared to find sporadic evidence of a more sophisticated humor in his examples of parody of the romance conventions, which can evidently be fitted into the scheme outlined above, but he is not prepared to see this as a minor
manifestation of more general tendencies which can be discovered throughout the fabliaux, and dismisses those poems not conforming to his scheme in as cursory a fashion as Bédier:

Once it is accepted that a fabliau is primarily a story meant to amuse, it seems perverse and misleading to then dismiss the humor as primitive or obscene, and to proceed with an investigation of the genre which more-or-less ignores its humorous intention altogether.

The only examination of any significance devoted solely to an appraisal of the humor in the fabliaux leans heavily on Bédier and produces almost exclusively negative results:

Les fabliaux ne connaissent pas l'ironie, ni le rire qu'elle fait naître; rire de choix, d'ordre intellectual....Le sarcasme aussi leur est étranger, ce rire moral qui est une révolte des consciences....Enfin, n'ayant pour cause rien de ce qui déconcerte, le rire des fabliaux n'est pas à l'humour....

Le rire des fabliaux ne se hausse pas jusqu'à être intellectual comme le premier; il n'a certes pas la prétention d'être moral, comme le deuxième. S'il n'est pas humoristique non plus, serait-il donc de qualité inférieure, un rire purement physiologique? Sans doute, il rit pour le plaisir de rire, [mais aussi] pour le plaisir de se moquer, d'une moquerie...qui s'amuse de l'ordre...
This sounds like reliance on some such idea as "pure" humor, a misty concept at best, and a mere excuse for abdication of critical responsibility at worst. Monro is probably right when he says that "ultimately humour appeals to a code of values even when it escapes from one" (page 135). To try to discover what those codes of values are in the fabliaux, and to show how they are manipulated for comic effect, will be the purpose of the following chapters of this study. Guerlin de Guer is right, I think, in saying that the humor of the fabliaux is "le rire de mots et de situations." We will examine in turn the plots of the fabliaux and the diction used by fabliaux writers.

CHAPTER II

RELATION OF PLOT AND COMIC ELEMENTS IN THE FABLIAUX

It is necessary to preface any proposal to discuss the relation between plot and comic elements in the fabliaux with some answer to the question whether a general concept of plot has any validity, or whether, since there are some one hundred and sixty fabliaux, we ought rather to be discussing one hundred and sixty separate and distinct plots.

Before the basic problem is considered, it should be noted that there is no direct correlation between the number of fabliaux and the number of plots, since among the former are included various versions of the same story, incorporating significant differences of detail but employing what for the purposes of this chapter may be considered the same plot structure. Thus, for example, three versions of the "mari battu et content" theme have survived in fabliau form, and there are three versions of the story given in La Damaoselle qui ne pocit oir parler de foutre(MR,III,81), besides numerous duplications of other tales. Grouping related fabliaux together significantly reduces the number of plots, an effect only slightly offset by the fact that three distinct stories are found in both
versions of Les trois Dames qui troverent l'Anel (MR, I, 168). Furthermore a number of fabliaux have to be excluded from the interests of the present chapter because they are to all intents and purposes plotless.

There still remains, of course, a large number of distinct stories, but the distinctions tend to disappear or to diminish in significance as the plot is pared back to its fundamental constituents. By its nature the fabliau is short, averaging only some four hundred lines, and generally develops one central incident, or a small number of closely related incidents which in themselves comprise a neat total pattern. The rambling episodic plots of such fabliaux as Le Prestre qu'on porte (MR, IV, 1) and the various versions of Le Segretain (MR, V, 115) are exceptional, both in complexity and in length. When the skeletal structure of the plots of various fabliaux has been laid bare,  

1When all these factors have been taken into account, the number of distinct plots is reduced by twenty five, giving a total of one hundred and thirty five.

2Among these have been included the fragment entitled Jugement (MR, VI, 154); the fragment published by Förster (Jahrb. f. rom. u. eng. Lit., XIII, 283); fabliaux such as Les Putains et les Lecheurs (MR, III, 175) and Les Chevaliers, les Clercs et les Vilains (Barbazan, I, 45), which contain nothing more than a witty observation of contemporary social groups; and psychological character studies, such as La Veuve (MR, II, 197), featuring only one central character who is not involved in any significant action in the course of the story. Eliminations on these bases number twenty two, further reducing the total of stories to one hundred and thirteen.

3Le Prestre qu'on porte stretches to 1,164 lines.
resemblances can be discovered between fabliaux which appear at first glance to be unrelated. It is in the basic plot structure that the strongest formulaic aspect of the fabliaux appears, and it is here that the distinguishing characteristics of the genre should probably be sought. This factor has never been critically investigated. In fact, as was noted earlier, it has been the custom of critics explicitly to eschew any consideration of the plot. The reason for this is not hard to find. It is by means of the basic plot that numerous fabliaux are connected with the misty background of oral tradition and the dissemination of folk tales from other lands and from earlier ages. Naturally critics wishing to dissociate the fabliaux from this folklore tradition and to study them in isolation as one aspect of a national literature limited roughly to the thirteenth century—critics, in fact, such as Bédier and Nykrog—should subjugate consideration of plot to a study of the incremental detail which most obviously fixes the fabliau in the literary matrix of its age. But it is surely possible to examine the plots of the fabliaux within the context of a critical approach sympathetic to that adopted by these critics. As Bédier himself at one time remarks, the fact that of all the stories which circulated orally, of all the rich inheritance of classical and oriental material available, these particular stories were chosen by
thirteenth century French writers to be reworked in the popular verse form of contemporary literature, is itself a cultural phenomenon significant of the age.\(^4\)

Of even greater significance is the fact that in some fabliaux composed by French authors in the thirteenth century (and in the absence of any evidence to the contrary for the vast majority of the fabliaux we are perfectly justified in assuming contemporary composition) the same plot pattern is followed as in fabliaux which emerge in thirteenth century redactions from the stream of oral literature. It seems, in other words, to have been on the basis of plot formulae of proven power to amuse that new stories were composed and offered for the entertainment of the public.

Furthermore, it soon becomes apparent, when the pattern of incidents in the fabliaux has been formulated, that the incremental detail to which critics have turned for some clue to the essential nature of the genre is itself dictated to a surprising extent by the elements of plot. There is very little elaboration for its own sake in the fabliaux; it is, in fact,

\(^4\)The soundness of Bédier's observation is discernible behind the banners of his rhetoric, here as all too often unfurled in the service of the moralist rather than the literary critic: "Dans l'immense forêt des contes populaires, où croissent confusément, pêle-mêle, les lîanes vénéneuses, les sauvageons stériles, les souches puissantes et précieuses, ils étaient libres d'élire les plus nobles essences. Cette matière brute, une fois choisie, ils étaient libres de la tailler et de la façonner à leur gré...."(Page 303.)
as alien to the spirit and intention of this form as it is characteristic of the romance. What we find instead, in poem after poem, is a studious emphasis on the progress of the plot, each turn and twist being charted by the comments either of the author as detached observer or of the characters involved in the changing fortunes of the tale. In the fabliaux almost everything is subordinate to the plot, and if we are to understand the nature of the genre, an investigation of the plot offers the most promising initial line of inquiry.

A means of postulating a formula for the plot of a typical fabliau is suggested by the observations of Schopenhauer "On the Theory of the Ludicrous" already alluded to in the first chapter. Schopenhauer traces the source of the ludicrous—his general term for all laughter provoking phenomena—to a conflict between what is thought and what is perceived, between the abstract conception and the concrete object of perception. More specifically, he argues that it is possible

...to trace everything ludicrous to a syllogism in the first figure, with an undisputed major and an unexpected minor, which to a certain extent is only sophistically valid, in consequence of which connection the conclusion partakes of the quality of the ludicrous.

theory of humor is not the concern of this essay. What is important is the remarkable extent to which the plots of numerous fabliaux conform readily to this or an associated syllogistic pattern. When the idea is translated into dramatic terms it yields in the fabliaux two conventional plot structures. The first, (a), which follows most closely the syllogism suggested above by Schopenhauer, begins with some major premise and is followed by two minor premises, the first of which, proposed by the dupe or victim in the story, is conventionally valid, while the second, proposed by the duper, is only sophistically valid, but serves to pervert the dictates of the major premise in his favor. The second, (b), begins with some minor premise and is followed by two major premises, under the first of which, again proposed by the dupe, the minor premise would conventionally be subsumed, while it can be, unexpectedly, subsumed under the second, proposed by the duper. A little reflection will suffice to demonstrate that the same conflict between the concept and the object is operative in both (a) and (b), and that the same presuppositions are made about the relationship between the two, but more detailed discussion of what is implied by these presuppositions will be reserved for a later chapter.

For the present, two examples will show how the patterns work out in practice. The first section of
Le Vilain qui od sa Feme vit aler son Dru by Marie de France provides a simple example of (b), and allows the skeletal syllogistic structure to stand out clearly, since it is relatively unencumbered with extraneous detail.

D'un vilein vueil ici cunter
ki od sa femme vit aler
vers la forest sun dru od li.
Après curut; cil s'en fui,
5 si s'est dedenz le bois musciez,
e il returne tuz iriez.
Sa femme laïdi e blasma;
e la dame li demanda
pur quei parlot issi vers li,
e sis baruns li respundi
qu'il ot veù sun lecheûr,
ki li fist hunte e deshonur,
aler od li vers la forest.
'Sire,' fet ele,'se vus plest,
10 pur amur Deu, dites mei veir!
Quidastes vus hume veeir
aler od mei? Nel me celer.'
'Jel vi,' fet il,'el bois entrer.'
'Lasse,' fet ele, 'morte sui!' 13
20 Demain murrai u uncore hui!
A m'aiuele avint altresi
e a ma mere, kar jel vi:
un poi devant lur finement
ceo fu seû apertement,
25 qu'uns bachelers les cunduieit,
là ood eles rien n'aveit.
Or sai jeo bien, pres est ma fins.
Mandez, sire, tuz mes cusins,
30 si departiruns nostre aveir!
N'os el siecle plus remaneir:
od tute le meie partie
me metrai en une abeie.' 6

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6 The text is taken from Karl Warnke,’Iterum de Muliere et proco eius,’ in Die Fabeln der Marie de France, Bibliotheca Normannica, Vol.VI(Halle,1898), pp. 148-152. "This is the story of a peasant who saw his wife walk into the forest with her beau. He ran after them, but the young man fled and hid himself in the woods, and the husband retraced his steps in a fury. He cursed his wife roundly for her misbehavior; and his
At this unexpected development the husband is so dismayed that he begs his wife to remain, admits to having been mistaken in thinking he saw someone with her, and swears never to refer to the incident again. Thus we see, concludes the author, that women have more skill than the devil when it comes to lying japes.

In terms of the formula described earlier, we have first of all the minor premise(lines 1-5), then the first major premise, unstated but clearly implied by the husband(lines 6-13), and finally the second, alternative major premise proposed by the wife(lines 14-27). The action advances almost entirely through dialogue, which is handled, particularly at the high point of the comedy, with a skill characteristic of the later developments in the genre. The first intrusion of doubt that the husband is really in control of events is signalled by the wife's question, "Quidastes wife asked him why he should talk to her like that. Her husband answered that he had seen her lover, who shamed and disgraced him, go into the forest with her. 'Husband,' said she, 'please, for the love of God, tell me the truth! Do you really believe you saw a man go with me? Don't hide anything from me!' 'I saw him,' he said, 'go into the woods.' 'Alas,' said his wife, 'I am a dead woman! I shall die tomorrow—perhaps even today! The same thing happened to my grandmother and to my mother, as I am a witness: shortly before their death it was generally thought that a young man had led them off somewhere, a young man with whom they had nothing whatever to do. I know for certain now that my end is near. Summon all my relatives, husband, and we will divide our goods! I dare not remain any longer in the world: I shall enter an abbey with the whole of my share....'"
vus hume veeir/aler od mei?" following which the husband's emphatic "Jel vi" already seems slightly pathetic. We can see here some anticipation of the mastery of inferential tone with which Chaucer will delight us when, for example, May confounds the accusations of January and leads him happily to deny the evidence of his newly restored senses.

As an alternative pattern, here are some extracts from *Le Vescie a Prestre* by Jacques de Baisieu, cited as an analogue to Chaucer's *Summoner's Tale*. A dying priest, who has disposed of his worldly possessions in as charitable a way as he could, giving to the poor of his village, to orphans and widows, and to the Franciscans, forgets the local order of Jacobin friars. Two Jacobins exhort him to make a bequest to their order, even suggesting that he withdraw one of his earlier gifts to do so, and angered by their persistence and evident greed, the priest eventually assents:

137 'Appenseis sui, doner vos voelh
   .I. jouuel ke mut amer suel
   Et aime encore. Par saint Piere,
140 Je n'ai chose gaires plus chiere;
   Milh mars d'argent n'en prenderoie. 7

He asks the Jacobins to return the next day with their prior, when he will tell them what it is, assuming that

7MR,III,106. "I have thought it over, and want to give you something precious which I have always treasured, and which I treasure still. By Saint Peter, there is hardly a thing I prize more; I wouldn't take a thousand marks cash for it."
he has not breathed his last before then. In high elation the two friars return to Antwerp, and spread the good news:

162 'Faites venir bone pitance. 
   IIC. livres gaangniet avons 
   A .I. prestre ke nos savons 
   165 Malade chi à une vilhe.'

A lavish banquet follows, and the monks work out their tactics for the next day, electing the best speakers to go with their prior to the priest's house. The priest reaffirms his intention of making them a donation, but asks that the mayor and aldermen be summoned as witnesses of the transaction. The priest then reiterates the circumstances of the gift, and describes it once more:

'Et ke nus n'i amene tenche,'
285 Dient al prestre li .v. Frere,
'Dites quel choze c'est, biaz pere.'
'Volentiers voir, c'est me vesie.
Se la voiiés bien netoiie,
Mieus ke de corduan varra
290 Et plus longement vos dura:
Se poreis ens metre vo poivre.'

Thus are the Jacobins brought to realize that the general concept of worth(lines 138-141) may have different particular applications, their own(lines 162-163) and

8"Kill the fatted calf, for we have won two hundred pounds from a priest we know who is sick in a nearby town."

9"'And lest there be any dispute about it,' the five brothers said to the priest,'tell us exactly what it is, good father.' 'Willingly! It's my bladder! If you have it washed, it will be better than leather, and will last you longer: you can keep your pepper in it.'"
that of the priest (lines 287-291), and that there may be wide discrepancies between the two. A similar sophism is the basis of the joke in the fabliau Charlot le Juif qui chia en un Pel dou Lièvre (MR, III, 222), by Rutebeuf. Charlot, a jongleur, is promised by a certain Guillaume, as payment for his services, something which had cost a hundred sous. He is given—a hare’s skin! Guillaume had ridden his best horse to death chasing it. Guillaume assures Charlot that it cost him as much as he said, but the jongleur comments wryly: "Hom n’en auroit pas Samedi/...autant au marché." (One would have trouble raising that much on it at Saturday’s market.)

Not every fabliau, of course, fits neatly into one or the other of these molds. Some cannot be forced into them at all, and like Schopenhauer when he proposes this pattern as the basis of all humor, we have to accept that the artifact may finally be at several removes from its base. The general concept may appear in its displaced form as a law which is controverted (L’Evesque qui benêi le Con; MR, III, 178), as a wager unexpectedly won or lost (La Gageure; MR, II, 193), as a wish which fails to fulfil the expectations of felicity (Le Sohait desvez; MR, V, 184; Le Couvoiteus et l’Envieus; MR, V, 211), or as a contract actually proposed between the two conflicting characters involved (Le Prestre et le Chevalier; MR, II, 46; La Dame qui Aveine demandoit pour Morel sa Provende avoir; MR, I, 318). The same
principle may be extended to cover even those fabliaux whose joke depends on certain forms of word play, since what is involved is often some meaning which the word may legitimately carry but which is unexpected, i.e., only sophistically valid, in the particular context (Estula; MR, IV, 87; Le Vilain au Buffet; MR, III, 199). The actual syllogism is not regularly spelled out for us. We are after all dealing with narrative literature, not exercises in Aristotelian logic, and it is fortunate for the variety and dramatic interest of the works that this is the case. But we can detect a syllogistic structure underlying the majority of fabliaux, and in terms of this structure some of the problems which arise concerning the comic intention of their authors can be brought to light and understood more clearly.

Let us suppose, then, that the "core" of a typical fabliau comprises three elements, BCD, where B, C, and D may be either major or minor premises as long as one of each is always represented. To this central core we must add an introduction, A, and a conclusion, E, which gives as a standard pattern a five part structure ABCDE. There may not be any introduction (there is none, for example, in Le Vilain qui od sa Feme vit aler son Dru, which we looked at earlier), or the introduction may be quite long, as it is in Le Vescie a Prestre (137 lines). It is possible, once the function of the introduction is understood in terms of the total structure, to
explain these variations in length from 0 introduction up to introductions of some hundreds of lines. There is generally a conclusion, serving to sum up in brief form the outcome of events, and often adding some comment by the author in the form of a proverb or a moral resembling that traditionally found at the conclusion of an exemplum.

The plot of the typical fabliau can be traced out on a paradigm such as that shown below:

```
G   A   B   C   D   E   J
H
X
Y
K
```

The line XY represents the chronological development of the narrative linearly from left to right, the axis GH represents a scale of morality from high to low, the axis JK represents a scale from good to bad fortune in the final outcome of events, and ABCDE are the stages in the development of the plot described above.  

10 The objection may be raised to a structural approach of this type that it imposes a theoretical
Once more an illustration would be in order. The fabliau entitled *Le Prestre et le Chevalier* (MR, II, 46) will serve very well. Briefly the story is this:

[A knight is returning to his own country from a tournament at which he fared so badly that he lost his retainers and his armor; he consequently travels poorly with only his squire. They have ridden a great distance that day and are lost, but come at last to a country town with a church and a priest. The priest has amassed such riches that he lacks for nothing, and cares not a jot for anyone but himself, his concubine, and a niece living with him. The gate warden recommends the knight to seek lodging with the priest, rather than with the peasants, as the better choice of two evils. The priest, at first unwilling to lodge the knight, is tempted by the knight’s offer of money, and finally yields on condition that the knight pay him five sous for every item he receives. The knight agrees, on condition that the priest supply him with any item he asks for which it is

pattern on the fabliaux from outside, and this is, indeed, a shortcoming in the method, although I hope to demonstrate that it has practical advantages and does not involve any undue distortion of the material. The structural method of Vladimir Propp (Morphology of the Folktale, trans. Laurence Scott [Bloomington, Indiana, 1958]) enables him to discover unifying principles in a similarly disparate collection of artifacts without exposing him to similar charges, since his point of departure is a detailed analysis of the plots themselves. I would like to think that an equally sophisticated and precise approach could be found for analysing the fabliaux, although there are good reasons why Propp’s method cannot be easily adapted for the purpose. He deals with narrative tales in which the incidents lend themselves fairly readily to symbolic representation. In the fabliaux the most important actions are often not physical but psychological, an effect, perhaps, of their humorous intention. The significance of such actions is largely determined by a complex of relationships between the actor and one or more of the other characters in the story, so that symbolic representation would be correspondingly complex.
within the priest's power to bestow. The knight and his squire are sumptuously entertained, but when, before going to bed, the priest suggests reckoning up expenses so that there will be no mistake, he puts five sous on the account for literally every 'item'--the salt, the pepper, the table, the tablecloth, the bedding for the horses and so on--so that the total is staggering. The squire is in a blue fit, but the knight, although bursting with rage, remains outwardly calm and goes to bed. Shortly he sends his squire to the priest with a request that the niece, Gillain, be dispatched to his bed to entertain him. The priest may put another five sous on the bill! The priest in fact offers to remit forty sous from the account, but the knight is adamant, and the priest has to bribe the tearful Gillain into complying with the knight's wishes. As soon as he has restored Gillain, the knight sends his squire back asking for the priest's mistress, Avinée. The priest's next offer to remit one hundred sous is rejected as peremptorily as the first. Finally the knight sends his squire for the priest himself--for he is plumper than his mistress and has four fingers of fat on his rump. The squire is outraged and the priest berserk, but the knight insists on his rights according to the agreement even when the priest offers to remit the whole account and throw in breakfast the next day for nothing. Only when the priest himself pleads with the knight to release him from the covenant, and offers to give ten pounds in addition to the concessions already made does the knight agree to release the priest from their contract. So the knight and his squire go off enriched and happy the next day, and from then on the priest proves a perfect host, never attempting to cheat his guests.]

The diagram for the plot of Le Prestre et le Chevalier corresponds exactly to that which would be projected, in terms of a medieval device, by a three-quarter turn of the Wheel of Fortune, from the position at the left to the position at the right in the diagram shown overleaf.
Traced out on the paradigm shown on page 50 it would look like this:

From this diagram we can clearly deduce certain features which will be taken as characteristic of the genre. They are, briefly, that the plot involves a conflict between two, and only two, protagonists, or closely related groups of protagonists, whose fortunes vacillate over a three stage pattern as described earlier,
and who, in consequence of these vacillations, finish in circumstances of relative well-being or misfortune, circumstances which "correspond" to their initial distribution on a moral scale, the basis of which remains to be determined. Any fabliau not conforming to this basic pattern will have to be excluded from the following general discussion on the grounds that it is not typical. This seems perfectly legitimate for those fabliaux already described as plotless, and if it seems arbitrary when applied to the numerous fabliaux which admittedly have a discernible plot not conforming to this pattern, the degree of arbitrariness does not, I hope, exceed that associated with any attempt at generalization when the phenomena examined are not themselves synthetical a priori, as is the case in mathematics.

On the basis of these features I propose to discuss three facets of comedy in the fabliaux which seem to be directly related to the plot structure. They are satire, which depends primarily on the general law of distribution of the characters along the moral axis GH; humor, which depends primarily on the general nature of the intellective maneuverings in the core BCD; and irony, which depends primarily on projections from the narrative axis XY to the final distribution on JK, the axis of good or bad fortune. Each will be dealt with individually and in detail with as wide as possible a range of reference, but before proceeding to these general discussions some explanation of how the diagram given at the
bottom of page 53 represents the plot of *Le Prestre et le Chevalier* and how it can be employed to examine those aspects of comedy described above would be profitable, since the reader has already been given a fairly full summary of the plot of this fabliau.

About the core nothing much needs to be said at this stage. It follows the syllogistic pattern (a), the general agreement between the knight and the priest preceding two particular applications of its terms, that favoring the priest which raises his fortunes to their peak at the end of C, and that favoring the knight which reverses this trend in D.

The distribution of the priest and the knight on the axis GH is very carefully indicated in a lengthy introduction of two hundred and two lines. The knight is described as "noble" and "deboinaires." He is handsome and dignified—"le cors ot plaisant et gent." Although a very rich man, holding fifteen castles and "other settlements" in fief, the knight is "simple et dous," qualities admirably illustrated by the politeness of his greeting to the gate-warden, specifically designated a *vilain* by the author. Sore from the drubbing he took in the tournament, temporarily destitute because of his losses, and tired from a full day's riding, the knight nevertheless maintains a similar courtesy in his dealings with the priest, despite the extreme provocation of this cleric's behavior. The
author informs us of the priest's wealth, his disdain of all and sundry, and his anomalous domestic arrangements, giving an impression of him confirmed by the gate-warden:

...ne prise pas .ll. mauves
Homme ne femme fors que lui, ll
Tant est fel et de put anui. 11

When the knight rides up to his house, the priest remains stretched out on his back reclining by the window, and returns the knight's greeting with an impudent question about his place of residence. He gruffly refuses the knight's request for lodging, saying he would refuse the king himself were he to happen by. But the vice which rules his life appears most clearly when the knight offers to pay generously for his keep:

Adont le regarde li Prestres;
Si a drechiet amont sa tieste,
Si descent jus de la fenestre,
Dans Silvestre, li capelains,
Qui avoit ouvertes ses mains
Tous jours au prendre et au rejoivre: 12
Le chevalier cuide dechoivre.

It is his cupidity which will prove his undoing, and it is consequently the key factor in differentiating him

11 "He doesn't care two figs for anyone but himself, he's such a dirty, stinking scoundrel."

12 "Then the priest looked at him, raised his head, and got down from the sill; the hands of Dan Silvester, the chaplain, were ever open to take or to receive; he planned to cheat the knight."
from the knight, although we need the insight granted by the later developments of the plot to recognize it as most important among the priest's many failings.

Although all the characters significantly involved in the action are described in the introduction, the knight, the squire, dame Avinée the priest's mistress, the priest himself, and Gillain his niece, the descriptions of all except the knight and the priest are morally neutral. The other three serve as passive functionaries in the plot, the squire as messenger for the knight, Gillain and Avinée as victims in his game of revenge, and it is for this reason that they can be excluded legitimately from the diagram depicting the conflict between the main antagonists. The primary function of Avinée and the squire is to comment on the action, and it is only in their capacity as commentators that any sense of their individuality emerges, a certain spitefulness in Avinée, and a nervous hesitancy in the squire which contrasts strikingly with the bold irascibility of the knight.

The squire comments on the course of the action in C, when the priest's fortunes apparently prosper while those of the knight are declining. He is perturbed when the contract between the two main protagonists is first agreed upon, and he becomes increasingly dismayed as the bill mounts:

Car demain à pié sans cheval
The squire fails to realize, as the priest does, the turning point at which the knight assumes control of the situation, and continues timidly to bewail the knight's folly in increasing the bill right up to the time that the priest remits the whole account and pays ten pounds to the knight. The prétresse, on the other hand, who has the typical shrew's finely piquant command of rhetoric, is only too well aware of what is happening, takes a perverse pleasure in the priest's change of fortune, and is ready to moralize on its causes:

Hai! Hai! Sire Selvestre,  
Com vous avés bien pourcachie  
La honte qui vous est venie,  
Que vostre amie avés perdue  
Et vostre nièche avés vendue  
Pour avoir à .l. estrange homme.  

Vo convoitise vous confont,  
Vo convoitise vous souspren,  
Vo convoitise vous espront.  

When the knight sends for the priest himself her triumph

13"For tomorrow he would be horseless and on foot because of the knight's prodigality. Thus did the squire fret and pulled a long face."

14"Hai! Hai! Sir Silvester, how thoroughly did you deserve the shame which has caught up with you, for you have lost your mistress and sold your niece to a strange man for gain. Your cupidity has confounded you, your cupidity has overcome you, your cupidity has consumed you."
is complete. His misfortunes provoke, rather than sympathy, a further blunt statement that he is getting his deserts, and the expressed hope that as a result of their dealings he will become pregnant!

The squire's conception of how events will develop corresponds to that possible at the point V in the diagram on page 53, and he fails to amend this until well after the point W has been passed, the point at which the true nature of the outcome is apparent to the prêtresse. Since both these characters have passive roles, and respond to, rather than initiate events, their views are "event-bound," that is they result from simple projections of the course of action at any one point. The two active protagonists, the priest and the knight, initiate action in accordance with some viewpoint which precedes it. Thus the squire's view at point V is known to the priest earlier in B when the contract is made, and the view of the prêtresse at point W must be at least partially anticipated by the knight at this time if we are to justify his making the condition he proposes, although he does not clearly formulate it until later, at the beginning of D. The reader may be granted varying degrees of insight into the minds of the initiators of action, or he may be limited to prediction on the basis of events already unrolled, like the passive characters. His position, consequently, cannot be defined in simple terms,
particularly since these variables are not the only factors which influence it.

The extent to which the comic possibilities of irony are exploited in the fabliaux depends on the reader being granted an insight into the final outcome of events earlier along the narrative axis than some character or characters in the story. Such an insight may be afforded directly by the omniscient author, it may come from a knowledge of the intentions of the initiators of action, or it may be inferred from a familiarity with the conventions of fabliau plot structure. The issue is a complex one, and will constitute the third major division for detailed analysis. In the interests of examining the three facets of comedy in the fabliaux described earlier, we will once more fragment the plot to deal separately with the introduction, the core, and the conclusion.
CHAPTER III

THE INTRODUCTION: SATIRE IN THE FABLIAUX

Most critics agree that satire is present sufficiently in the fabliaux to merit discussion. Behind the opprobrious or sympathetic portrayal of individuals, that is, they presuppose some identifiable general ethic according to which behavior is condemned or condoned. In dispute are the identity of the group or groups which are the target for satiric attack, and consequently the nature of the moral standpoint which directs it. Bédier's typically esoteric pronounce­ments on satire in the fabliaux¹ offer answers to both questions. He found, first of all, no evidence of social satire in the fabliaux:

Or la portée d'un fabliau ne dépasse guère celle du récit qui en forme la trame. Les portraits comiques de bourgeois, de chevaliers, de vilains, y foisonnent: mais aucune idée qui domine ou relie ces caricatures; la raillerie vise tel chevalier, et non la chevalerie, tel bourgeois et non la bourgeoisie; et le plus souvent, on peut substituer un chevalier à un bourgeois, ou un bourgeois à un chevalier, sans rien changer au conte, ni à ses tendances. En ce sens, nos diseurs de fabliaux ne s'élèvent point jusqu'à la satire: ils s'arrêtent à mi-route, contents d'être de maîtres caricaturistes. Ils jettent sur le monde un coup d'œil ironique: clercs, vilains, marchands, prévots, vavasseurs, chevaliers, moines, ils esquissent d'un trait rapide la silhouette de chacun--et passent. (Page 333)

What he did find was satire directed against women and priests, which he attributed to a kind of soured monasticism prevalent among the clerical outcasts who he thought formed a large part of the wandering minstrel fraternity. Lack of any satisfactory methodology to govern his investigation and validate his opinions in no way impeded their widespread acceptance, on this point as on many others.

Nykrog, wishing to reopen the question of social satire, suggested a method of determining the author's sympathies which gives at least some objective basis from which to examine the problem. Briefly his method depends on acceptance of the simple proposition that "si un personnage de fabliau finit mal, c'est qu'aux yeux du poète et de son public, il l'a mérité, et s'il finit bien, c'est qu'il faut le considérer comme symp-pathique"(page 109). This is the basis on which the present study of satire in the fabliaux will be conducted, although for numerous reasons the conclusions reached differ radically from those of Nykrog.

There seems to be no other way of establishing the moral statement of a literary artifact, without importing extra-literary judgments from conventional morality or from moral viewpoints not necessarily coincident with those of the author. Take, for example, the introduction to Le Prestre et le Chevalier. I cited the priest's anomalous domestic arrangements as one factor
contributing to the impression of wickedness the reader gains of him in the introduction. We know that celibacy was urged on the priesthood as an ideal, even though the order was habitually contravened in practice, and since we can establish the priest's wickedness on other counts, it is probably justifiable to accept his concubinage as contributory evidence. But we must recognize at the same time that we are not actually told anything about the author's attitude towards a priest having a mistress, and that we would know little more if the author had explicitly stated that this was wrong and had condemned it. For if the priest at the conclusion of the fabliau had been favored by fortune, we should have been forced to ask, in the light of the morality of the literary artifact thus revealed, whether it is perhaps a "good" thing to be "wicked," where wicked has reference to some extra-contextual standard of morality. We know the priest deserves censure because he ends up unfortunately, losing ten pounds. He also has to sanction the knight's seduction of his niece and his mistress, but since he permits this initially rather than lose the money they are presumably lesser evils to his way of thinking. The nature of his misfortune indicates the nature of his wickedness, greed, the only aspect of his character commented on significantly by the structure of the plot, for it is greed
which first involves him in difficulty and greed which prevents him from extricating himself.

That the author's moral judgment of the characters in a literary work can only be determined by the fortunes accorded these characters at its conclusion is probably a defensible theory for all literary works. If we tried to apply it, however, to—let us say—a nineteenth-century Bildungsroman, we should not only encounter problems of change in the characters depicted, but also discover that we had simply substituted for one indeterminable, the author's moral view of the character, an equally indeterminable assessment of the character's good or bad fortune. We would no doubt find that in the course of the novel he had suffered a good deal of misfortune, but at the same time had profited spiritually in acquiring self-knowledge, compassion, the ability to endure suffering, and so forth, so that the relative good fortune of the character could not be established in any simple and clear-cut fashion. Neither of these problems, however, is met in the fabliaux. The brevity of the average fabliau prohibits any real elaboration of character, even if the authors had the inclination and ability to depict round characters in E.M. Forster's sense of the term. Characters are sketched in quickly, and are static. Two fabliaux of Gautier le Leu, La Veuve (MR, II, 197), and Le Vallet qui d'Aise a Malaise se met (MR, II, 157) are notably remarkable for their
psychological insights, but even here we have characters revealed by events rather than molded by them, and such detailed elaboration of character is only achieved at the sacrifice of plot, which is virtually non-existent in both instances. Furthermore, it is usually an easy matter to determine the relative fortunes of the characters at the end of a fabliau, since they are dictated simply by the acquisition or loss of money or goods, by the suffering or avoidance of physical violence, by the attainment or frustration of sexual pleasure. Only in one instance, the loss of virginity, is there any real difficulty of interpretation. We will class this as a misfortune, although as we might expect there is more than a suggestion that just as in war there are no winners, in love there are no losers, and that both seducer and seduced profit from the resolution of their conflict.

That the characters deserve, in the last analysis, the fate which the author allots them may not be axiomatic for all modes, but it is for comedy, where the achievement or maintenance of social order is the ultimate desideratum, and where man is capable of controlling his own destiny and achieving his measure of happiness within that order. In the fabliaux, as we have just explained, this axiom provides a practical means of discovering the unique moral statement of the literary artifact.
If we subject Bédier's view that women form a prime butt for satire in the fabliaux to critical examination according to this principle, the results are revealing. Nykrog himself does not do this, perhaps because the whole question lies somewhat outside his chief area of interest, but he does devote a section of his book to recounting female vices as they appear in the fabliaux and in the third book of Andreas Capellanus' *De Arte Honeste Amandi*, which might be taken as an endorsement of Bédier's position. In fact, of the forty-nine fabliaux which feature, in a plot core of the type described earlier, a conflict between members of the opposite sex, women are triumphant on thirty-one, and suffer some misfortune on only eighteen occasions. When the various relationships are examined in greater detail, the degree to which women seem to be favored stands out even more impressively. For of the eighteen examples of an unfortunate outcome for the women involved, seven concern cases of seduction, a rather special misfortune where the women, it is hinted, are not as victimized as conventional morality would like to believe, and where the real sufferer, who does not appear in the foreground of the action, is the husband, father, or duenna charged with the woman's protection. This is abundantly clear, for example, in *Le Héron* (*Rom.*, XXVI,85) and *La Grue* (*MR*, V,151), two versions of the same story which features a naive young girl
immured in a tower at the order of an over-protective father and under the surveillance of an incompetent duenna. In the fabliau *Le Chevalier a la Corbeille* (MR, II, 83) it is the duenna herself who suffers as a result of direct conflict with an ardent and ingenious lover. Of the ten fabliaux which remain, the sex of the defeated antagonist is incidental in two; *La Gageure*, which could as easily have involved a wager between two men as in *Celle qui se fist foutre sur la Fosse de son Mari*; and *Boivin de Provins* (MR, V, 52), whose victim Mabile just happens to be a prostitute. We are left then with eight fabliaux in which some essentially feminine vice gets the victim into trouble. But the only fault attributable to the nature of women per se to receive anything like general castigation is an excessive sexual appetite beyond the power of any husband, whatever his virility, to satisfy. Such is the complaint in *La Dame qui Aveine demandoit pour Morel sa Provende avoir* and its cognate, *Porcelet* (MR, IV, 144), and in *Le Pescheor de Pont seur Saine* (MR, III, 68). There are, of course, other references to this aspect of women's nature in other fabliaux, a particularly good example occurring in the wife's "confession" in *Le Chevalier qui fist sa Fame confesse*:

A paine porroit-l'en choisir
Fame qui se puisse tenir
A son seignor tout seulement,
Jà tant ne l'aura bel et gent;
Quar la nature tele en ont,
Qu'els requierent, ce sachiez-vous,
Et li mari si sont vilain
Et de grant felonie plain,
Si ne nous oson descouvrir
Vers aus, ne noz besoins gehir,
Quar por putains il nous tendroient,
Se noz besoins par nous savoient;
Si ne peut estre en nule guise
Que n'aions d'autrui le servise. 2

But the wife here successfully extricates herself from the predicament brought about by her husband's deceit, and we can only assume in consequence that the author regards the wife's misdemeanors as more venial than the knight's prying which exposes them, and which, by opening doors better left closed, subjects him to a good deal of mental anguish he might otherwise have avoided. There is some evidence for a general feeling in the fabliaux that virtue consists rather in concealing the effects of sin than in avoiding it altogether, in preserving unruffled the surface of societal relationships whatever dark currents move below, and this feeling promotes sympathy for the ingenuity which women often display in extricating themselves from embarrassments. This is clearly expressed by Jean de Condé:

Li tours fu biaus et grascieus

2 MR, I, 183. "It would be hard to find a wife who could be satisfied just with her husband, no matter how handsome and gallant he might be; for it is natural for them to have desires, you know, and husbands are such wretches, and so full of malice, that we dare not reveal ourselves to them or make known our needs, for they would think us all whores if we ourselves told them what we wanted; so there is no other way for it but that we must have the service of others."

Complaints against the behavior of women in the remaining six fabliaux of this group vary considerably. *La Couille noire* (MR, VI, 90) has to be included because its joke depends upon the particular nature of the female anatomy, but it depends even more directly on conduct which must have been highly aberrational even in the not-too-hygienic middle ages. Marital infidelity is directly responsible for the misfortunes of the wives in *L'Enfant qui fu remis au Soleil* (MR, I, 162) and *Le Fevre de Creil* (MR, I, 231), who suffer the loss of a son and a beating, respectively. It is only marginal in *Le povre Clerc*, where the woman's inhospitality is the direct cause, as the appended moral indicates:

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... a celui doit l'an del pain  
Q'on ne cuide jamais veoir:  
Car l'an ne cuide pas savoir  
Tel chose qui vient mout sovant.  
C'est domage al plus de jent  
Et à la dame tot premiere  
Qui au clercl fist si laide chiere  
Quant il oustel li demanda;  
De quanque il la nuit conta  
N'aust il ja un mot soné,  
S'el li aust l'ostel presté.  
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3 *Le Pliçon; MR, VI, 263. "It was a prettily executed ruse, full of trickery and guile, and most opportune, for through it serious trouble was avoided."*

4 *MR, V, 200. "One should give bread even to those one never expects to see again: for one cannot anticipate the turn which events very often take. Failure to do so brings shame to many people, and to this woman particularly who gave the clerk such a cold reception*
The greatest punishments are reserved for two women whose sins would otherwise seem less serious than, for example, the adultery which is successfully concealed in the majority of cases. Significantly they both involve open defiance of husbands. The wife in L'Home qui avoit Feme tencheresse (Warnke, pp. 307-310), described as "mult felunesse/de male part et tenceresse" has reduced her husband to a state of terror, and in revenge he allows her to drown, directing the searchers upstream instead of down by the argument that someone so dedicated to going against the current all her life could not be expected to change her habits when facing death. The wife in La Dame escoillée (MR, VI, 95) misbehaves in a comparable way, assuming mastery in the house and acting always in direct contradiction of her husband's expressed wishes. She is subjected to brutal mutilation and only just escapes with her life.

In attempting to establish any general scale of morality for the fabliaux we are evidently not much helped by considering a simple distinction of sex. If anything, women would seem to be favored over men, but this, as we shall see later, is a side effect of other factors rather than a significant factor in itself. Furthermore, in such attacks on women as do occur, the

when he asked her for lodging; he would not have said a word of what he related that night had she agreed to put him up."
object of the attack is most often some specific vice, some way in which the individual woman is betraying her true nature, or some excessive conduct which perverts her true role in the appointed order of things. When no information about either man or woman is given prior to a conflict between the two, as in *Le Vilain qui od sa Feme vit aler son Dru*, the man almost invariably comes off second best.

Bédier and Nykrog agree that there is a general condemnation of priests, and the evidence substantiates their view. Of the twelve fabliaux which feature priests as main protagonists, only four favor the priest in the final outcome, and in two of these other members of religious orders are the victims, a bishop in *L'Evesque qui benëi le Con* (*MR*, III, 178), and two Jacobin friars in *Le Vescie a Prestre*. On two other occasions, in *Le Prestre et la Dame* (*MR*, II, 235) and *Le Prestre qui abevete* (*MR*, III, 54), the priest functions as lover and principal schemer in typical triangle situations, the victims being a bourgeois and a *vilain* husband.

Particularly significant are fabliaux which condemn priests to extreme suffering for conduct treated with tolerance, if not with complete approval, when practiced by others. We are told nothing about the priest who is savagely mutilated in *Le Prestre crucefié* (*MR*, I, 194), apart, of course, from the adultery in which he is detected, and the priest caught in similar circumstances
in *Le Prestre qui fu mis au Lardier* (MR, II, 24), who escapes much more lightly, but not without some discomfort, humiliation, and expense, is described only as "un prestre joli." The priest in *L'Oue au Chapelain* (MR, VI, 46), also free from serious vices although perhaps slightly given to gluttony, suffers only the loss of a goose which his clerk had helped to prepare but which the priest had hoped to keep to his mistress and himself.

With the priests involved in the remaining five fabliaux, however, other factors enter which are sufficiently common to be significant. No less than four of them are explicitly accused of having too high a regard for material riches. We noticed this trait already in *Le Prestre et le Chevalier*. It occurs again with the priest in *Connebert* (MR, V, 160), by far the most vicious fabliau both for the nature of the punishment dealt the victim and the relish with which it is recounted. A similar characteristic distinguishes the priest in *Brunain* (MR, I, 132), who is "à prendre bée toz tans," and the priest in *Le Prestre et Alison* (MR, II, 8) is not only "riches hom à merveille," but so thoroughly debauched by his mercenary attitude that he feels no compunction in offering the mother of a twelve-year-old girl money to be allowed to spend the night with her daughter. It may be inferred that the proud chaplain in *Le Bouchier d'Abéville* (MR, III, 227) has a money
fixation too, for like his counterpart in *Le Prestre et le Chevalier* he is gruffly inhospitable until tempted with reward in the form of a sheep he does not know is his own.

References to the material wealth of those chosen as recipients of ill-fortune by the writers of fabliaux are fairly common in other contexts not involving priests. Jessie Crosland questions Bédier's view that the fabliaux constitute a bourgeois genre on the basis that the attitude they express seems to be consistently anti-capitalistic. She argues that the fabliaux ethic reflects rather "the eternal[grievance]...of the 'have-nots' against the 'have\'s'"(page 147). There is certainly sufficient truth in this observation to make us question Bédier's opinion on the economic status of the group which sponsored the rise of the fabliaux as popular entertainment, but it must be somewhat modified when we consider its bearing on the problem of satire. In the first place the struggle is not quite as simple as Miss Crosland suggests, and the mere possession of wealth in itself not the ultimate offense. The knight in *Le Prestre et le Chevalier*, while temporarily impoverished, is evidently infinitely richer than the priest whose greed brings about his downfall. The difference

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5 This is often the case when a young girl is married below her station to relieve her father's debts, as in *Aloul* and *Bérengier au lono Cul* (*MR*, III, 252).
between the two lies rather in the way the idea of wealth and its acquisition affects their characters. It obviously affects the knight not at all. He is neither disturbed by his temporary losses, nor arrogant towards the lower social orders in the knowledge of his real wealth. With the priest, however, the desire for gain is a ruling passion which dictates his every move and from which he is incapable of escaping. We may observe a similar trait in the actions of the other priests, and this fact provides a means of extending Miss Crosland's idea to contexts not concerned only with the possession or lack of money, in itself too narrow a concept to have any general significance.

While Bédier picks attacks on women and priests as the predominant satirical tendency in the fabliaux, and explains this as a manifestation of monasticism, Nykrog turns his attention to social satire, which, despite Bédier's denial, he feels is present sufficiently to support his contention that the fabliaux form a courtly genre deriving humor from a burlesque of the lower orders of society. This is the most general statement of the position on which his investigation rests:

Les fabliaux définissent essentiellement leurs personnages par le rang social qu'ils leur attribuent. En effet, là où les poètes modernes caractérisent leurs personnages par le trait prédominant de leur individualité psychologique, concentrant ainsi leur attention sur le fond de leur âme, les conteurs médiévaux se contentent
d'une distinction extérieure. C'est n'est pas chez eux le rêveur qui s'oppose à l'homme d'action; c'est le vilain qui s'oppose au prêtre, l'amant qui s'oppose au mari, le jeune qui s'oppose au vieux. C'est cette tendance dans les fabliaux qui nous permet de localiser le point de vue des conteurs sur un plan purement social. (Pages 108-109.)

The summary of typically conflicting alignments in the fabliaux is unobjectionable, but one fails to see any relation between it and the statement that these are social distinctions. We may accept that opposition of a vilain and a priest differentiates protagonists on a social basis, although the priest's position in the social order is nebulous, and he more clearly belongs to the same social rank as the vilain than to any other. But opposition of lover and husband is not in itself a social distinction. We would surely distinguish "the married man" from "the Lothario" in psychological rather than in social terms, and I see no reason to assume that a medieval audience would not have done the same. This is equally true of opposition between "the young man" and "the old man." Individual psychology may not be involved here, but a conventional concept of certain psychological traits characteristic of a group most certainly is, and the groupings thus represented have no relation to the social orders, as Nykrog seems to imply. He does have a method, however, and makes a commendable effort to establish some objective criteria for conducting his study. He
separates the fabliaux with erotic from those with non-erotic themes, and then, further subdividing the triangle situations from the former category, he carefully correlates the social rank of the husband and the lover with the fortunes accorded each in the final outcome. The results, which show some conformity, are summarized as follows:

Dans les rangs des amants sont tolérés, sans discussion, les chevaliers et les clercs écoliers; avec eux on trouve, en raison de leur mérite personnel, deux bourgeois. Tous les autres, prêtres ou vilains, peuvent à la rigueur cueillir au passage une aventure rapide si l'occasion s'en présente, ou même avoir une liaison durable, à la condition que ce soit dans un milieu très bas. Mais le plus souvent ces sortes d'amants finissent mal, parfois même très mal.

Le seul milieu historique qui, à l'époque, ait pu se former une telle conception littéraire de la société, c'est celui du monde courtois.... (Pages 119-120.)

The weakness in Nykrog's case seems to me to lie not so much in his method as in the conclusions drawn from the results it produces. Nykrog is too ready to generalize from the evidence, and does not sufficiently recognize alternative explanations of the phenomena observed.

The evidence itself does not support Nykrog's case unconditionally. He admits that the lover "[peut] être réduit à l'état d'une simple silhouette" in many instances, and indeed of the sixty-one fabliaux which satisfy the conditions for his investigation, the lover's social rank is not stated in sixteen. In many other
fabliaux included in Nykrog's tabulations the husband's immediate antagonist is his wife, upon whom marriage must have conferred social equality, and the lover, even if his social rank is given, plays only a minor role in the action. Essential definition of characters by their social rank does not occur in the first instance, and social comment can be read into the second only by distorting the author's purpose as it may be inferred from the emphasis given to the main characters in the drama.

We ought to guard against concluding too much from the fact that literary works appear to favor the social group which controls the political, judicial, and economic power in the community. There is no way of knowing whether the sympathetic portrayal of the aristocratic milieu can be taken as an endorsement of the courtly ethic, whether it is indeed a moral comment, or whether it is dictated rather by economic expediency, a desire on the part of the purveyors of entertainment not to offend that section of society which would provide the most lucrative rewards for their efforts. Bédier suggests that "le jongleur...se range du coté de la force" (page 326), and we cannot ignore this as a possible influence on the representation of social groups. In the light of this sort of motivation we might see a connection between the frequent accusations levelled against priests of being inhospitable, "[de
and the harsh treatment generally meted out to them.

Two further qualifications arise from Nykrog's limitation of his inquiry to fabliaux dealing with erotic themes. The special nature of the subject matter may impose certain conventions of its own, applicable in one context but not generally valid if extended to others. Medieval convention favored men establishing amorous liaisons with members of their own or a lower social class, as Andreas Capellanus' *De Arte Honeste Amandi*, which Nykrog uses extensively, makes abundantly clear. Compliance with this convention indicates certainly that there were convictions about social propriety sufficiently deep-rooted to inhibit assault even in the fabliaux, but it does not necessarily indicate a deliberate attempt to consolidate those convictions, as Nykrog would have us believe. They have been assaulted many times since then, but endure even today. Much of the furor about *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, I suspect, stems from social rather than from sexual outrage. The degree to which we automatically make assumptions congruent with the situation depicted in the fabliaux may be shown by a story which depends on these assumptions for its comic point. Riding through the forest one day, a young king comes upon a peasant of about his own age

working by his hut, and is amazed to see that the peasant bears a striking resemblance to himself. "Tell me," he says, "did your mother by any chance work in the king my father's household?" "No sire," replies the peasant, "but my father did." Our delight at the peasant's sudden shattering of the king's assumptions is enhanced by our recognition of the fact that initially we are lured into sharing them.

If we extend the investigation beyond fabliaux dealing with the theme of love in order to escape any conventions of this sort, we find the nobility treated generally with less respect. We might begin at the very top of the aristocratic hierarchy with two fabliaux, Le Roi d'Angleterre et le Jongleur d'Ely and La Male Honte (MR,IV,41), in both of which unflatteringly portrayed English kings are exposed to ridicule by humble subjects. In Le Vilain au Buffet a member of the very lowest social order strikes and humiliates an important aristocrat, seneschal to a count. There are thoroughly uncomplimentary portraits of the nobility in Le sot

Having criticized Nykrog for failing to qualify his evidence sufficiently, we must avoid the same error ourselves. Here is a case in point. Since we have French writers attacking English kings, the possibility suggests itself that national antagonism is the primary motive behind the assault, rather than any wish to debunk the feudal monarchy as an institution. But that national antagonism should express itself in this way still signifies a greater willingness to dispense with respect than we would anticipate from an aristocratically oriented literature in the thirteenth century, when nationalism had hardly begun to challenge international feudalism as the major force for social order.
Chevalier (MR.I, 220), Charlot le Juif qui chia en un Pel de Lievre, and La Dame escoillée. The existence of pairs of fabliaux such as Un Chivalier et sa Dame et un Clerk (MR.II, 215) and La Borgeoise d'Orliens, or Los Tresces (MR.IV, 67) and La Dame qui fist entendant son Mari qu'il sonjoit (MR.V, 132), which use the same plot in different social contexts, supports Bédier's contention that such transmutations could be made in other cases, and contributes to an overall impression that social considerations are not too important. Nykrog himself admits that the most significant statistic to come out of his investigation was the degree to which "la sympathie est nettement du coté des amants" (page 111), in two cases out of three. Since this figure ignores social differences, its significance must lie elsewhere. Social satire hardly explains either the basis of satiric attacks or the humorous intention of the authors. Only a very shaky case for viewing the fabliaux as "un genre cortois burlesque" can be made on the evidence offered, and there are serious objections against such an interpretation which we will look at in concluding this chapter.

Let us, then, put aside social considerations for

8 Less striking, but also worthy of comment, are the portraits in Le Chevalier qui fist parler les Cons, Une seule Fame qui a son Con servoit, c. Chevaliers de tous Poin (MR.I, 294), La Gageure, and La Dame qui se venja du Chevalier (MR.VI, 24).
a moment and examine other possible grounds for distinction. Lanson's view that the world of the fabliaux "est aux rusées" spotlights the characteristic which most evidently associates those elected to survive in a society where conventional moral law is inoperative or ineffective. The ability to engignier, enfantosmer, or charmer one's opponent, if not explicitly praised, is more convincingly endorsed by being unfailingly felicisfic, and we are tempted to put at the top of the moral scale those personal qualities which define the temperament needed for membership of this favored confraternity. The basis for success in conflict after conflict is a certain elasticity of mind, quick-wittedness, and a freedom from any conventional mold of thought, which allow the successful individual to respond in a new way to every new situation. These are the qualities which span barriers of age to unite the ancient crone in La Vielle Truande(MR,V,171) with the young wife of Les Tresces, barriers of class to unite Le Vilain au Buffet with Le Chevalier a la Corbeille(MR,II,183), and economic barriers to unite the poor youths of Gombert et les deus Cleres(MR,I,238) with the rich young count of La Dame escoillée. The elite group is best exemplified by such free spirits as the young vallet adventurer of Le Foteor(MR,I,304), the devil-may-care clerks who invade Orleans in La Dame qui fist batre son :ari(MR,IV, 133), or the young wives whose husbands, pawns in their
hands, are powerless against the machinations of their nimble wits. Qualifying for membership is sufficient, in *Le Prestre et la Dame* and *Le Prestre qui abevete*, to redeem even the much maligned priest.

But we would be justified in claiming that such qualities characterize one end of a moral scale only if we could prove that the other end was characterized by their opposite, by a lack of freedom, by rigidity, by inability to respond to new situations in a new way, by an "automatism of acquired habits." The person most obviously fitting these specifications is the "humor" character of traditional satire, whose ruling passion so governs his life that his every action is predictable, and who has in consequence forfeited his freedom to respond appropriately to any new situation confronted. Do we have such characters in the fabliaux? Most certainly we do. Except in rare cases satire directed against a humor character is not the primary purpose of the tale, and we do not have anything approaching, for example, a Molière comedy in which every facet of a particular vice is systematically exposed to ridicule, but there is abundant evidence that satire of this sort enters into a large number of fabliaux, and can be found

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"The quotation is from Henri Bergson, "Laughter," in *Comedy* (New York, 1956), p. 72. The sort of distinction drawn above evidently approaches that on which Bergson's whole theory of humor is based."
subtly coloring the development of the action in some unexpected contexts.

Let us look first of all at the most obvious example of satire of this type, Jean Bodel's *Le Couvoiteus et l'Envieus* (MR, V, 211), the very title of which is sufficient to identify its features. The really significant fact about this fabliau is the way in which satire directed against two such humor types as those named is made to integrate with the characteristic jape we have learned to identify with the central core of the typical fabliau, in such a way that the two are entirely interdependent. The obvious satiric intent here does not, in other words, involve any deviation from the standard fabliau formula, does not force any displacement towards a moral did or other genre, but is perfectly possible within the unique framework outlined for the fabliaux. It is the character of the victims which makes them vulnerable, and the trick played upon them which exposes that vulnerability. For Saint Martin, recognizing the nature of each in a brief encounter with them as they journey together, grants them a wish, that the first to speak may have anything he desires, while the one who stays silent shall have double that of the other. Given the characters of the two wretches, the terms of the gift are such as to paralyze them completely. Greed cannot bear to wish first, for he wants as much as possible, while Envy cannot tolerate that his
companion should have twice as much as him. Thus both remain silent until, threatened by Greed, Envy elects to lose an eve, whereupon his companion is blinded completely. The harshness of the outcome reflects the bitterness of the satire, but captures the essentially self-destructive quality of the vices attacked.

We have already seen the same vice of greed displayed by a number of priests, and it is well exposed in Le Vescie a Prestre, where the two Jacobins, who, the author says, "mut se vuelent estachier/Cant aucun desviiet ravoient" (Stuck close to anyone who looked like a soft mark), receive their just deserts at the hands of the old priest. The introduction in this fabliau is long because we do not have any means of discriminating automatically between the parish priest and the friars. The priest is carefully built up as an admirable character, solicitous, at the end of an exemplary life, for the well-being of his soul and for the poor and unfortunate in his parish, and eager to make the most equitable possible disposition of his worldly goods. The two Jacobin friars visit the priest because they are habitually well entertained at his house rather than because they have any real affection for him, they push the case for a charitable donation to their own order a little too insistently, and finally anger the priest and forfeit all sympathy of the audience by suggesting that one of the gifts already projected be rescinded in their
favor. Thus is the way carefully prepared for their final humiliation. A consuming envy characterizes a seneschal who suffers a similar fate:

Quant il veoit son seignor fere
A nului bien, si se dervoit;
Por .l. petit qu'il ne crevoit
D'orgueil, et d'anui et d'envie. 10

His punishment is particularly apt in that he gets back the "buffet" given to the vilain with the offer of interest on the loan if he so desires.

Others of the seven deadly sins specifically castigated in the fabliaux to which reference has been made are sensuality and pride. Besides the wives who have usurped their husbands' authority in the home, the innkeeper in La Plantez (MR, III, 170) and the wife of La Couille noiro are described as "mout fiers et orgoillos." Special cases of pride rendering a person liable to exploitation are evident in two tales of seduction. The young maid in Frere Denise (MR, III, 263) has refused all offers of marriage because, being intensely religious, she has vowed to remain a virgin. But the assurance by a crafty Franciscan that by disguising herself as a boy and joining their order she will almost certainly be canonized exploits just that issue wherein her good sense is clouded by vanity, and the virginity vowed to

10 Le Vilain au Buffet, MR, III, 200. "Whenever he saw his master do anyone a favor, he would go mad, and come close to bursting with pride, anger, and envy."
God is lost, alas, to the lust of her seducer. A similar misfortune befalls another professional virgin whose refusal to listen to the pleas of her various suitors is motivated by even more bizarre ambitions:

\[ \text{I. jor dist que voloit voler} \\
\text{Volentiers par mi l'air lasus} \\
\text{Ausi comme fist Dedalus.} \]

A clerk is enabled to profit in down-to-earth fashion from her wish by working to provide her with the necessary beak and tail to accomplish her desires, but the results turn out most unexpectedly for the young girl.

Gullibility evidently plays an important part in these latter examples, as in most of the fabliaux dealing with the theme of seduction. The description "sote et nice" applied to the maiden in \textit{La Grue} is equally applicable to her counterpart in \textit{L'Esquiriel} (\textit{MR}, V,101), and even more emphatically to the bourgeois wife of \textit{Le Maignien qui foti la Dame} (\textit{MR}, V,179). The trait is not restricted to young girls, however, but appears with great frequency among male dupes, as a kind of natural antithesis to the guile which distinguishes their adversaries. Thus we have an extended study of stupidity in \textit{Le fol Vilain} (\textit{Livingston}, 148) and \textit{La Sorisete des Estopes} (\textit{MR}, IV,158), the hero of \textit{Brifaut} (\textit{MR}, IV,150) is "un vilain riche et non sachant," and the husbands in

\[ \text{La Pucelle qui voloit voler, MR, IV,208. "One day she said that she wanted to fly freely through the air like Dedalus."} \]
Le Pliçon and Gombert et les deus Cleres are explicitly identified as belonging to the same group. One of the dupes condemned to the ignominy of being cuckolded by a priest is described at length in Le Prestre et la Dame, his natural mawkishness augmented by drink:

...il fu maintenant toz yvres,
Si ot vaillant plus de mil livres
En son chatel que au matin.
Lors commence à paller latin
Et postroillaz et alemant,
Et puis tyois et puis flemmanc,
Et se ventoit de sa largesce,
Et d'une trop fiere proesce
Que il soloit faire en s'anfance: 12
Li vins l'avoit fet roi de France.

Closely linked with pride, and in the context of the fabliaux which favors lovers over husbands inviting a comic nemesis, is jealousy. The association of the two is clear in La Saineresse, where the wife's infidelity is precipitated by her overhearing her husband "se vanta de grant folie/Que fame n'el poroit bouler" (Foolishly boast that no woman could deceive him). Similarly in L'Espervier (MR, V, 43) the wife misbehaves with her husband's friend only after he has unjustly accused them of deceiving him. For the rest we have a whole gallery of potential cuckolds whose behavior towards

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12MR,II,238-239. "By now he was quite drunk, and thought himself worth a thousand pounds more than he had been that morning. Then he started talking Latin, and gibberish and German, and afterwards Dutch and Flemish, and he boasted about his prodigality and about the way he used to act with too rash a boldness in his youth: the wine had made him king of France."
their wives is typified by that of the husband in La
Fame qui cunqui son Baron:

...li vilains et honte et lait
Li refaisoit et rebatoit
Com cil qui jalous en estoit.\textsuperscript{13}

Favorite targets for attack in the fabliaux are
those characters who indulge in some form of hypocrisy.
They are guilty not only of a shackled consistency in
their behavior, but also of forging their own chains, by
a deliberate act of will, in choosing some public image
to which they become committed. Their fate is to have
the private personality behind the public image exposed.
The husband in \textit{Bérengier au lonc Cul} makes pretence to
valor and knightly prowess:

...ort pereceus et vains
Et vanterres après mengier:
Mout se fesoit bon chevalier\textsuperscript{14}
Par parole;....

He maintains the masquerade by riding off into the for­
est every day and battering his shield with his own
lance and sword, returning at night with tales of
battles in which he had humbled numerous opponents. His
own humiliation at the hands—well not exactly the hands—

\textsuperscript{13}Published in Joseph Bédier, \textit{Les Fabliaux} (Paris,
1893), pp. 344-346. "The wicked ugly peasant would
continually beat her and then be nice to her, just like
the jealous husband that he was."

\textsuperscript{14}MR, IV, 57. "He was a lazy good-for-nothing, and a
boaster at the dinner table; for to hear him talk one
would have thought him a great knight."
of his wife is necessarily private, but complete. Again, by virtue of the predominantly erotic preoccupation of the fabliaux, hypocrisy manifests itself primarily in sexual terms, as an assumed prudishness or modesty. The bishop in *L'Évesque qui béné la Con* and the abbess in *La Nonette* (MR, VI, 263) are guilty of berating others for practices in which they themselves indulge, a fault which *Le Lai d'Aristote* illustrates and which Henri d'Andeli summarizes at the conclusion of the story:

\[\ldots\text{quant on est repris de chose}\]
\[\text{C'on a blasmé à fere autrui,}\]
\[\text{Puis c'on en a blasme et anui,}\]
\[\text{C'est grant folie qui ce fet; 15}\]
\[\text{Son sens amenuise et deffet.}\]

The wife in *Le Pescheor de Font seur Saine* disclaims any pleasure from making love, declaring it to be the only annoyance of married life, but reveals her true feelings when her husband tricks her into believing that their sexual relations have been prematurely terminated by an accident he has suffered. In *Celle qui se fist foutre sur la Fosse de son Mari* a widow's excessive anguish at the death of her husband and declared intention never to have dealings with another man last only until the departure of the other mourners from the grave side, where she readily allows herself to be seduced by

\[15\text{MR, V, 260. "It is very foolish to court censure for something one has accused others of doing, and to incur reproaches and trouble, for thus is the force of one's argument weakened or destroyed."}\]
a cynical squire. The smith's wife in *Le Fevre de Creil* (MR, I, 231) admonishes her husband for his indelicacy in describing to her their servant's genitalia, but hastens off at the first opportunity to test for herself the truth of his assertions. The young girl who faints at the word but is totally unabashed by the deed in *La Pucele qui abevra le Polain* (MR, IV, 208) prompts an acid comment from the author of this fabliau similar to that made by Henri d'Andeli.

Although the humors so far recorded are conventional and are treated in rather straightforward fashion, the author of a fabliau may show considerable subtlety in his character delineation, so that the dominant trait of the victim and the way it influences his fate may at first escape notice. A particularly good example occurs in *Le Chevalier a la Robe vermeille*. We are not told anything specifically to the detriment of the cuckolded husband. The wife's lover follows the traditional path in pursuit of fame, wandering the country in search of adventure and tests of valor, but the husband has other interests:

\[\text{Et li vavassors por son preu} \\
\text{Entendoit à autre maniere,} \\
\text{Qu'il avoit la langue maniere} \\
\text{A bien parler et sagement,} \\
\text{Et bien savoit .l. jugement} \\
\text{Recorder, c'estoit ses delis.} 16\]

16 *MR*, III, 35-36. "The vavasor sought fame in other fields of endeavor, for he had a golden tongue and
Returning one day unexpectedly, he finds the lover’s palfrey, hunting dogs, and hawk in the yard, and a beautiful scarlet cloak in his wife’s chamber. Although he is naturally suspicious at first, his suspicions are allayed when his wife says that all are presents to him from her brother, who had been on a visit during his absence. The knight accepts her explanation without question, despite the very unusual circumstances of the "gift," and we might question the credibility of this sudden switch. But the explanation is contained in the knight’s reply to his wife’s admonition to accept the various items with a good grace:

...Dame, vous dites voir;  
Du palefroi m'est il molt bel,  
Et des chienès et de l'oisel,  
Mes .1. petit i mespreites,  
Quant vous sa robe retenistes,  
Quar ce samble estre convoitise. 17

In rescuing herself the wife is aided not only by her own guile but also by the precious scrupulosity of her husband’s legal mind, which is immediately distracted from the question of the veracity of her explanation to the delicate problem of where good grace ends and greed begins. Later, when the articles have all been removed could speak well and wisely, and he knew how to pronounce judgment, and took delight in such matters."  

17MR,III,39. "Lady, what you say is true; I am very pleased with the palfrey, and with the dogs and the hawk, but you overstepped the mark somewhat in accepting his cloak, because that looks a little greedy."
while the husband slept, and the wife tries to convince him that he dreamt the whole incident, the same trait allows the discussion to be side-tracked onto the issue of how many shrines the husband ought to visit in begging God to restore his mind. Thus the rather inconspicuous information on the husband's pursuits offers a key to his character which in turn explains how his wife is able to manipulate him at her will.

The victim is not always identified in this way. We have seen already that the introduction, wherein distinctions of the sort just described between duper and victim are made, may be missing completely, or it may describe the protagonists only in non-discriminatory terms. Such fabliaux are for the most part triangle situations in which the wife is duper and the husband victim.\(^\text{18}\) The prejudice in favor of the lover over the husband already noted by Nykrog automatically includes the wife one must suppose. This conforms with the general stipulation that the fabliau ethic is best understood in terms of freedom as opposed to restraint, as the term "free love" used of pre-marital or extra-marital relationships implies. The same general concept can explain the evident sympathy for youth over

\(^{18}\) For example, Les Braies au Cordelier(MR,III,275); La Dame qui fist trois Tors entor le Moustier(MR,III,192); Le Cuvier(MR,1,126); Les Tresces; Le Vilain qui vit un autre Home od sa Feme(Warnke,pp. 145-147); Le Vilain qui od sa Fame vit alor son Dry; and the three short stories in Les trois Dames qui troverent l'Anol.
age, in accordance with the theory that youth is radical while conservatism tends to increase as people grow older. In a number of cases wives are explicitly designated as being considerably younger than their husbands, and there may be a general assumption that this is the case even when no overt mention of the fact is made. An example is the wife in *La Famme qui cunquie son Baron*, whose displeasure with her husband stems partly from a disparity in their ages: "...elle fu trop giovene a son oeu/Elle nel prisa pas deus oeu." (She was too young for him, and did not think him worth two beans.) The comic overthrow of Aristotle in *Le Lai d'Aristote*, despite the immense respect which he commanded as a philosopher in the early thirteenth century is possible because of his portrayal as a caricature of the aged academic who by complete seclusion with his books has lost touch with mundane reality. Here is Aristotle's description of himself:

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Je sui toz vieus et toz chenuz,
Lais et pales et noirs et maigres,
En filosofie plus aigres
Que nus c'on sache ne ne cuide. 19
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Two interesting examples of the triumph of age over youth are provided by *Auberée, la vieille* *Naquerelle* (MR,VI,1) and *La Vielle et la Lisette*. 20 In each

19 *MR*, V, 254. "I am too old and too grey, ugly, sallow, thin, and melancholy, more emaciated with philosophy than anyone would credit."

20 "Petri Alfonsi *Disciplina Clericalis*:III
case an old woman acts as procuress to deceive a younger husband and wife, who are, apparently, completely innocent. The wife in the latter tale is in fact a paragon of virtue whose betrayal seems in many respects highly objectionable. The procuress acts, of course, on behalf of a young lover in both stories, and the readiness with which everything else is sacrificed to the achievement of his purpose serves to emphasize the force of the anarchic principle in this respect.

When sympathy neither for a lover nor for youth over age is operative as a distinguishing factor we have, as we might expect, long introductions to differentiate antagonists. Such is the case with two fabliaux, Les deux Changeors (MR, I, 245) and La Dame qui se venja du Chevalier (MR, VI, 24), where the husband is only marginally involved in action which centers on a quarrel between the wife and her lover. Both feature a complete introductory episode serving to record some gaucherie on the part of the lover whereby he antagonises his mistress and alienates the sympathy of the audience.

In terms of the satiric elements present it is possible, then, to see the action of the fabliaux as conforming fairly closely to what Northrop Frye has described as the typical movement of comedy from law to liberty: "The movement...from a society controlled by
habit, ritual bondage, arbitrary law and the older characters to a society controlled by youth and pragmatic freedom."21 If this is acceptable, it involves a major shift of viewpoint from that taken by Nykrog, who argues the existence of social satire to support a conception of the fabliaux as a courtly genre whose humor is burlesque. To agree with Nykrog is to subsume the role of the fabliaux under a generally ideological intention,22 that is as tending to reinforce the courtly ethic by ridiculing its extension to the lower social orders, and thus to maintain the conventions in their pure form as the exclusive right of the privileged group. The fabliaux would then take their place among those literary works described by Huizinga in The Waning of the Middle Ages as serving to codify, and to buttress by artistic representation, ideas which had begun to lose their vitality in the social flux. They would be, as the title of Huizinga's work implies, associated primarily with an already decadent and moribund culture.

But this is surely to contravene both the general opinion which most modern critics have formed of the fabliaux, and the evidence we have of their influence


22I use the term in the sense employed by Karl Mannheim, Ideology and Utopia (London, 1949).
on contemporary medieval writers. For the fabliaux lead forward in one direction to Boccaccio and the immediate flowering of the Italian literary Renaissance, and in the other direction, less conspicuously at first, to the French comic mime and secular drama. The fabliaux, that is to say, seem of all the literary modes of the thirteenth century to be among those which do most to stimulate subsequent literary activity. Bédier was surely right in trying to explain the fabliaux as the manifestation of some novel impetus towards the future. In choosing as the basis of his explanation the emergence of the new bourgeois social class he undoubtedly picked the wrong horse, but at least it was running in the right race. Recognizing Bédier's error, Nykrog assumes that since the middle class is not to be held responsible, the aristocracy must be. But this in turn presupposes that Bédier was right in seeking the explanation within the context of the social divisions of the age. There is little if any evidence that this was indeed the case. As we have just seen, the lines of demarcation in the fabliaux conform fairly well to a division that is more fundamental than this, and which operates without reference to social differences, a division better understood in terms of the intellectual rather than the social climate. The nature of the conflicting attitudes can best be seen by analysing the engin which forms the core of the typical fabliau, the
trick or deceit whereby the favored group, whose nature we have just described, exercise their will over the others, and the world of the law-makers is forced to give way to that of the law-breakers.
In discussing humor I shall not introduce an entirely new subject, nor deal with a body of material distinct from that which was examined in the last chapter. Rather it is my intention to expand and expound the suggestion already made that humor, by which I mean the pleasure derived from perceiving a conflict of mental attitudes, and, at its most significant, of fundamental views about the meaning of life and the nature of reality, is a necessary adjunct of satire. Without humor as its basis and inspiration, condemnation of individual behavior is no more than arbitrary and gratuitous invective. There is no satire without humor. There may be humor without satire, but only if the author presents opposing attitudes without personally espousing either of them, and this is impossible when those attitudes are distributed among their respective proponents in a series of dramatic conflicts which consistently move towards some definitive resolution in the triumph of one group. The satirist strives to expose and discomfort his society or a section of his society by attacking its individual members, and the profundity of
the satire increases proportionately to the significance and general distribution of the chosen victims' vices. They must be the outward manifestation of mental attitudes themselves instrumental in forming the fabric of society if they are to warrant the satirist's attention. Furthermore, the satirist's aim is always therapeutic. He desires the purgation and reform of society, not its destruction. His is not the apocalyptic vision which replaces society with a vacuum, or despairingly abandons this world for the next. He looks forward, not to Armageddon, but to the millenium. In all satire, then, the mental attitude condemned by the satirist as vicious is opposed by some concept of virtue, by the vision of mental attitudes which are seen as healthier, more realistic, better for the well-being of society as a whole. The positive aspects of the satirist's vision are often not fully developed. His primary purpose is to attack the present wrong, not to adumbrate in any detail the future right. While not totally destructive, he is seldom sufficiently constructive to appear utopian. The positive virtues he advocates can best be inferred by negating the vices attacked.

In this respect the movement of satire is simply a sharpened version of the movement of comedy in general, a movement not only from one type of society to another, but also, to quote Northrop Frye once more, "...a
movement from illusion to reality, [where] illusion is
whatever is fixed or definable, and reality is best
understood as its negation: whatever reality is, it's
not that" (page 169). We cannot postulate the nature of
the society which the satirist envisions, and it is by
no means certain that the satirist himself in many
instances has formulated any detailed conception of its
nature. What we can infer is some need for change in
the fundamental attitudes according to which the society
attacked is constituted. When the upholders of that
society are successfully opposed by adversaries whose
mental orientation differs essentially from their own,
the direction of the change can further be inferred from
the attitudes of this latter group. We shall attempt by
this means to reach some understanding of the mental
attitudes which underlie the conflict between the opposing
groups of characters in the fabliaux, to relate this
understanding to the idea of a formulaic structure al­
ready proposed, and finally to offer an explanation of
the conflict by relating it, through its intellectual
basis, to the general intellectual climate of the thir­
teenth century.

Let us begin once more with a specific example. In
the moral which concludes *Le Vilain de Farbu* Jean Bodel
makes the simple action of his story indicative of a
general movement from one type of society to another,
youth as represented by the son taking over from age as
represented by the father. The story merits some de-
scription, since it raises a number of points pertinent
to that general conflict of attitudes in the fabliaux
which constitutes the basis of humor.

[A peasant proposes taking his son with him to
market to give the boy some useful experience.
On the way the father spots in the path a piece
of iron which a smith has thrown there all hot
from the forge as a bait to catch unwary passers-
by. He tells Robin his son to grab it, as a
piece of iron is a valuable find, but instead of
picking it up Robin kneels down by the iron,
spits on it, and seeing that the hot iron bubbles,
leaves it where it is. The peasant asks why
Robin has not brought the iron, and he explains
that it was fresh from the fire.
"How could you tell?" asks the peasant.
"Because I spat on it and it bubbled," says Robin,
"and there isn't a piece of iron on earth which,
when hot, won't bubble when you wet it. So you
can always tell that way."
"Now I have learnt something worthwhile," says his
father, "for I have often burnt myself by touching
or tasting something which was too hot. In future
I will know how to avoid doing that.
Having made their purchases the two return home.
By the time they get there the peasant is starving,
and he asks his wife to make some soup. She
quickly heats the soup over a straw fire and

1MR, IV, 86.

Segnor, à çou vous en tenés:
Si est mais li siecles menés
Que li fius engigne le pere,
Si n'ert mais jors qui ce ne pere
Ci et aillors, si com je cuit,
Car plus sont li enfant recuit
Que ne sont li viellart barbu,
C'avint au vilain de Farbu.

"Gentlemen, take this lesson from what you have heard;
that is the way of the world now, that the son fools his
father. I fancy not a day passes but some evidence to
this effect presents itself in one way or another, for,
as the experience of the vilain of Farbu shows, children
are better tricksters than their bearded elders."
serves him a trimming bowl. The peasant dips a ladle in the soup, spits in it, and when it does not bubble attempts to swallow a huge mouthful. He gives himself the worst burn he has ever had, turns purple, and can neither swallow the hot soup nor spit it out. "Good heavens," says Robin, "haven't you learned to feed yourself yet?"
"Robin, you miserable bastard, you tricked me into scalding myself."
"Didn't you blow on it?"
"No, because you didn't blow on the hot iron."
"I proved that was hot by spitting on it to dampen it."
"So did I spit in my soup," says the peasant.
"You have to get one thing straight;" says Robin in conclusion, "there is a big difference between a piece of hot iron and a bowl of soup."

Nykrog cites *Le Vilain de Farbu* as an example of stories dependent for their comic effect on "une bêtise excessive" (page 56), and complains that the idea for the tale lacks dramatic force. We may accept this fabliau as an example of Hobbesian "superiority" humor. The irony of the peasant's avowed intention to educate his son, the crass vulgarity of spitting in his soup, and the slapstick retribution which follows, all lend support to such an interpretation. But if the tale is so interpreted Nykrog's complaints, which he offers with some hesitancy in view of Jean Bodel's undisputed competence and popularity as a writer, appear nevertheless to be justified. In fact dramatic force and a better sense of balance between the parts can be restored to the tale if we recognize that this is not the only possible interpretation. For the peasant is guilty both of "une bêtise excessive" and of excessive
ingenuity. His experiment ends calamitously, but the method of analogical extension which betrays him can be regarded as a legitimate avenue to new knowledge. Only if we recognize this can we justify the long preamble to the final scene, and only then does the son's insistence that "caus fers n'est mie mortereus" achieve any force as a conclusion. Jean Bodel clearly indicates in the final summary that for him the story incorporates some dramatic conflict between the main characters, and that the son actually does engigne his father. It is through this idea of some trick at the center of the story that Le Vilain de Farbu is connected with the traditional fabliau development. If the peasant is so stupid that he brings about his own misfortune, and if the son consequently plays a completely passive role, the idea of conflict dwindles away. The author's use of the word engigne can be understood if we assume that the son, in engineering his father's humiliation, depends not on the peasant's absolute stupidity, but on a particular and limited, but very real sort of intelligence. Jean Bodel is therefore permitted to draw general conclusions from a story which would otherwise deal only with idiosyncratically stupid behavior.

I do not wish to foist upon a simple story such as Le Vilain de Farbu a weight of philosophical interpretation greater than it was ever intended to bear, but if
we dismiss the story as no more than slapstick humor
directed against a rustic clown we have to ignore the
greater part of it, while if we wish to find a satis­
factory explanation of the story as a whole we can do
so only by recognizing it as a conflict between two
characters with a carefully contrasted approach to
understanding reality and attempting to control their
environment. Robin the son insists on an almost total
discrimination of individual objects. If in the course
of his daily life he employs concepts—that all hot
iron bubbles when wetted, or that soup can always be
cooled by blowing on it—the concepts are so special
that they almost approximate to the individual objects
subsumed under them. But in the father's thought pro­
cesses, of which we are given a full description, no
such cautionary distinctions are made between individ­
ual objects. He generalizes on the basis of accident,
heat, instead of substance, iron and soup, and conse­
quently ends by confusing these two. He does not hesi­
tate to move experimentally from his son's special
concept that all hot iron bubbles when wetted to a more
general concept of his own that everything hot bubbles
when wetted, assuming erroneously that the empirical
validity of the one will hold good for the other. In
attempting to extend the content of his son's concept,
to make one general concept of his own serve in the
place of two distinct concepts of his son, he destroys
its validity and renders it pragmatically useless. He has tried, in one flash of inspiration whose thrill Jean Bodel faithfully conveys to the reader, to understand too much, and has ended up by losing touch with reality altogether. Any attempt to understand reality, to have ideas about the multiple phenomena of sense experience, to introduce any sense of order or purpose into life, involves the use of concepts. But if we assume that concepts form a graduated series from the most special to the most general, we can see that the son's mental processes operate more closely towards the special concept end of the scale than the father's, and we can interpret the story of Le Vilain de Farbu as a cogent illustration of the fact that it is the son's understanding which most closely reflects the real. The father's final scalding with the hot soup can be seen as the son's revenge for the burn which the father's equally indiscrete reliance on an abstract concept of value,"fers est boine trouvêtre," nearly occasioned him earlier. Fortunately for the son, a natural distrust of concepts prompts him to subject the piece of iron to a careful scrutiny, and he consequently establishes that this particular piece of iron is not a good find. It follows as a necessary corollary to a belief that ultimate reality resides in objects rather than in concepts that the means to apprehending that reality is through the senses rather than the intellect, and the reality of
the smith's piece of iron, which the father misconceives, is rendered perceptually apprehensible to the son by his examination of it.\(^2\)

This distinction between the father and the son in *Le Vilain de Farbu* typifies that which distinguishes the major protagonists in the fabliaux generally. For it is characteristic of the dupes that they apprehend reality in terms of concepts, and are consistently concerned with a conceptual idea of order, attempting either to explain accomplished facts or to control new events according to some previously established design for living. Hence their preoccupation with such abstract concepts as value, justice, chastity, fidelity, honor, and so forth. It is characteristic of the dupers, on the other hand, that they apprehend reality in terms of perceptions, and are content to live experience rather than attempting to control or understand it according to preconceived patterns. The differences between the two groups are fundamental and irreconcilable, involving as

\(^2\)The story resembles Aesop's *Lion and Traveller* fable, with which it shares the same basic joke, the lion failing completely to understand how the traveller can blow on his hands to warm them, on his soup to cool it. Only in the French author's thirteenth century version of the story, however, do we get the opposing views made the basis of a fairly prolonged conflict between two characters who each act in strict accordance with one point of view and in opposition to the other, so that in the course of the story both views are investigated in some detail, and a conclusion is reached which favors one point of view over the other.
they do completely opposed attitudes towards the nature of reality and the conduct of life. ³

Once this basic difference between the dupes and the dupers in the fabliaux is fully appreciated, the nature of the tricks at the core of the various stories forms a cohesive and intelligible whole. If reality is to be found in objective phenomena, and if sense perceptions offer the only reliable means of apprehending that reality, it becomes the task of the dupers to invalidate the sensory evidence of the dupes. At its simplest this is accomplished by temporarily impairing the sense perceptions altogether. Hence the frequency in the fabliaux of dupes rendered temporarily blind, ⁴ or so drunk

³A piquant illustration of the complete inability of those committed to one point of view to understand those committed to the other is provided by the Wife of Bath in her prologue. Aligning herself with those who would willingly dispense with any abstract notions whatever about the ultimate purpose or meaning of life, she quotes with approval a statement which she mistakenly attributes to the Almagest of Ptolemy: "Of alle men his wysdom is the hyste/That rekketh neve who hath the world in honde." What can such a person understand concerning an abstract conception of marital fidelity, the cause of contention between herself and her husbands? Nothing, of course. In trying to understand she automatically turns to the physical effects of infidelity, and discovering none, can see no reason to condemn it:

He is to greet a nygard that wolde werne
A man to lighte a candle at his lanterne;
He shal have never the lasse light, pardee.

⁴Le Pliçon, MR, VI, 260; Le Femme qui charma son Mari, Disciplina Clericalis (op. cit., ch. III, Note 20), pp. 22, 97; Le Velous, Disciplina Clericalis, pp. 24, 98.
as to be unaware of what is going on. On a slightly more sophisticated level, the dupes can readily be persuaded to distrust the perfectly reliable evidence of their senses, and to discount it in favor of some far-fetched conceptual explanation of the observed event. Thus the wife in *Le Chevalier a la Robe vermeille* is able to convince her husband that he dreamed he had seen all the articles left behind by her lover. Marie de France describes an even more gullible husband, whose acceptance of his wife's persuasions against the evidence of his senses is complete. As with other of Marie's fabliaux, *Le Vilain qui vit un autre Home od sa Feme* manages to crowd a number of factors significant in the clash of attitudes into small compass, and is worth quoting in some detail. The peasant, having looked into his house and seen his wife making love to another man, lets out a cry of angry astonishment:

'A, las,' fet il, 'qu'ai jeo veü!'
Dunc l'a la femme respundu:
'Que veez vus, beais sire, amis?'

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5 *Le Prestre et la Dame*, MR, II, 235; the first of the three stories in *Les trois Dames qui troverent l'Anel*, MR, I, 168; and *La Piere au Puis, Disciplina Clericalis*, pp. 35, 104.

6 The author has this comment on the wife's deceitfulness:
Ainsi la dame l'en envoie
Qui li a fet de voir mençonge,
Et se li a torné à.songe
Ce qu'il ot veü à ses iex.

MR, III, 45. "That was how the woman dismissed him. She had turned truth into lies for him, and had transformed into an illusion what he had seen with his own eyes."
'Un autre hume; ceo m'est a vis, 
sur mun lit te tint embraciee.'
Ceo dist la femme curuciee:
'Bien sai,' fet ele, 'n'en dut mie,
que c'est vostre vieille folie:
tu vuels tenir mençunge a veire.'
'Jel vi,' fet il, 'sil dei bien creire.'
'Fols iês,' fet ele, 'se tu creiz
pur verité quan que tu veiz.'
As mains le prent, od li l'en meine
a une cuve d'ewe pleine;
dedenz l'ewe le fist guarder.
Puis li cumence a demander
qu'il veit dedenz, et il li dit
que s'image meisme vit.
'Pur ceo,' dist ele, 'n'i6
s tu pas
dedenz la cuve od tuz tes dras,
se tu i veiz une semblance.
Tu ne deiz pas avoir creance
en tes uiz, ki mentent sovent.'
Dist li vileins: 'Jeo me repent:
Chescuns deit mielz creire e saveir
ceo que sa femme dit pur veir
que ceo que si malvais ueil veient, γ
ki par vede le foleient.'

 Warnke, pp. 145-147. 
'Alas, he cried, 'what did I see!' And his wife answered: 'Jell, my beloved hus-
band, what did you see?' 'Another man, that's what I saw,
holding you in his arms on my bed.' Then the wife, with
a sharp edge to her voice, said: 'Just as I suspected,
you are up to your old nonsense again. You want to make
some illusion of your own into a fact.' 'I saw him,'
said the husband, 'and so I have to believe it.' 'You
are a fool,' said the wife, 'if you believe whatever
you see.' She took him by the hand, led him to a barrel
full of water, and had him look down into it. Then she
asked him what he saw inside, and he told her that he
saw his own reflection. 'You aren't in the barrel with
all your clothes on just because you see an image of
yourself. You ought not to put all your faith in the
evidence of your eyes, for they often deceive you.'
Then said the peasant: 'I'm sorry! Everybody ought to
put more trust in what his wife tells him is true than
in what his wicked eyes see, for what they record is
deceptive.'" The wife teaches her husband a lesson out
of St. Augustine, that we must use our intellect to
correct the impressions we receive from our senses, and
uses an example rather like his, of the apparent bend-
ing of an oar in water, to do it. Another example of
the same type is provided by Le Prestre qui abevete, MR,
III,54. A priest looks through a window at a peasant
It requires, as we said earlier with reference to Le Vilain de Farby, a particular type of intelligence to be deceived in this way, as the gullibility of these victims stems from their willingness to rationalize away the evidence of their senses. A completely unsophisticated person would be protected against deceit of this kind by his very naivety, and for this reason dupers sometimes find themselves exposed by idiots or small children.\(^8\)

Another factor which distinguishes those with an excessively conceptualized approach to apprehending reality is their tendency to jump to conclusions, particularly on the basis of purely circumstantial evidence.\(^9\) It is therefore easy for the duper to arrange the evidence in such a way that the dupe puts two and two together to get at least five. Falling for the frame-up is an error to which both the typical dupe and the law are by their nature liable, but while the law takes elaborate precautions to protect itself against being deceived in this way, the dupe is usually happy to blunder into misconceptions. The most outrageous example of this type of deception is provided by another story of Jean Bodel's, Le Vilain de Bailliol,\(^{112}\), in which a wife is able to persuade her husband that he...
is dead, simply by acting consistently as though that were the case. She looks at him in horror when he first arrives home, expressing concern at his appearance, puts him to bed, covers him with a sheet, loudly laments his loss, closes his eyes and mouth, and summons the priest to recite prayers for the dead over him. When the husband, fully conscious under his sheet, begins to complain at what the priest next proceeds to do with his wife, he is told to shut up and behave in a manner more commensurate with his condition. "C'on doit por fol tenir celui," says the author, "Qui mieus croit sa femme que lui."\(^{10}\)

It is this conflict between opposing attitudes which manifests itself in the syllogistic structure of numerous fabliaux. For the dupe, committed to a conceptual approach to apprehending truth, makes use of propositions in his attempt to control reality, and acts on the assumption that a valid relationship can be postulated between concept and object to reach a conclusion which will guide subsequent action. But propositions are invariably suspect even when, at their most special, they most closely approximate to the individual and hence

\(^{10}\) For other examples of the same pattern see Les Tresces, MR, IV, 67; and its cognate, La Dame qui fist entendant son Mari qu'il sonjoit, MR, V, 132; the second story in Les trois Dames qui troverent l'Anel, MR, I, 168; and a version of the weeping bitch folk tale, La Vieille et la Lisette, Disciplina Clericalis, pp. 29, 101.
to the real, and they grow increasingly more remote from reality as they become more general. Reality in the fabliaux is intractable and infinitely varied, while conceptions are immaterial but inflexible. Now the duper, convinced that any such conceptual approach to understanding the nature of reality is a mere game, exploits the area of uncertainty in all empirical propositions.\textsuperscript{11} To have practical value, the syllogism must presuppose a fixed relationship between concept and object, so that a given phenomenon is explained by relating it to one concept, while under one concept can be subsumed a finite and definable number of phenomena. But if the individual and the real is infinitely varied, no such finite bounds for the phenomena to be subsumed under any concept can be established, while since concepts are immaterial and thought is free, the number of concepts which can be proposed to explain any particular phenomenon is governed only by the inventiveness of the proposer. It is by these two doors that the idea of sophistical validity is introduced, whereby the conceptual approach to controlling reality through the use of syllogisms is superficially maintained, while its effectiveness for practical action is destroyed. Thus the dupe is trapped by the nature of his intellectual

attitude and totally frustrated. The peasant in *Le Vilain qui od sa Feme vit aler son Dru*, all set to beat his wife for her apparent misconduct, cannot disprove the fantastic idea she herself devises to explain away her behavior, and consequently forfeits the possibility of punishing her, as this would appear, after the exchange of arguments, irrational and a betrayal of his own nature. This is exactly the pattern of a large number of fabliaux featuring a conflict between husband and wife such as occurs in *Le Dame qui fist trois Tors en tor le Moustier*(*MR*, III, 192) and in *Les Braies au Cordelier*(*MR*, III, 275).

We thus have three distinct ways in which the duper may triumph over the dupe—by physically impairing his senses, by arranging phenomena in such a way that he himself will postulate an erroneous concept to explain them, or by proposing some fantastic explanation favorable to the duper which the dupe cannot refute. That the authors were themselves aware of these distinctions and categorized them according to the amount of humor to be derived from each may be inferred from *Les trois Dames qui troverent l'Anel au Conte*(*MR*, VI, I), by Haiseau. The three stories are set in a context of competition for the most entertaining by the framework, which provides that the discovered ring shall be given to the woman "qui mieus conchiera" her husband. The three stories, although the first two show some confusion of elements, correspond roughly to the three types described above in the same order of occurrence. The author at the conclusion assumes the role of arbiter, and justifies his decision to award the ring to the third woman:

*Cil fu li mieus afoubertez
Qu'ivresce et force, ce savez,
Engignerent les autres deus,
Més cil fu droit maleureus;
Plus hardi barat et plus bel
Fist ceste: je li doing l'anel.*

"The latter was the most effectively duped, you understand, because the other two were beguiled by drunkenness and force, but he contributed to his own downfall; the third worked a bolder and neater trick: I award her the ring."
In each of the cases just mentioned the husband's "guilt" seems to consist solely of a mental incapacity to control events in the face of his wife's assault on the intellectual approach he employs, and this is essentially the case in all those fabliaux where the conflict of attitudes is clearly distributed between the major protagonists. There are however, a whole group of fabliaux, generally described as conforming to the "biter-bit" formula, where the syllogistic structure is retained, but where the attitudes are not clearly distributed in this way. They are nevertheless implicit in these stories as in the others. We have already looked in detail at one such work, *Le Prestre et le Chevalier.* Evidently neither the priest nor the knight is bound by the general agreement which they conclude to govern their business dealings, since both are prepared to introduce the idea of sophistical validity to infringe it. To that extent they are both dupers. But the priest assumes, in accordance with his desire to gain money by cheating, that the knight will be bound to honor the agreement, so that the traditional dupe figure is present, even if only as a phantom in the mind of the priest. In fact the knight is saved by his ability to outwit the priest at his own game, and thus to escape from the dupe's role in which the priest's preconceptions have cast him.

This example of the "biter-bit" formula occurs for
the syllogistic structure (a), where the general concept is followed by two particular applications, both of them now only sophistically valid. It also occurs for pattern (b), where a particular event, normally subsumed under two alternative concepts, one valid and one only sophistically valid, is now subsumed under the same sophistically valid concept by both the duper and his intended victim. When both are equally prepared to join in the game, the advantage initially possessed by the duper is lost, and he in turn becomes committed to a fantasy of his own invention which may redound against him. A good example occurs in the fabliau L'Enfant qui fu remis au Soleil. The wife of a merchant, who has been absent two years on business, becomes pregnant by a young man and bears him a son. When the merchant returns she attempts to explain the presence of the child:

Une foiz m'estoie apoie
Là sus à vo haute poie,
Mout dolente et mout esplorée
Tout por la vostre demorée,
Dont g'ère en mout grant desconfort.
Yvers ert, si nègoit mout fort;
Amont vers le ciel esgardoie,
Et je, qui point ne me doutoie,
Par meschief reçu en ma bouche
.1. poi de noif, qui tant fu douce
Que cel bel enfant en conçui
D'un seul petit que j'en reçu;
Ainsi m'avint com je vous di. 13

13 Mr. I, 163. "One day I was upstairs leaning on your high balcony, all sad and tearful because you had been away so long, which upset me terribly. It was
The merchant pretends to accept it as a sign of divine grace that their childless marriage should be blessed with a son in this way, and says no more about the matter. He suspects the worst, however, and simply bides his time until her son is fifteen years old, when he insists against his wife's wishes on taking the boy with him on a trading venture. When they reach Lombardy he sells him to another merchant trafficking with the slave market in Alexandria, and returns home alone. His wife, heartbroken at the loss of her son, demands to know what has become of him, and the merchant obliges with an explanation:

Par un chaut jor el tens d'esté,  
Jā estoit miedis passez,  
Et li chauz ert moult trespasses,  
Lors erroie-je et vo fiex,  
Lez moi..................  
Descure un mont qui tant fu hauz;  
Li solaus, clers, ardanz et chauz,  
Sor nous ardanz raiz descendì,  
Que sa clarté chier nous vendì,  
Que vos fil remetre covint  
De l'ardeur qui du soleil vint.  
A ce sai bien et aperçoïf  
Que vostre filz fu fez de noif,  
Et por ce pas ne m'en merveïl,  
S'il est remis el chaut soleil.  

winter, and it was snowing hard. I looked up towards the sky, not expecting for a minute that any harm could come to me, and by some mishap there entered into my mouth a snowflake, which was so sweet that from it I conceived this beautiful child, just from swallowing that one little bit of snow. That was exactly how it happened, just as I have told you."

\[14\] MR.I,166. "Just past noon on a hot summer's day, when the heat was excessive, I was wandering along with your son at my side....Atop a high mountain the sun, which was bright, burning and hot, bathed us in its
And so, as the author remarks, the wheel comes full cycle: "Li est bien en lieu remis/Ses engiens, et tornez à perte" (Her own guile has been brought home to her, and turned to her own loss).

When a fantasy concept of this sort is developed and sustained by relating a series of events to it for explanation we have something closely resembling allegory, and this tendency towards allegory is more clearly developed in some other fabliaux. In L'Enfant qui fu remis au Soleil such development is necessarily limited, because the action which provokes it, the wife's infidelity, is a source of conflict between the characters, and although they both comply with the ramifications of the wife's imaginative fantasy, they do so only under duress. Both are eager to escape back to reality once the fantasy has served its immediate ends for them individually, and there is no real stimulus to extend it any further than simple expediency dictates.

As was noted earlier, however, in the case of tales of seduction the amount of conflict between the two major protagonists is minimal, and what we have very often is an effort on the part of both seducer and seduced, not to outwit each other, but mutually to

fiery rays, and its brilliance that day cost us dear, for your son was fated to melt in the sun's heat. I can see now, beyond a shadow of doubt, that your son was a snow fairy, and so it is really no wonder if he melted in the hot sun."
circumvent the exigencies of the public character, maiden or honorable young man, to which they are unwillingly committed. Under such circumstances it might be expected that the kind of allegory mentioned would flourish, and that is indeed what we find. A good example is provided by the tale which forms the basis of the two fabliaux called *La Damaisselle qui ne peut oir parler de foutre* (MR, III, 81; MR, V, 24) and of *La Pucele qui abevra le Polain* (MR, IV, 199), where the allegorical element is sufficiently strong to have influenced the choice of title in the latter instance. The problem in these three stories is how to seduce a young girl who faints at the very mention of love-making. The solution is found by constructing a fantasy which allows the act of love to be performed under the guise of some totally remote activity. Such a solution is acceptable to both parties, and both contribute their share to the allegory. Put to bed together, the young people explore each other's bodies, and as the discovery of novel features prompts a question as to their nature, a pat answer is ready. The young girl has a meadow, and in its midst a fountain, ever flowing but never full. Further exploration reveals the presence of a trumpeter, who will sound the alarm should any beast violate the pasture or attempt to drink from the fountain. The young man's accouterments comprise a horse and two marshals who guard him. What remains but that the horse
be permitted to slake his thirst at the fountain. And the trumpeter? If he should complain, the two marshals will thrash him until he is silent. In the fabliaux there is no clear distinction between a simple lie and an allegory, the latter arising naturally from a lie which is sufficiently elaborated and sustained to produce a whole series of substitutions and parallel events. L'Enfant qui fu remis au Soleil never really gets off the ground as an allegory, because escape from the plane of reality brought about by the wife's lie to explain the arrival of the child is cancelled by the husband's lie to explain its disposal, and the author omits any elaboration to give us a sharp juxtaposition of these parallel but opposing movements. When there is no overt conflict, as in La Damoiselle qui ne pooit oir parler de foutre, or in L'Esquiriel(MR,V,101), another seduction allegory arising from a young man's declaration that his sexual member is a squirrel, there is a mutual agreement

On this passage Nykrog remarks, "Nous sommes en plein pays breton"(page 78). Certainly he is correct in pointing out the overtones of Celtic romance in the allegory. He interprets it as a parody, however, and takes it to illustrate that the young girl, one of the précieuses ridicules of the thirteenth century, gets into trouble because, like Don Quixote's, her head has been turned by overexposure to the conventions of romance. But in one version it is the young man who first begins the allegory, the girl who just follows along, and his head certainly hasn't been turned by anything. Rather than getting them into trouble, their familiarity with the material of romance seems simply to provide a means of surmounting a difficulty, allowing them to conceal on one level an action unacceptable to the images they hold of themselves on another.
to abandon the plane of reality, and elaborate allegorical development follows.\footnote{Other examples of extended allegory in the fabliaux are to be found in \textit{La Damoiselle qui sonjoit}, MR, V, 208 and \textit{La Saineresse}, MR, I, 289. The two related stories of seduction, \textit{La Grue}, MR, V, 151 and \textit{Le Heron}, Romania, XXVI, 85 should perhaps be included here also, since the lack of any conflict makes the "biter-bit" formula inappropriate, although they conform to that pattern. One of the most interesting examples of allegory is provided by \textit{La Dame qui Aveine demandoit pour Morel sa Provende avoir}, MR, I, 318. Here the conflict, which in \textit{L'Enfant qui fu remis au Soleil} is distributed between the man and the wife, takes place within the individual psyche of the young man, and the wife, with her insatiable sexual appetite, represents the unpleasant reality from which it is necessary to escape. Unable to satisfy his wife's unexpressed expectations, the man hits on the following way to make them explicit, in the hope that natural modesty will then moderate their frequency: whenever his wife wants to make love, she is to employ the formula, "Give Dobbin his oats," and he will always respond appropriately. Instead of diminishing them, however, this ruse serves only to trap the husband into complying with increased demands, and his attempt to maintain some semblance of his initial concept of marital love as "le jolif mestier amoroux" ends finally, at the last impossible request, with his shitting in the bed and remarking:}

"Sister, from now on stick to bran, and help yourself to as much of it as you want, but rest assured that from now on the oats are finished. I have allotted you too much already. Now the granary from which Dobbin was supplied is empty. From now on you will have to make do with bran, because you have exhausted the supply of oats."

Thus he dispenses with the allegory which he himself had proposed, and returns to face the reality which he had sought to evade, a recognition of the discrepancy between his wife's sexual appetite and his own which cannot help but occasion some strife between them. It is interesting to note in passing that the movement
From these examples it is obvious that the nature of allegory in the fabliaux distinguishes it radically from allegory as it is familiar to us from other genres, and that it is in sharp contradiction of the whole tradition of allegorical exegesis as a means of understanding the true nature of events, a tradition which had been dominant in the early middle ages. For according to this tradition the movement from the plane of objective phenomena, from events in time and space, to the plane of underlying concepts—the movement, in Augustine's religious expression of the idea, from the creature to the Creator—is a movement from the plane of illusion, of phantasmata, to a plane of ultimate reality. When allegory appears in the fabliaux, however, the elements in this dualism in the ground of certitude acquire exactly the reverse value. It is the plane of objective phenomena which is real. To postulate a conceptual plane with which it has correspondences is to engage in a totally frivolous activity, a game whose rules can be manipulated at will to achieve desired ends in the real world.

The occurrence in the fabliaux of this type of from illusion to reality expresses itself also as a movement from elaborate euphemism, "le jolif mestier amoroux," to obscenity, the first and only vulgarisms occurring very late in the story just prior to the passage cited. An explanation of the use of obscene diction as one factor in the clash of attitudes will be offered in Chapter VI of this study.
inverted allegory would seem to signify, then, some divergence from contemporary ideas, specifically those of the Augustinian realists, who sought to establish a region of immutable certainty, of rules or principles according to which the intellect could correct the fallible impressions of the senses, and who rejected perceptual experience as a ground of certitude since it gave acquaintance only with the shifting accidents of superimposed forms. The dupes in the fabliaux are constantly being exhorted by the dupers to correct the impressions of their senses, of course, but with the important difference that their sense impressions are invariably reliable, while the process of correction according to some abstract theory always leads them into error. In the period immediately prior to that in which the fabliaux had their relatively brief flowering, realism had received its first serious challenge after holding sway since the fifth century, from a group of scholastic philosophers whose leading representative, the renowned Abelard, insisted on the individuality of every thing, and reinstated the objects of perception as the only kind of objects possessing genuine reality.

17 Ideas for the necessarily brief references to medieval philosophy have been gleaned from the following works: Meyrick H. Carré, Realists and Nominalists (Oxford, 1946); Maurice de Wulf, History of Medieval Philosophy, trans. P. Coffey (New York, 1909); and Paul Vignaux, Philosophy in the Middle Ages, trans. E.C. Hall (London, 1958).
for human thought. The epistemological and ontological questions which have received recurrent mention throughout this chapter were brought into sharp focus by discussion of the problem of universals, which dominated philosophical thought from the twelfth till the fourteenth centuries, and it is tempting to see the fabliaux as a displaced and to some extent debased examination of some of the main features of the dispute in low-life dilution, with the authors' sympathies reflecting something of the nominalists' position. Huizinga, citing the "argumentation, quibbling, and hair splitting" which characterized debate on the dispute, the "snares of words and nets of syllables" with which pupils and masters tried to befoul one another, would explain its lasting vogue as at bottom agonistic, a manifestation of the play spirit, and it seems possible that the authors of the fabliaux, many of them in all probability spasmodically and marginally involved with the schools at which these disputes were aired, might have perceived the comic possibilities in the ideas bandied around and have exploited them for their own uses.

Even the subject matter to which this body of philosophical ideas is applied has some connection with the contemporary issues in the schools. Sexuality as a

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subject matter has always been sufficiently popular, of course, not to require any justification of this kind, but it is a fact that the appearance of the fabliaux coincides with the development of a special branch of medieval humanism, which mixed cosmological speculation with the praise of sexuality, took the philosophical doctrine of plenitude as one of its main tenets, and produced a series of highly influential works among which the De universitate mundi of Bernard Silvestris and the Anticlaudianus and De planctu Naturae of Alan of Lille provide the fertile ground in which flowers the final great achievement of Jean de Meun's part of the Roman de la Rose. The fabliaux provide us with a series of dramatic vignettes in which the work of the goddess Natura has been taken from the charge of such glorious handmaidens as Urania and Physis and entrusted to the rough and tumble mob of the contemporary medieval scene, who pursue it ardently, armed with all the logic-

19 See Ernst Robert Curtius, "The Goddess Natura," in European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York, 1963), pp. 106-127. The movement is discussed in detail as an important aspect of Chaucer's literary heritage in Charles Muscatine, Chaucer and the French Tradition (Berkeley, 1957). That the ideas involved penetrated significantly into the curricula of the schools and found numerous champions may be inferred from the need in 1270 and 1277 to condemn such theses as Quod continentia non est essentialiter virtus; Quod perfecta abstinentia ab actu carnis corrumpit virtutem et speciem; Quod simplex fornicatio, utpote soluti cum soluta, non est peccatum. Quoted by M-M. Gorce, "La Lutte 'Contra Gentiles' à Paris au XIIIe Siècle," Mélanges Mandonnet (Paris, 1930), I, 223-243.
chopping guile of the disputatious schools. But even in
the fabliaux it is possible on occasion to find a champ-
on worthy of her mistress' court, and when the beauti-
ful Indian girl in the Lai d'Aristote invokes the aid of
nature against the sens et clergie of the philosopher we
know her plea will not fall on deaf ears.

In the fabliaux the play element has, of course,
taken over completely, as it has, for example, when
Laurence Sterne looks at Lockean philosophy in Tristram
Shandy, but this in no way affects the seriousness of
the subject matter, or the significance of the author's
reaction to it. It would be foolish to suggest that the
authors of the fabliaux had any intention to preach a
philosophic message, and I would not want to imply this
at all. What I do suggest is that the authors of the
fabliaux were perhaps in a position to be stimulated by
the comic possibilities in the ideas currently circulat-
ing, and on their basis could compose works which, while
demanding no such sophisticated knowledge on the part of
the audience to be found amusing, have nevertheless
significant connections with the intellectual issues
of the time, connections which have received insuffi-
cient recognition from previous critics.
CHAPTER V

THE CONCLUSION: IRONY IN THE FABLIAUX

Erich Auerbach, in his recent stylistic investigation of the representation of reality in western literature, includes among the texts illustrative of the late medieval period Antoine de la Sale's story of Madame du Chastel from Le Réconfort de Madame du Fresne.1 The crucial scene of the story, which is singled out for detailed examination, presents an anguished debate between the heroine and her husband concerning the sacrifice of their son, assigned as a hostage to the forces besieging the father's stronghold. "In medieval literature," says Auerbach, "there is hardly another instance of so simple, so extremely real, so exemplarily tragic a conflict." Among the fabliaux, the story of L'Enfant qui fu remis au Soleil describes what is, from the wife's point of view, a similar loss, but obviously without arousing any of the emotions associated with either tragedy or pathos. A study of the means by which the author avoids involving the reader emotionally with a potentially tragic situation will offer a guide

to the nature of irony in the fabliaux, and Auerbach's study provides some useful points of contrast which illuminate the differences between the two works.

In the fabliau we realize, when the husband fails to be taken in by the wife's story and plans "sa delivrance" that retribution for the wife will eventually be forthcoming, and although fifteen years in the lives of the protagonists elapse before an opportunity presents itself, they are dismissed in one line in the narrative and interest immediately centers on the husband's projected journey, in the course of which, we presume, he will enact his revenge. The wife, who does not know of her husband's festering suspicions, nevertheless has a premonition that her son is in danger. She wishes to keep the boy with her, and agrees only reluctantly to let him accompany her husband on his trading mission. The story moves close to tragic irony when she invokes God's protection for them both:

Et Dieu, qui là sus est et maint,
Vous conduie, et mon fils ramaint,
Et doinst la bonne destinée.

When the husband returns alone, having sold the boy into slavery, the wife is overcome with grief:

Mès ne le vous diroient cent
Le duel que la dame demaine
De son fil que pas ne ramaine.
Sovent se pasme, ainsi avint,
Et, quant de pasmoison revint,
En plorant li requiert et prie,
The description of the wife's distress is quite conventional, even to the successive faintings, and the author's limitations show up in the stock phrases and in a meaningless tag like "ainsi avint," but it is difficult not to feel some sympathy for the wife, and since she is about to have her worst fears confirmed one expects that the pathos will intensify. But in fact nothing of the sort happens. For the husband's explanation of the boy's disappearance turns the wife's own deceit against her in a series of careful parallels and antitheses—winter/summer, the high balcony/a high mountain, heavy snow/burning sun-rays, conception/dissolution—with the result that the conflict between the husband and wife is narrowed down to a battle of wits, in which the wife's intellectual maneuverings are successfully countered by the even more ingenious machinations of her husband. A good joke has been "capped" in other words, and the only way we are expected to react emotionally to the narrative is to sympathize admiringly with the triumph of the greater wit.

When we concur with Lanson's statement that in the

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2 MR, I, 165-166. "But a hundred writers could not describe the torture which the wife suffered when she saw that he had not brought back her son. She fainted several times, and when she recovered consciousness she begged him, crying, for the love of God to tell her what had happened to the boy."
fabliaux "le monde est aux rusées" we should do so on the understanding that "le monde" in this case is not "the real world" but an artificial backdrop against which the clash of wit can take place without distraction by any of the irrelevancies with which the real world abounds. The conflict of the fabliaux is a game, the outcome of which may have significance for life, but which should not be mistaken for life itself. The basic game concept is clearest in Jean de Condé's Le Sentier Batu, a fabliau which presents a contest of wit, and a knight's clever riposte to the offensive witicism of a lady, as a game and nothing more, with no narrative framework.\(^3\) Charles Muscatine, who accepts Bédier's attribution of the fabliaux to the so-called bourgeois literary tradition, finds in the genre:

...a spirit of intense practicality, a myopic circumscription of the attention to clock time and local space, a reckoning with tangible force, concrete motive, physical peculiarity. [The naturalistic style is] designed to evoke a naturalistic, material world, and little more.

Such an explanation of what goes on in the fabliaux seems to me a mistake comparable to suggesting that a play exists for the sake of displaying the props.

\(^3\)MR, III, 247. The game is "Le Jeu du Roi et de la Reine." Bédier cites, on page 381, an act of the council of Worcester, in 1240, which explicitly forbids the game: "Non sustineant fieri ludos de rege et regina."

\(^4\)Chaucer and the French Tradition, p. 66.
Nowhere is this more clearly evident than in the fabliau we have chosen to examine. There is some myopic circumscription, surely, but it works primarily to isolate the two large chunks of wit quoted in full in Chapter IV, pages 116-117. Such details of the "naturalistic, material world" as are included serve only to provide a narrative setting for the passages which present the ruse and counter ruse. The husband is a merchant, which conveniently gets him out of the way and gives the wife her opportunity to be unfaithful. He is away two full years, not because the author wants to record clock time realistically, but because this is the shortest convenient span for him to be presented, on his return, with a son that he can be sure is not his own. While he is absent the wife is unfaithful, but all we hear about the affair is that she becomes pregnant and produces the offspring who will need to be explained away. The husband pretends to accept the wife's explanation of the child's arrival, and the first ruse having been completed, we immediately prepare for the second. Fifteen years of clock time are dismissed in one line, and the only other piece of action involves the sale of the boy into slavery, an obvious outcome considering the husband's profession, and the only means of preparing the way for the husband's counter-ruse other than his murder, which would be unnecessarily cruel and would endanger the particular type of circumscription which is
operative in the tale, and which acts to keep the emotional involvement of the reader at a minimum.

The son who is killed in the story from the Réconfort is described in great detail, and his words and actions at his execution are reported back to the parents to increase the pathos of the events. In the fabliau the boy is scarcely mentioned, and he remains nameless and featureless. He has no more individuality than some inanimate piece of incriminating evidence which is whisked from one place of concealment to another in a farce, and this is exactly his function in the story. In the Réconfort there is "a real partnership between man and wife," and the way in which both partners struggle to control their emotions out of a deep consideration for the feelings of the other, in that peculiarly sensitive dialectic which is a marriage, increases the general pathos. In the fabliau the relationship between man and wife is purely agonistic, and the emotions they display are entirely selfish. They are recorded only as the author feels they are appropriate to the narrative development: suspicion by the husband of his wife's infidelity, grief by the wife at the loss of her son. But the husband's suspicions have apparently no effect on their domestic life for fifteen years, and the wife's grief in no way mitigates the cruelty of the husband's triumphant revenge. In fact such emotions of the protagonists as are described
serve simply to fill out the narrative line, just as the rhyming tags serve to fill out the metrical line. What Auerbach picks as the key to the pathos of the Réconfort, its kreatürliches realism, a sense of the suffering to which man is subject as a mortal creature, is exactly the quality which is rigidly suppressed in the fabliau. This is most clearly seen in the author's conclusion to the story, which immediately follows the husband's "explanation" of the boy's disappearance:

La dame s'est aperçue  
Que son mari l'a deceue,  
Qui diast que son filz est remis.  
Or li est bien en lieu remis  
Ses engiens, et tornez à perte,  
Dont follement estoit couverte:  
Bel s'en est ses sires vengiez,  
Qui laindentment fu engigniez  
Et par paroles et par dis;  
Mès jamès n'en sera laidis  
Por ce qu'ele se sent meffette;  
Ses meffez a ceste pais fete;  
Bien l'en avint qu'avenir dut  
Qu'ele brassa ce qu'ele but.  5

The wife, who has presumably loved and nurtured her son for fifteen years, knows nothing of his fate from her husband's statement. We might expect her to go out of her mind with grief, uncertainty, and despair. But all

5MR I,166-167. "The wife realized that her husband had tricked her by saying that her son had melted. The ruse, with which she had foolishly tried to conceal her own misconduct, had redounded to her loss. Her husband, who had been shamefully ensnared in a web of words, had cleverly avenged himself. But she will not be mistreated further, because she has suffered enough; her injury has brought about this accord. She received her just deserts, and had to drink her own concoction."
we get is a kind of summary of the final score, two to one in favor of the husband, and the contestants then return amicably to their dressing rooms. They accept the rules of the game, as the reader is supposed to accept them, and while the rules will tolerate any kind of guile, they exclude recourse to emotional appeals or moral exhortations except in so far as these are calculated to win a point over an opponent.

It is in this context that irony in the fabliaux is to be understood. Obviously such a context precludes the possibility of tragic irony, but it considerably enhances the opportunities for dramatic irony as a factor in the total comic effect.

In a conflict which is purely agonistic the outcome is unequivocal, since the terms of the contest establish the conditions for victory or defeat. We are not expected to evaluate this conclusion according to any extracontextual standards of behavior, for the very reason that such standards have been excluded from the story itself. To this extent the fabliaux are, as some critics have alleged, amoral, and it is pointless to complain that their conclusions are morally enigmatic. It is equally mistaken to object to the cruelty of the fabliaux, since what we are offered is a conflict of wits in which ordinary compassion plays no part. Thus in Le Prestre crucifié a priest attempts to hide from an irate husband, a carver of religious images, by stretching
himself cut like a crucifix. The husband, aware of what is going on, sharpens his knife and contrives him a cruel and vicious enough act, but if we are to enjoy the story as it was meant to be enjoyed we should pay attention to the underlying wit, and ignore the surface implications of the act except as they are necessary to convey the joke, clear in the husband's discourse with his wife who has been brought along to assist:

"Dame," said ill, "vainement.
Al en est magie morgue,
J'estoie y r o ,  ce n'est arzis,
Quant je ceste chose l'esselai? 6
Almez, si l'anendorrai."

The double meanings in the husband's speech are very carefully developed. He castigates himself for what is clearly the priest's guilt, uses, out of deference to the nature of the verse, a careful euphemism, "cette chose," for what has already been described in much blunter terms by the author, and introduces the idea of correcting the image which in fact means mutilating the priest. Ideas of cruelty or viciousness can only distract from the humor which is meant to preclude them.

Le Prestre crucifié seems to me a better fabliau than that by Gautier le Leu which treats the same theme and concludes in the same fashion. Gautier is highly regarded for his "moderacy," and Conspéret(Jz.138) may be a better story for modern tastes, in that it shows much greater insight into the personality and motives of the outraged husband, but it lacks the wit of the other tale and consequently the viciousness is rather intrusive. Post-romantic taste may be responsible for the apparent inability of some modern readers to enjoy the fabliaux as they were evidently meant to be enjoyed. 7

We find it almost impossible to approach a work of art with anything less than a self-analyzing sense of total humanity, and we somehow feel a need to employ all our accumulated knowledge and experience in its appreciation. We look, accordingly, for complexity, for tension, for paradox—for some reflection of our sense of the human condition. It is immensely difficult to find something which we are prepared to regard in a more restricted critical light, recognizing that one aspect of our experience may be appropriate to understanding its meaning while another is not. The stories of Greek mythology are perhaps sufficiently remote for us to be able to do this.

We are not generally concerned that Zeus' treatment of Kratos is cruel or vicious. But there are plenty of people prepared to object that God's treatment of Job

6.1.195. "'Hift,' he said, 'I made a bad mistake with this image. I must have been drunk to leave this thing on here; fold up the lamp, and I will put it right.'

7. The effect of a different intellectual tradition in the middle ages on an audience's reaction to didactic literature is discussed at some length in D. W. Robertson, A Preface to Chaucer(Princeton,1952). The argument is persuasive, but Robertson's further conclusions on its effect are disappointing, in that they seem invariably to impoverish rather than to enrich the context of the works which he examines.

8. Robertson's point is clear when applied, for example, to a hagiographic tale such as La Vie de Saint Alexis. The hero's treatment of his wife and parents shows no obvious not be considered in terms of their suffering, their uncertainty as to his fate, and so forth. They are moral aphorisms denoting the flesh and the world which the saint has put aside, and we corrupt the tale to introduce these sentimental irrelevancies.
badly beaten, and is held up to general ridicule and scorn:

...cil ot ses deniers perduz.
Il en fouti Aélison,
Qu'il péust, por un esperon, 9
Le jor avoir a son bordel

This sort of wry summary is typically found at the conclusion of the fabliaux. It may be delivered by the author or by one of the characters. In Le Heron (Romania, XXVI, 85), one of the tales of seduction, the duenna charged with the young girl's safe-keeping berates her own inefficiency and laments the loss of the bribe which first led to the disaster: "Ore est crousu e recrousu/Le con, e li heron perdu." When the victims themselves provide the final comment, as is partially the case here, a kind of stoicism manifests itself in the epigrammatic quality of the statement, seen again in the complaint of the girl who wanted to fly, but instead became pregnant and had difficulty walking: "Coment porroie je voler?/A paine puis je mès aler." In each case recognition of the disparity between the victim's expectations and the final outcome of events is couched in such concise, forthright, and unemotional terms as clearly to indicate the agonistic nature of the conflict and the victim's resigned acceptance of its conventions.

9MR, II, 23. "He lost all his money, for he used it to buy Alison, whom he could have had any day at her brothel for a penny."
The limitation of the conflict in the fabliaux to an agonistic battle of wits ensures that some of the conditions for dramatic irony are satisfied, since it allows for a clear-cut conclusion in which victor and victim are clearly differentiated, and protects the reader against becoming so emotionally involved with the misfortunes of the victim that he cannot participate in the triumph of the duper. Such a limitation also influences the other necessary condition for dramatic irony, that the reader shall have some prior knowledge of the outcome. For in a contest of wits the victory must go to the most quick-witted, and some slight familiarity with fabliau conventions soon serves to identify the dupe and duper on this basis. It is only necessary to place on stage in a fabliau context a husband and wife for us tentatively to identify dupe and duper, and to foresee the probable outcome of events. We know from previous discussion that it is characteristic of the dupe to make plans, to attempt to control events in accordance with some preconceived principle which promises personally beneficial results, and we know that such plans will bring him into conflict with the duper who will be responsible for thwarting them. Nowadays we tend to regard marriage as a mutually beneficial plan entered upon by both husband and wife for the future happiness of both, a plan which it is in the best interests of both parties to preserve. But as it is featured in the
fabliaux, and as it probably often was in practice in the middle ages, marriage appears as a plan conceived and executed by the man to ensure the legitimacy of his offspring,\(^{10}\) a plan which does not compromise the husband's sexual indulgence outside of marriage but which is meant to inhibit completely his wife's promiscuity and against which she naturally rebels. Planners who attempt to control their environment in accordance with some predetermined abstract principle, who seek to force events into some rigid mold, who try to follow a straight line through experience to some elected goal, are forced out of touch with reality, which will not be so ordered, sufficiently for the opportunist, uncommitted to any such plan, to defeat their purposes. From the very outset, therefore, the husband, jaloux and potential cuckold, is by his nature in a vulnerable position, and it is the purpose of the fabliaux to expose and exploit that vulnerability. The fathers or other guardians of young virgins, avaricious priests who want to gain even more money, and girls with ideas of flying or becoming saints are all in somewhat the same position, we anticipate that their expectations will suffer a reversal, and the reader is consequently predisposed to savor the

\(^{10}\) Such an attitude is clear on those occasions when a man about to marry discusses the merits of his proposed course of action with his friends. See, for example, the opening of _La Piere au Puis_ or of Chaucer's _Merchant's Tale_.

the actions of such individuals as examples of dramatic irony.

If the nature of the conflict does not clearly indicate the probable outcome to the reader, the author will often signify at some early point in the story what is to develop. Thus we are not allowed to mistake the priest in *Le Prestre et Alison* for a potentially successful seducer. His reliance on the power of money to buy what he wants rather than on his wits to win it might be sufficient, but so that there be no possibility of error the author explicitly informs us of the outcome: "Onques mais ne fu guiléz hon/Que li Prestres fu conchiez." A miller and his assistant with similar designs on a young farm girl are also clearly destined to have their hopes frustrated:

Jésir cuident entre ses bras;
Mais il n’en aront ja solas;
Ains en sera Jakès décheus
Tristres, doleus, corchiés et mus. 12

Differentiation in the terms just described is perhaps not too clear in the story of the dying priest and the Jacobin friars, dealt with in some detail in Chapter II.

11 *MR*, II, 12. "No one was ever so beguiled as this priest.

12 *MR*, II, 32. "They think to lie in her arms, but they will never enjoy her favors. On the contrary, Jacques will find himself deceived, unhappy, sad, bad-tempered, and put at a loss for words."
Anyway, the author once again provides a clear signpost to the final outcome:

Mais, ains ke li jors fu passeis,  
Amassent ilh mieus estre asseis  
A Anwiers dedens lor maison.

13 MR,III,113. "But before the day was over they would rather have been sitting in their house back in Antwerp." With reference to this fabliau W.M. Hart has an interesting comment in Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, ed. W.F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster(Chicago,1941), p. 276. "The author makes effective use of the opportunity...for irony," he says, "conscious in the speeches of the Priest, unconscious in those of the Friars; present also in the whole situation and emphasized by the presence of Mayor and Aldermen at the close. Readers or hearers, enlightened by the title of the piece, will enjoy this irony to the full; yet in so far as they are aware of the Friars' point of view, they will not forego the pleasure of suspense." Whether we can still feel suspense when we know exactly what will transpire is doubtful. Certainly the loss of suspense is compensated by a sharper sense of the irony of the situation. But Hart is surely mistaken when he implies, by referring to readers and hearers, that the contemporary medieval audience was also "enlightened by the title of the piece." The titles as we have them are part of the fifteenth century manuscript tradition. Thirteenth century references to the fabliaux often show a good deal of variety in the titles--Dame Erme/Le Vilain de Bailluel; Songe des Vis/Le Schait desvez; Morteruel/Le Vilain de Farbu--and generally name some character or incident which serves to identify the story without divulging much of its contents. Some titles are given by the authors, but are incorporated into the body of the text, generally in conjunction with a plea for attention and silence:

Traiés en châ; s'oiés .1. conte
Si com Milles d'Amiens le conte,
D'un Chevalier et d'un Provoire...  
(Le Prestre et le Chevalier;MR,II,46.)

Volés vous oir du Vallet  
Qui d'aise à malaise se met?  
(Le Vallet qui d'aise....;MR,II,157.)

Pur ce que plusors coutn merveille  
Del Chevaler à la corbaylle,
Such a guide to the final outcome is invariably provided in the case of fabliaux which follow the "biter-bit" pattern, when prediction of the outcome on the basis of the protagonists is impossible since they are both dupers. Thus in _Le Prestre et le Chevalier_, which we have already looked at, the author tells us:

De chou li a sa foi plevie
Li Prestres, mais ceste fiance
Dont contraire duel et pesanche
Ot, ains que partissent andui.  

In another story of the same type the fate of a husband who has tried an elaborate ruse to detect his wife's infidelity is also signalled well in advance of the counter-ruse which thwarts him:

Diex, com il savoit or petit
De ce qu'ele penses et porpense!
Li asniers une chose pensse

Ore le vus vueil je counter
Se il vous plest a escoter.

_(Le Chevalier à la Corbeille; MR, II, 183.)_  

It seems thoroughly unlikely that a minstrel would preface his tale by announcing the title when it would be repeated in the text. When the title would divulge the surprise turn in the story, as it would, for example, in _Le Vescie a Prestre, L'Enfant qui fu remis au Soleil, Celle qui se fist fouter sur la Fosse de son Meri_ and several others, it is not incorporated into the beginning of the text, and it seems even less likely that the minstrel would announce it.

14 _MR, II, 54. "The priest agreed to abide by this faithfully, but the agreement unexpectedly caused him grief and anxiety before the two of them parted."_
The pattern followed as regards dramatic irony seems to be, then, that the author makes certain the reader or listener knows in advance the general outcome of events, or at least is so placed as to make a shrewd guess at it, but is kept in suspense about the specific moment when the duper will triumph, and about the exact nature of the ruse by which he will outwit his opponent. The reader can therefore maintain a detached, sceptical, and emotionally neutral view of the physical action, while being strongly committed to the intellectual developments whereby an envisaged outcome is actually achieved.

It sometimes happens that, at the point of triumph for the duper, the dupe remains ignorant of what has really happened, and in such cases the dramatic irony is heightened by verbal irony. This is the case, for example, in Guillaume au Faucon, since the wife explains...

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15 La Borgoise d'Orliens, MR, I, 120. "God, how little he knew of what she was thinking and planning! The donkey-driver has one idea in his head, but the donkey has another quite different. He would soon be very uncomfortably lodged."

16 "A form of utterance that postulates a double audience, consisting of one party that hearing shall hear and not understand, and another party that, when more is meant than meets the ear, is aware both of that more and of the outsider's incomprehension." H. W. Fowler, A Dictionary of Modern English Usage (Oxford, 1946).
the squire's strange behavior to her husband as stemming from a yearning for the husband's falcon, when in fact he is love-sick for the lady herself. The word falcon therefore acquires a special meaning for the wife, the squire, and the reader, but not the husband, who is deaf to the double meanings surrounding subsequent discussion of the gift of the bird. The author draws attention to this play on double meanings at the end of the story:

Dist la Dame: "Or avez faucon;
'll. besanz valent .l. magnon."
Ce fu bien dit, .ll. moz à un,
Que il en auroit .ll. por un,
Et cil si ot ainz l'endemain
Le faucon dont il ot tel faim,
Et de la dame son deduit
Qu'il aura mielz que autre fruit. 17

The husband in La Saineresse (MR, I, 289) is similarly oblivious to the true meaning, known to the reader, of the wife's description of what purported to have been a blood-letting but was in fact sexual intercourse with a young man disguised as the functionary of the title. The passage is too long to quote, some thirty lines, and is anyway among the lewdest in a not-too-delicate genre, but it is a good example of sustained double entendre for the purpose of verbal irony. 18

17 MR, II, 112. "Said the lady: 'Now the falcon is yours; two shillings are worth one florin.' That was cleverly said, to make a short story long, that he would get two for one, and indeed the very next day he had the falcon for which he had yearned and enjoyed his pleasure of the lady, which he would rather have than other fruit."

18 For other examples see particularly Lo Chevalier
The movement of the typical fabliau is towards a predestined climax, a process of narrowing down in which suspicions are gradually confirmed, misconceptions righted, and the readers brought finally face to face with reality as it has been understood all along by the duper and by the author who is his advocate. There is an element of surprise in the fabliaux, but the surprise takes its place in the general pattern of gratification by the expected, and needs to be understood as such. I do not find "a 'snap' at the end, after the fashion of an O. Henry story,"

19because typically this sort of surprise demands a sudden reversal of the values which have been assumed to govern the development of the plot, and this is never true of the fabliaux. On the contrary, such a pattern is characteristic rather of stories which are the very antithesis of the fabliaux, which find reality in eternal principles governing human behavior and which demand a sudden revaluation of mundane reality according to their precepts. Although by no means a clear-cut example, the conclusion of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* illustrates the sort of effect such a questioning of the governing ethos of a tale may have. We might compare the reader of a fabliau to a man wandering around a room full of furniture in the dark. He discovers the shape and

disposition of most of the pieces, but the nature of some he mistakes and some he misses altogether. If the light is then switched on it will occasion a start of surprise, but for the most part he will recognize the objects he has investigated and will feel reassured that he has now been brought suddenly to full knowledge of what he previously had known only imprecisely. If he had been accompanied in the room by a character wearing a blindfold and with his hands tied behind his back, the effect of switching on the light would be to increase his feeling of superiority, and to enable him to enjoy to the full the other's incapacity to control his environment. On the other hand, if when the light went on nothing was found to be as imagined, if the very walls of the room receded, and reality turned out to be something entirely unexpected, the effect would evidently be very different. Not only would the reader feel extremely uneasy, but his relationship to his companion would be changed, since the latter's handicap would no longer constitute a significant difference between them. Evidently it is the first situation which pertains in the fabliaux, and which makes possible the particular type of irony favored by the authors.
CHAPTER VI

HUMOR AND DICTION IN THE FABLIAUX

For a discussion of the relationship between diction and humor in the fabliaux, Nykrog again provides a good starting point, not because his views on the matter are so wildly mistaken that they cry out for correction, but rather because he is sufficiently enlightened and conscientious a critic to have dispensed satisfactorily with the erroneous views which were entertained before the publication of his own work, and to have approached things in an honest and objective way which offers opportunities for further understanding. To inquire into the relationship of diction and humor is to be brought face to face with the problem of obscenity in the fabliaux, and this fact is sufficient to discourage some critics, seemingly more concerned to protect their own sensibilities than to understand those of the middle ages, from investigating the question further. We are unlikely to get much help in this instance from Gustave Cohen, whose discussion of the fabliaux takes account only of those which are "moraux, edifiants et touchants, dont[on peut]...tirer profit et emotion"—a short list indeed:—or from Jessie

1 Gustave Cohen, La Vie Littéraire en France au Moyen
Crosland, who thinks that the obscene and bawdy fabliaux, although they enjoyed considerable popularity, "may be left aside without undue loss" (page 149). The sight of a creeping vulgarism will send even Bédier scurrying, the skirts of his academic gown held high, for the nearest chair, whence to pontificate unprofitably on "l'incroyable monotonie de l'obscénité humaine" (pages 325-326; 358-359). The genuine attempts at explanation which have been made are well refuted by Nykrog (pages 213-214). We cannot explain the occurrence of obscenities in the fabliaux, as would le comte de Caylus, simply on the basis of a different convention of style in the period, for if the objectionable words were in current use they would appear frequently in many other genres, which is not in fact the case. The same objection can be raised against explanations which need to assume an uninhibited naturalness in the spirit of the people.

Nykrog himself would account for the presence of obscenities in the fabliaux as evidence of frank and naive pornography: "Voilà le caractère de l'obscénité dans les fabliaux: elle veut choquer en faisant ouvertement infraction à la décence" (page 216). He bases his

Age (Paris, 1953), pp. 186-187. He has to be content with Tombeor Nostre Dame, Chevalier au Barisel, and La Housse partie, none of which appears in Nykrog's list of 160 fabliaux. To make some pretense of discussing the fabliaux and then to put this sort of restriction on the subject matter is a travesty.
opinion on a number of specific facts which will be useful later in offering a slightly different or at least elaborated explanation of the function of obscene diction in the fabliaux, and it will be profitable therefore to give a brief indication of what these factors are (page 213).

1) Opportunities to be vulgar are neglected approximately half of the time, the author choosing to pass lightly over what could be an offensive passage, making use of a euphemism appropriate to the language of courtly literature.

2) Fabliau bawdy is always of a direct and outspoken grossness, without hint of perversity or sexual titillation.

3) When the author does choose to be gross, he tends to emphasize the vulgarity by supplying salacious detail to the vulgar scene, or by adding modifiers to the obscene word which reinforce its effect on the reader.2

All these factors, says Nykrog, can be related to the same psychological phenomenon, the existence of a generally recognized limit of decency, which the author either skirts at close hand without violation, or which he

2First remarked by Bruno Barth, Liebe und Ehe im altfranzösischen Fablel und in der mittelhochdeutschen Novelle (Berlin, 1910), p. 138.
transgresses deliberately and defiantly, drawing as much attention as possible to the fact that he is committing an infraction of the rules of propriety. Nykrog's psychological explanation of obscenity in the fabliaux is not unreasonable, and I think it would be fair to admit that the simple shock effect does contribute to the general humor. But his explanation leaves the whole matter of obscene diction in isolation. The best Nykrog can do is to attempt, not altogether successfully, to prove that the presence of obscenities is not totally incompatible with his idea of the fabliaux as a courtly genre. He does not show, nor do I think it is possible to show, that the occurrence of obscenities in any way contributes to the idea of the fabliaux as a burlesque genre.

I do feel, however, that the whole problem of diction can be understood satisfactorily in terms of that

As evidence that authors exploited the shock effect of juxtaposing incongruous elements in their fabliaux Nykrog cites Les trois Dames qui troverent un Vit, MR, IV, 128. Not only, he says, do the three ladies find the object mentioned in the title, but they fight over it, take their dispute for settlement to a convent, show the object of contention to the prioress, and draw a large crowd of nuns who have just come from hearing mass! He might have cited other examples, which are plentiful. With the verb foutre, for example, I find the following blasphemous conjunctions with religious ideas:

Miex voudroie estre en croiz tonduz
Que je fusse d'omme foutuz.
(Le sot Chevalier, MR, I, 225.)

Une fois la fout, en mains d'eure
Que l'en eust chanté une eure.
(Le Prestre et Alison, MR, II, 20.)
clash of attitudes which was described in Chapter IV, and that the occurrence of obscenities then appears, not as a haphazard exploitation of the chance to shock the reader's sensibilities, but as a carefully integrated factor in the total structure of the story, and a purposeful contribution to its humorous effect. There is more involved, I would suggest, in the choice of a euphemism or an obscenity than merely the consideration of whether or not to shock the audience. In order to determine what this difference is we will look at a number of euphemisms together with the obscenities for which they are substituted. It will also be necessary to consider a third alternative, mentioned by Nykrog but not taken into account in his final summary. There are, says Nykrog, certain euphemisms which are perhaps even more offensive than the obscenities themselves whose place they take, although he does not explain why this should be so. I will include these in my comparative table, which is not meant to give exhaustive coverage of all the possible alternatives, but simply to provide enough material for purposes of comparison.

From a quick glance at the lists given overleaf it is easily seen that the tendency of the various words to cause offense is directly proportional to their factual content. The euphemisms in list A are so general that they are practically drained of content altogether. As substitutes for the verb *foutre*, for example, we have a series of abstract nouns combined with the most general
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<th>Obscenity</th>
<th>Euphemism A</th>
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<tr>
<td>Foutre</td>
<td>Mener</td>
<td>Marteler[hammer]</td>
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<td>revel</td>
<td>Aforer(le tonel à quelqu’une)</td>
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<td>Vit</td>
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verbs available in the language (avoir, faire) and the relationship is so inexact that verb and noun can be interchanged almost at will. The result is to subsume the particular activity under the general concept of activities related to pleasure or volition in so vague a way that the specific referent is lost sight of completely. The same is true of the nouns, which at their most vague say no more than that the object referred to, like other objects, exists (afère, chose, rien), or at most that it exists as one of other objects having some usefulness (ostil). By means of such words we apprehend the activity or the object in the most general, abstract, and conceptual way. This is not the case when the author uses the obscenity itself or a euphemism from list B, both being notable for the way in which they stress the physical action or the physical features of the object, which insist, above all, on our seeing or recreating a visual image of whatever is described, and which consequently communicate on an almost exclusively perceptual and particularized level.

The point of distinction can be seen even more clearly if we look at what Nykrog has referred to as "la tendance à ajouter des détails pour rendre particulièrement graveleux des mots déjà obscènes par eux-mêmes." The words become more offensive because, by the addition of modifiers, their innate capacity to communicate the particularized physical details of the action or the object in question is even more emphatically
insisted upon. The most common example of this tendency is the use of specific enumeration with the verb foutre:

En .l. lit l'avoit estendue
Tant que il l'a .111. fois foutue.
(La Saineresse, MR, I, 290.)

De ci au jor que la nuiz fine
.Ix. fois i fouti la meschine.
(Le Prestre et Alison, MR, II, 21.)

Et sachiez que en petit d'ore
La foutit .111. fois près à près.
(Le Maignien qui foti la Dame, MR, V, 182.)

The same trait towards increased specification is discernible with the other obscenities:

Et les coilles granz et enflées
Qui pendoient contre val jus.
(Aloul, MR, I, 266.)

Au bacheler tendi le vit
Que il avoit et lone et gros.
(Le Pescheor de Pont seur Saine, MR, III, 69.)

and with the euphemisms from list B:

Granz cops me feroit et souvent.
(La Saineresse, MR, I, 291.)

Une herbe que je bien conois,
..........................
Corte est et grosse la racine.
(Aloul, MR, I, 257.)

It is simply not possible to combine specific detail of the sort occurring here with the euphemistic expressions in list A. The addition of simple enumeration, for example, to an expression such as "coucher avec" would suffice to confuse the sense, "il s'est couché .111. fois
"o la pucele" suggesting someone hopping in and out of bed more than anything else. Even if the expression retained its meaning fairly clearly, "ll. fois il a eu son sez de la dame," it would provoke a smile at the realization that we were being asked to apprehend the events on two different levels at the same time.

Now that this difference between euphemisms of type A and euphemisms of type B or obscene words has been established, we will pursue further the question of their respective uses.

The distinction between the use of a euphemism of type A on the one hand, and of an obscenity or a euphemism of type B on the other is not to be explained according to the division of social classes, since, as Nykrog points out (pages 216-220), wives of smiths and fishermen, or the daughters of peasants, can express the utmost horror at the use of an obscene word which aristocrats may use without scruple. Nor is it entirely satisfactory to explain the use of obscenities as a deliberate affront to effeminate fastidiousness, the explanation which Nykrog offers, although again there seems to be an element of truth in this. Nykrog supports his contention by quoting and discussing at some length the debate between Reason and the lover in the second half of the Roman de la Rose, which is worth reconsidering with some care.

In the course of their long discussion Reason
mentions "coilles." This provokes a protest from the lover, a protest which he repeats when the goddess fails to offer the promised justification for her use of such a word:

Si ne vous tieng pas a courtoise
Quant ci m'avez coilles nommées,
Qui ne sont pas bien renommées
En bouche a courtoise pucele.
Vous, qui tant estes sage et bele,
Ne sai con nomer les osastes,
Au meins quant le mot ne glosastes
Par quelque courteise parole, 4
Si com preuddefeme en parole.

Reason replies that coilles were after all made by God for the propagation of the species, but the lover counters with the argument that God may have made the object, but wicked man devised the word, and it is the word that he is objecting to. On the contrary, says Reason, it is the object which you find objectionable, for if I called coilles relics, and relics coilles, relics would be a dirty word, while coilles would be quite genteel:

'Coilles' est beaus nons, et si l'aïns.
Si sont, par fei, 'coillon' et 'vit';
Onc nus plus beaus guieres ne vit.
Je fis les moz e sui certaine
Qu'onques ne fis chose vilaine.
Et Deus, qui est sages e fis,
Tient a bien fait quanque je fis.
Comment, par le cors Sait Omer,

4"I don't consider it polite of you to use a word like coilles, which sounds vulgar on the lips of a well-bred maid. I can't imagine how you dare name them, a wise and beautiful girl like you, without at least substituting some courtly periphrasis for the word itself, as a well-mannered woman would in her speech."
Reason is annoyed at being admonished by the lover, and is obviously impatient with his effete punctiliousness. She says so, but her annoyance can easily be inferred from her provocative replies. Admonition by the lover, instead of bringing about any reform of her vocabulary, provokes the sort of outburst of accumulated obscenities, coilles, coillon, vit, which we have noticed the authors of the fabliaux using in certain contexts. She deliberately misunderstands the lover's appeal to gloss offensive words with a courtly periphrasis, by which he must mean employing a euphemism of type A, and instead proposes an alternative which simply serves to bring religious ideas into juxtaposition with the obscenity and thereby to increase its offensiveness, another trait we

5"'Coilles' is a fine name, and, what is more, so are 'coillon' and 'vit'; I have scarcely seen finer. I devised the words and I am certain that I have never been guilty of any vulgarity. And God, who is wise and truthful, holds whatever I do to be well done. Why, by Saint Omer's bones, should I hesitate to name with decency the works of my Father?"

6Was there an echo of the scene in Chaucer's mind when he was composing the exchange which concludes The Pardoner's Tale? The host's anger at the pardonercertainly finds vent in the same blasphemous association of ideas:

I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond
In stide of relikes or of seintuarie.
Lat kutte hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie;
They shul be shryned in an hogges toord!

Works, VI, 952-955.
have already noticed in the fabliaux. Reason certainly
displays some belligerent scorn for the lover's mealy-
mouthed attitude, but there is surely more implied in the
scene than a condemnation of excessive delicacy in the
choice of vocabulary. Reason is after all an important
figure, as her own speech testifies, and what she has to
say may be interpreted as a plea for intellectual honesty
with repercussions which go deeper than questions of
social propriety. For the choice of a courtly euphemism
of the type recommended by the lover, or of an obscenity,
represents a choice between two modes of signifying the
object or event to be communicated, one abstract, general,
and intellectual, the other concrete, specific, and per-
ceptual. Reason's rejection of the courtly euphemism is
therefore a partisan decision in that clash of attitudes
concerning the nature of the real which, I have argued
earlier, contributes to the comic conflict in the fab-
liaux. Although Jean de Meun is not necessarily to be
identified with Reason, his sympathies in this instance
are very obviously with her rather than with the lover.
He would presumably endorse the use of an obscenity in
certain contexts rather than a courtly euphemism, which is
perhaps what we would expect from the author of a work
which has so many affinities with the fabliaux.

Choice of diction may therefore be a contributory
factor in the development of the comic plot of the
fabliau. How is it possible to demonstrate that it
actually does play such a role? Here we will have recourse once more to the prototype plot diagram for the fabliaux suggested in Chapter II. Movement of the narrative along the axis XY is, in Northrop Frye's words, a movement from illusion to reality, a movement signified by the triumph of the duper over the dupe. In the course of this movement we have a comic peripety at the point CD, when the dupe's fortunes, apparently at their zenith, suffer a reversal. Since the change of fortune generally becomes apparent to the dupe in the course of D, the peripety is accompanied or immediately followed by anagnorisis, or discovery, in which illusion, particularly in the mind of the dupe, is dispelled.\footnote{The terms are taken, of course, from the Poetics, particularly section II in Aristotle's Art of Poetry, trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe (Oxford, 1940), pp. 29-31. The idea of a comic peripety is developed by Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, 1957), p. 44.}

We have already defined the particular nature of illusion and reality in the fabliaux, and according to that definition we have seen that while obscenities or euphemisms of type B are by their nature particularly suited to convey the essence of the real, that is of the individual and perceptible, euphemisms of type A are associated strongly with the illusory, that is with the general and intellectually apprehensible. If there is a connection between the choice of diction and the general development of the plot, we might expect then that the moment of
discovery, when illusion is dispelled, would be accompanied by a change in vocabulary, and this indeed is often the case, a sudden outburst of accumulated obscenities marking the point of discovery of what has really transpired and is about to follow in the story. There are some instances when the use of obscenities with no other intention than to shock the reader conceals or supplants this more significant employment, but there are plenty

8 We might mention such stories as La Sorisete des Estopes, MR, IV, 158; Le sot Chevalier, MR, I, 220; and Le Chevalier qui fist parler los Cons, MR, VI, 68; in all of which obscenities abound from beginning to end, apparently without much justification other than the author's desire to crowd in as many as possible. Evidently the idea of indecent humor as simply the mention of the unmentionable is here being pushed towards its reductio ad absurdum, when the author simply recites a string of obscenities which ought, according to the dubious logic of the theory, to be funny in itself. Defense of such a theory on the grounds that humorous effect is increased by elements of contrast or surprise only indicates that it ought to be abandoned in favor of one more satisfactory, such as I have been endeavoring to put forward in this chapter. As for the three stories mentioned, it is significant that none of them conforms exactly to the typical fabliau pattern, in that the idea of conflict, and consequently the occurrence of any comic peripety in the plot, are lacking in all three. They all depend upon some particularly bizarre proposition—that a peasant could accept that his wife's pudendum is a mouse, that a knight could be stupid enough not to know one end of a woman from the other and could propose making love to his wife only by reciting the formula "Li plus lons ert foutuz, et li plus court sera batuz," and finally that a knight could be granted the power to render the pudendum mulieris articulate. Development of all three is simply a matter of following through the consequences of these bizarre propositions as they lead to a series of equally bizarre and vulgar incidents. Even then we may get the sort of contrast described within a particular incident in a tale, even if such a contrast is not developed throughout the story as a whole. In the longest version of Le Chevalier qui fist parler les Cons (Version I in Jean Rychner, Contribution à l'Étude des Fabliaux [Geneva, 1960], II, 38-79), for example,
of instances when organic justification of the sort described for the occurrence of an obscene passage can be found. It is difficult to illustrate this aspect of the humor without fairly extensive quotation, and obviously the reader needs to know what has happened in the story to appreciate that obscenities usually ignored or apologized for can be used with conscious artistry, so we will limit ourselves to a couple of the best examples and deal with them in some detail.

Le Bouchier d'Aberville (MR, III, 227) has been generally admired for the tightness of its plot and for some excellent character portrayal, enhanced by lively exchanges of dialogue. The author's choice of diction, as we might expect from a polished artist like Eustace an aristocratic girl, maid-in-waiting to a countess, is described at great length according to the courtly romance formula. When sent to the knight's bed by her mistress she at first protests strongly, and when she has finally consented to do her mistress' bidding she tells the knight the reason for her visit in terms appropriate to maidenly gentility and modesty:

\[ \text{Ma dame...a vous m'envoie} \]
\[ \text{Pour vous faire solas et joie;} \]
\[ \text{...........................} \]
\[ \text{De moi pouvez vostre bon faire} \]
\[ \text{Einsis con il vous vourra plaire.} \]

No such modesty is apparent, however, when the knight exercises his powers:

\[ \text{C'est li cons qui vous atant ci} \]
\[ \text{Que vous maintenent le foutez} \]
\[ \text{Et en fates vo privautez} \]
\[ \text{Et se mervoille durement} \]
\[ \text{Que vous alez tant atondent.} \]

Maidenly reticence has now been replaced by what we can only regard as a more honest impatience, and a complex of courtly euphemisms gives place at this juncture to earthy obscenities.
d'Amiens, is careful and exact. Here first of all is a précis of the plot:

[A butcher has been to the meat market in a distant town, but, finding none of the animals for sale to his liking, is returning home with a purse full of money when night comes on and he grows afraid of robbers. He seeks lodging in a neighboring town at the house of a surly priest who refuses to accommodate him. As he is leaving he meets a shepherd with a large flock who informs him that the sheep all belong to the same priest. The butcher steals one of the sheep and returns with it to the priest's house, offering this time to pay for his lodging with the animal, as it is too heavy for him to carry further. This time he is welcomed and well-entertained, the sheep which he slaughters providing the meat for an excellent meal. That night he makes love to the priest's maid, promising her the sheepskin as a reward for her favors. In the morning the priest leaves his house early to go and say mass, and the butcher seduces the priest's mistress with the promise of the same skin. He then goes to the priest and offers him the skin cheap, the priest pays him two sous for it, and at that point the butcher leaves for his own town. The priest returns home to find the two women quarreling violently over the ownership of the skin, and in trying to establish the cause of their disagreement he discovers that the butcher has slept with both of them. At that point the shepherd turns up to report that one of the prize sheep is missing, and identifies it by the skin as the one which was eaten the night before. The priest then recognizes the full extent of his misfortunes.]

In the early part of the story, which is characterized by the successful deceptions of the butcher, the question of love naturally comes up several times. It is referred to always in the most courtly terms, the butcher, a vilain, the maid, and the author using between them the following euphemisms: 'faire son plesir,' 'faire son bon' (used three times), 'faire son desir,' 'faire sa volenté,' 'gesir avec quelqu'une,' and 'se mettre en la merci de
quelqu'un.' Not until the priest discovers that the butcher has slept with the maid do we get the first euphemism of type B, and then it is fairly innocuous, used this time by the author:

Li doiens ot et apercoit
Aus paroles qu'elle disoit, q
L'avoir ses costes culonée.

The first obscenity accompanies the priest's discovery that what was true for his maid was true also for his mistress: "Je sai de voir qu'il ta foutue." The only other obscenity occurs in the priest's speech when he realizes that the sheepskin which had caused all the trouble was his own:

...............ce fu Davis
Noz costes, qui ceenz a jut;
Bien m'a engingnié et décut
Qui ma masnie m'a foutue;
Ma pel meisme m'a vendue;
De ma mance m'a ters mon nés.
En mal eure fuissce jou nés
Quant je ne m'en seuch garde prendre! 10
On peut cascus jor mot aprendre.

As I have indicated by the italics, the idea of discovery of the truth, and consequently of misfortune for the priest, accompanies each use of an obscenity or an

\[9\] MR III, 240. "From what she said the priest realized that his guest had screwed her."

\[10\] MR III, 245. "It was David our guest, who slept here. He really made me out an idiot, for he fucked my whole household for me. He sold me my own sheepskin. He wiped my nose in my own sleeve. I must have been born yesterday not to have known how to guard against such treatment. There is a lot to learn every day."
offensive euphemism. Furthermore the type of discovery is carefully graded, and the degree of offensiveness varies accordingly. With the first mildly offensive euphemism we have the verb *apercevoir*, indicating the first realization of misfortune which, since it is the maid who is involved, is not very serious. Then comes the verb *savoir*, indicating full knowledge of the treachery of his mistress, and this provokes the stark-est obscenity. Finally the last summary of what the priest has learned, that is what has become absorbed as part of his experience, is subsumed under the verb *aprendre*, and there is a tendency to modulate the obscenity with a euphemistic *mesnie*, while the whole unhappy experience is expressed with a proverb which testifies to a recognition by the priest that he is one sufferer among many.

The same sort of control is evident in Jean Boel's *Gombert et les 11. Clercs*, the plot of which is familiar from Chaucer's The Reeve's Tale. The author, tongue in cheek as we suspect from the setting and as we are forced to realize from the later developments, sets the scene in the opening sequence on a note of courtly charm:

Cil mist encor s'entente miex,
Quar sa fille est et cointe et bele,
Et je di qu'amor de pucole,
Quant fins cuers i est ententiex
Est sor toute autre rien gentiex
Comme li ostors au terquel.

11MR, I, 238. "The other one proposed an even better
This tone is maintained throughout the rather sordid developments which follow by both the participants and the author, employing the same series of courtly euphemisms as were used in *Le Bouchier d'Abeville*: 'gesir avec,' 'faire ses volentez,' 'consentir les bons de quelqu'un,' 'faire la folie,' 'faire ses buens,' and 'faire son delit.' The only deviation comes with the author's description of one clerk's dealings with the miller's wife:

0 la dame s'en vait couchier;  
Ainz ne li lut son nez mouchier  
S'ot esté .111. fois assaillie. 12

But when the clerk who has been with the daughter inadvertently reveals to the miller what has been going on we get an agglomeration of blasphemies, obscenities, and offensive euphemisms, typical of the point at which truth will out and serving to emphasize the force of revelation to the miller:

A tant Sire Gombers s'esveille;  
Estraument s'est apercéuz  
Qu'il est trahis et deceuz  
Par les clers et par lor engiens.  
'Or, me di,' dist-il, 'd'ont tu viens?'  
'D'ont?' dist-il, si noma tout outre  
'Par le cul biue, je vicng de foutre,

conquest for himself, for her daughter was charming and beautiful, and it is my contention that the love of a maid, when noble heart sets out to win it, is of all things the most admirable, like the love of a goshawk for a sparrowhawk."

12 *MR*, I, 242. "He lay down with the wife, and before she had time to wipe her nose she had been assaulted three times."
Mès que ce fu la fille l'oste;
Pris en ai devant et encoste;
Aforé li ai son tonel.

In these examples and in many more which space prohibits examining at length we can see that in the fabliaux obscenities may be used without discretion but not without discrimination. Clearly a careful author reserves their use for a particular point in the development of the story, the point at which illusion is dispelled and reality reasserts itself. Contrasts in the use of vocabulary conform to the distinction between the specific and the general, and hence between the real and the illusory, and help to reinforce it. Viewed in this light the predilection of many fabliaux authors for obscene words or offensive euphemisms can be seen as a necessary consequence of their desire to communicate a particular attitude towards experience.

13 MR, I, 243. "Thereupon Sir Gombert woke up; straightway he realized that he had been betrayed and deceived by the clerks and their tricks. 'Tell me,' he said, 'where have you been?' 'Where?' said the clerk, spilling everything, 'by the almighty's arsehole, I've been fucking, with who else but the host's daughter. I had her frontwards and sideways. I broached her barrel for her.'"

14 Obscenities play a similar part in marking the comic peripety in the following fabliaux: La Gageure, MR, II, 193; La Pucelle qui voloit voler, MR, IV, 208; Le Prestre et le Chevalier, MR, II, 46; Celle qui se fist foutre sur la Fosse de son Mari, MR, III, 118; La Dame qui Aveine demandoit pour Morol sa Provende avoir, MR, I, 318; Le Prestre crucifie, MR, I, 194; Le Prestre et la Dame, MR, II, 235; Le Prestre et Alison, MR, II, 8; and Celui qui bota la Pierre, MR, IV, 147.
CHAPTER VII
CHAUCER'S FABLIAU-TALES

In referring to Chaucer's fabliau-tales I follow a convention of nomenclature which reflects a recognition of both similarity and difference between the French fabliaux and those tales of the Canterbury collection which show some relationship to them. Superficially one can adduce a good deal of evidence for kinship between the two groups of works. For the Reeve's Tale we have a definite source in Le Meunier et les 11. Cleres, an analogue has been found among the fabliaux for the Summoner's Tale, and critics have proposed lost French originals for the Miller's Tale and the Shipman's Tale.

Incidents in other tales may be paralleled in extant fabliaux. Common to a majority of the fabliaux and to

1 Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, ed. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (Chicago, 1941), pp. 124-147.

2 Ibid., pp. 275-286. 3 Ibid., pp. 106, 439.

4 See, for example, Claes Schaar, "The Merchant's Tale, Amadas et Ydoine, and Guillaume au Faucon," in K. Humanistika Vetenskapssamfundets i Lund Arsberättelse, 1952-3, pp. 87-95, for a suggestion that the fabliau cited provided hints for the episode of the meal and the lady's visit to the lovesick squire in Chaucer's tale.
Chaucer's fabliau-tales is the bourgeois setting. Chaucer has the same characters—the old, jealous husband; the avaricious friar; the corrupt official who lives by extortion; the naive maiden with her over-protective but ineffectual father—as occur frequently in the fabliaux, and all suffer the same predictable fate at the hands of the same group of lecherous young wives and indigent but ingenious clerks. The description of the incidents which lead to a foreseeable denouement is even handled in much the same spirit in the Canterbury Tales as in the French fabliaux. Germaine Dempster comments on the use of dramatic irony in both groups of works:

The irony of the French fabliaux is striking because of the teller's healthy, communicative delight in a good joke. But the story is left to speak for itself. In all his fabliaux we shall find Chaucer consistently faithful to this technique.

In Chapter V, I cited the dispassionate detachment of the final summary of the fabliaux as evidence of this sort of circumscription, which limits the implications of the story to the contest of wits, and controls the nature of the irony. Much the same tone can be found at the conclusion of Chaucer's fabliau-tales. The Miller's Tale, for example, sums up what has transpired in admirably terse and decisive fashion:

Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf,

Germaine Dempster, Dramatic Irony in Chaucer (Stanford, 1932), p. 35.
For al his kepyng and his jalousye;  
And Absolon hath kist hir nethyr ye;  
And Nicholas is scalded in the towte.  
This tale is doon, and God save al the rowte.  
(Works, I, 3850-3854.)

But while a similarly neat conclusion to a French fabliau seems exactly the right note on which to end, because it does adequately account for what has happened and sets a reasonable limit on the implications of the action, we are not as satisfied with a comparable summary for the Miller's Tale. It becomes increasingly difficult, in other words, once the most superficial resemblances have been noted, to proceed with any confidence in drawing further parallels. For one thing the tale is not "doon" altogether. We know that the Reeve, himself a carpenter by trade, has taken exception to the subject matter of the story, and that it will consequently evince a reply from him. We know also that the Miller's Tale had its origin in a desire to "quite" the Knight's Tale, with which it must also have some connection, and that it is therefore to some extent open at both ends. The summary looks too simple and straight-forward, and we suspect that the miller is an inadequate judge of the implications of his own tale. We are forced very quickly to take account of differences when comparing Chaucer's versions of fabliaux with the French originals, and it is consequently more profitable to take account of them first, and then to investigate resemblances in their light.

These differences can best be appreciated by examining
the specific changes Chaucer makes in a particular tale, and for this purpose I choose the *Summoner's Tale* with its analogue, *Le Vescie a Prestre*. There is enough common ground to make the comparison meaningful. Both stories depend for their humor on the same "unexpected gift" joke, and both feature the same grasping friar or friars and the sick man who has contributed generously to their support in the past but has eventually become disillusioned by their greed and lack of any genuine gratitude.

It is a commonplace to say that Chaucer elaborates the characters he takes over from the fabliaux and transforms them into fully round human personalities, and indeed some elaboration of the character of the friar is apparent here. But Jacques de Baisieu is no novice at the art of character portrayal either, and is able to depict in a few deft strokes sufficient features of his protagonists to satisfy his purpose, so that characterization does not seem to be of any particular significance in this instance. What is important, but has not attracted the attention of critics, is the change which Chaucer makes in the nature of the "gift," for this change has implications which go beyond the obvious opportunity provided for some comic business involving the problem of "departynge of the fart on twelve."

The key to the nature of the change is to be found in the circumstances of the gift:

"Now thanne, put in thyn hand doun by my bak,"
Seyde this man,"and grope wel bihynde.
Bynethe my buttok there shallow fynde
A thyng that I have hyd in pryvetee."
"A!" thougest this frere, "that shal go with me!"
(Works,III,2140-2144.)

Attention has recently been drawn to Chaucer's use of puns, much more extensive than was earlier thought, and the *Summoner's Tale* is particularly rich in this type of word play. Most of the major characters are conscious punsters, the lord of the village with his "ars-metrike," the friar with his play on "chaced/chaast" and the two meanings of eructavit, and Thomas himself, for the thing hid in "pryvetee" is hidden there in a sense of which the friar is not yet aware. The pun contributes to the humor just as does the lord's "ars-metrike." It also takes its place in the pattern of ironic foreshadowing of the outcome, as do a number of unconscious puns by the friar, who seems himself to have planted the idea of the gift in Thomas's mind by such remarks as "What is a ferthyng worth parted in twelve?" and "unnethe the fundement[of oure cloystre]parfourned is." But such factors still do


7For an answer to the phonetic difficulties in what seems to be a certain pun at this point see J.E. Whitesell, "Chaucer's Lisping Friar,"MLN,LXXI,1956,pp.160-161.

8Contribution of puns and other devices to irony in this tale has been exhaustively studied by Earle Firney, "Structural Irony within the Summoner's Tale,"Anglia, LXXVIII,1960,pp.204-218.
exhaust the significance of the pun in this instance. The friar "groping" around Thomas's arse-hole for expected gain is particularly appropriate a picture for a religious beggar whose practice it is to "poure and prye" into every house, and who boasts his ability to "grope tenderly a conscience." Christ took the disciples to be "fishers of men" (Matt., iv, 19), but there are others who become anglers in the lake of darkness,¹⁰ and when this mercenary friar says it is his habit to "walke, and fishe Cristen mennes soules/To yelden Jhesu Crist his propre rente," we wonder which party really has his allegiance. The friar is guilty of prying in a number of respects, whether he is groping a conscience in the hope of gain from penance,¹⁰ glossing a text in order to fish out a meaning advantageous to himself, or falsely pretending a visionary knowledge of "Cristes secrey thynges." He is an

⁹Chaucer's Monk's Tale, VII, 2476, whence Shakespeare's King Lear, III. vi. 7.

¹⁰Such a motive can be inferred from the general conduct of the friar in the Summoner's Tale, but more specifically from what is said about the friar who is a pilgrim in the General Prologue. The two are very closely identified.

Ful swetely herde he confessioun,
And plesaunt was his absolucioun:
He was an esy man to yeve penaunce,
Ther as he wiste to have a good pitaunce.
For unto a povre ordre for to yive
Is signe that a man is wel yshryve;
For if he yaf, he dorste make avaunt,
He wiste that a man was repentaunt;
For many a man so hard is of his herte,
He may nat wepe, althogh hym score smerte.
Therfore in stede of wepynges and prayeres
Men moote yeve silver to the povre freres.
(Works, I, 221-232.)
abuser, rather than a user of curiosity, since he seeks
gain rather than the truth, and his last violation of
"pryvetee" consequently produces just the reward he
deserves. The incident serves to exemplify the friar's
character in a way which illuminates his conduct through­
out the tale.

But we have not finished even now. The friar claims
to have had an "avision of Cristes secree thynges," and
therefore to have known of the death of Thomas's child,
but this connects him with the friar of the Summoner's
Prologue, who "ravysshed was to helle/In spirit ones by a
visioum." He also expected information about a "pryvetee."
the special grace which friars have, and ended up, like
the friar of the Summoner's Tale, intimately acquainted
with a "pryvetee" he had not expected to see:

"Hold up thy tayl, thou Sathanas!" quod he;
"Shew forth thyners, and lat the frere se
Where is the nest of freres in this place!"
(Works,III,1689-1691.)

The Summoner's Prologue and Tale are in direct retaliati­
ion for the Friar's Tale about a thieving summoner, and the
summoner has taken particular exception to the friar's
boasting about his knowledge of hell. Has the summoner
seen a pun, intentional or otherwise, in the words which
the friar put in the mouth of Satan when he addressed the
summoner in his tale?

"Thou shalt with me to helle yet to-nyght,
Where thou shalt knowen of oure privetee
Moore than a maister of dyvyntyee."
And with that word this foule feend hym hente;
Body and soule he with the devel wente
"Ther as that somonours han hir heritage.

(Works,III,1636-1641.)

If "where" in the last line refers back to "helle" in the first line perhaps no pun is intended, but if "oure privattee" is taken in its double sense, the friar may be implying, or may be thought by the summoner to be implying, that the summoners' dwelling place in hell is just where the friars are to be put in his retaliatory prologue. 11 The summoner too, of course, is a prier into divine mysteries for the sake of exploitation, so that the series of puns serves to point up a fundamental connection between the fictitious friar and summoner, just as the quarrel connects the friar and the summoner who are pilgrims. 12 Fragment III is generally regarded as the closest knit of the fragments which comprise the Canterbury Tales, in which the tales "have received something like their final arrangement at Chaucer's hands." 13 The author's sense of the interrelatedness of the Friar's and Summoner's Tales is evident in the brief altercation

11 There is a significant recurrence of the word "heritage" in the Summoner's Prologue which might indicate that he had these lines of the Friar's Tale in mind:
But natheless for fere yet he quook,
So was the develers asy in his mynde,
That is his heritage of verray kynde.

(Works,III,1704-1706.)

12 Chaucer seems to have used a quarrel between pilgrims as a favorite means of indicating their basic likeness; cf. the miller and the reeve.

between the summoner and the friar planted at the end of the Wife of Bath's Prologue:

"A frere wol entremette hym evermo.
Lo, goode men, a flye and eek a frere
Wol falle in every dyssh and eek materre.
What spekestow of preambulacioun?
What! amble, or trotte, or pees, or go sit doun!
Thou lettest oure disport in this manere.
(Works,III,834-839.)

These words of the summoner suffice to demonstrate the animosity which exists between the two, the basis of the summoner's anger, and, by the tendency to engage in punning, taken up again by the Wife ("If I have licence of this worthy Frere"), the technical means which Chaucer will use to highlight the relationship between the two tales which the protagonists use as vehicles to attack one another. If we go back yet further to the General Prologue we see the hypocrisy of this complaint by a summoner who also pries into the affairs of others when there is any hope of gain, for he had the young people of the diocese at his mercy, "knew hir conseil, and was al hir reed."

Thomas's gift serves the same purpose as the priest's gift of his bladder in Le Vescie a Prestre, in so far as it is possible to talk of it as though it is valuable while it turns out to be completely useless. Thus the

14The professional antagonism between the friar and the summoner and the way this is employed to unify their tales is treated by R.M. Lumiansky, Of Sondry Folk (Austin, 1955).
friars are frustrated in that hope for financial gain on which they have set their hearts, and the story in each case serves to expose and ridicule their greed. But there is no particular aptness in the priest's gift in the French fabliau. Anything worthless which could be ambiguously referred to as though it had value would serve the purpose. The typical syllogistic pattern for the ruse can readily be adapted for the tale because the vice of the friars, greed, is attacked in its most abstract form. As I have tried to demonstrate, the gift of Thomas has a particular relevance since it draws attention to the specific nature of greed as it manifests itself in the character of Chaucer's friar. The nature of the gift has thematic implications which soon carry us beyond the bounds of the tale itself. In the *Summoner's Tale* we see the same vice, greed as the perverter of the true function of religious office, manifested under different circumstances by a different functionary, and through the resemblances between the two tales we understand something more of its nature. The meaning of *Le Vescie a Prestre* is adequately expressed by the tale itself, and the tale is a logical demonstration of that meaning. One feels that the characters are conceived in order to illustrate the meaning, the friars serving, by virtue of the popular prejudices of the time, as particularly apt embodiments of the vice of greed, the priest of selfless charity. Because it is a logical demonstration, we can
discover the meaning by analyzing the plot, since it most clearly reflects the logical intention. We may, of course, by comparing a number of such tales, find ways in which they reflect significantly on each other, and hence discover meanings in the tale which transcend the content of the tale itself. This indeed has been my preoccupation in the earlier chapters of the present work. But such meaning depends on the fundamental presuppositions of the author as a member of a particular culture or a particular cultural group; it is not a factor in the author's conscious artistic purpose, which must be limited to the confines of the literary artifact as he conceives it, in this case a short comic tale in verse. In an earlier chapter I have used the Wheel of Fortune to describe the development of the typical fabliau plot, a valid figure, it seems to me, because the authors' attitude to their material is exclusively comic, and the development of the plot is, in consequence, fairly mechanistic. The element of surprise is not entirely sacrificed, because the reader does not know exactly where the wheel is going to stop. In the case of the "biter-bit" pattern it makes one half revolution more than is initially expected. But the wheel does have a fixed center, and it is from this center that the peripheral events are viewed by both the author and his audience. The only way we can get outside this viewpoint, to recognize, for example, that it is mechanistic and to draw further conclusions on this basis about
the meaning of the tale, is to compare a number of tales which employ the same technique. Such a viewpoint is not incorporated into the individual tale as part of its conscious literary purpose.

It is in the light of this sort of consideration that we must account for the differences in Chaucer's use of the fabliau-genre when we compare it with that of his French predecessors. The final significance of the Summoner's Tale is not to be found within the confines of the tale itself. The tale provides us with the first hints to the meaning, of course, but one of these hints is that the meaning lies partly in the fact of juxtaposition with the Friar's Tale, being something in addition to and apart from them both. The meaning is further clarified when we add to these two portraits of clerical vice the tale of the virtuous parson which concludes the pilgrimage, but it does not receive its full definition, as far as Chaucer was willing or able to define it, until we consider the tale in the light of the other twenty-three, which together with it comprise the total literary artifact.

Chaucer, we know, had a number of tales on hand when he conceived the plan for the Canterbury Tales. Palamon and Arcite became the Knight's Tale, and it has been suggested that the Man of Law's Tale and the Second Nun's Tale, among others, are early compositions incorporated into the new scheme. Nevertheless the tales are
potentially enriched in meaning by being made part of a larger literary artifact. How far this potentiality is realized depends largely on the degree of adaptation which Chaucer makes to them, and the immediate context into which they are placed. The Knight's Tale has probably undergone considerable transformation in both respects. Because of the setting we cannot confidently seek the final meaning of any tale in isolation. Charles A. Owen remarks on the structure of the Canterbury Tales:

Each character projects his tale, the limited vision it embodies, and his limiting personality into the world of the pilgrimage. The plot is simple but dynamic. For each vision has the potentiality of bringing into new focus those that preceded and of influencing those that will follow. The possibilities are soon unlimited.

Nor, of course, is the meaning of the tales the pilgrimage itself, despite attempts by some critics to make it so. The pilgrimage is a literary device which indicates the nature of the ultimate meaning of each tale, and the direction in which such a meaning is to be sought, but we impoverish the meaning if we accept the idea of the pilgrimage as a substitute for it. The same result occurs if we postulate any other simple formula as the theme of the Canterbury Tales. The tales are not illustrations

16 Ralph Baldwin, The Unity of the Canterbury Tales, Anglistica, V (Copenhagen, 1955), illustrates this tendency.
17 See, for example, Frederick Tupper, "Chaucer and the Seven Deadly Sins," PMLA, XXIX, 1914, pp. 93-128.
of some abstract principle; they are too varied for that. Nor are they self-contained entities hung on the framework of the pilgrimage like hats on a rack; the connections between them are too subtle and provocative for that. Hence the crux of the literary origin of the Canterbury Tales. We have examples of the latter scheme in Boccaccio's Decameron and in Giovanni Sercambi's Novelle, but Chaucer's work differs so radically from either of these that the question of whether he did or did not know them seems of relatively little importance.

If we require a literary parallel for the Canterbury Tales I would suggest that the closest we have is perhaps the dramatic mystery-play cycle, which bears somewhat the same relationship to the miracle plays as the Canterbury Tales bear to the French fabliaux. We have the same mixture of jest and earnest in the dramatic cycle as we find in the Canterbury Tales. In the Towneley cycle, for example, the Fall of Man and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise, the exemplary tragic event of Christian history, is followed immediately by a comic and in parts blasphemous version of the Cain and Abel story. The almost total destruction of mankind in the flood serves to introduce the domestic comedy of Noah's wife. The Nativity is introduced with the sheep-stealing farce of the Secunda Pastorum. There is, of course, a pattern in the mystery cycle, in that we progress through Christian history chronologically from the Fall of the Angels in
Genesis to the Last Judgment. But this pattern probably reflects the origin of the mystery cycle in liturgical drama, and subsequent development according to biblical history, rather than the artistic theme of the work, which is juxtapositional rather than progressive. Because every incident recorded in the cycle is figuratively present in every other,\(^{18}\) its meaning can be found only by reference to the totality which both precedes and follows it. Authors therefore do not hesitate to violate the exigencies of a strict chronology in the individual plays, and anachronisms abound. The shepherds in the *Secunda Pastorum* swear "by the roode" before the birth of Christ.\(^ {19}\) Thus the drama of the Last Judgment is not so much the point towards which all other events lead according to chronological necessity, but the ultimately significant event with reference to which the significance of all other events is established as they occur at any point in time.

The *Parson's Tale*, with its emphasis on penance and its insistence that man needs to achieve and remain in a state of grace, serves much the same purpose in the total scheme of the *Canterbury Tales*. We do not have any

\(^{18}\)See Erich Auerbach's essay "Figura" in *Scenes from the drama of European Literature* (New York, 1959), pp. 11-76.

foreshadowing of subsequent tales in Chaucer's work. Evi-
dently the material is not familiar to the audience as is
the material from which the mystery cycle is compounded.
But if, as seems likely, Chaucer has Justinus in the
Merchant's Tale refer to the Wife of Bath (Works, IV, 1685-
1687), a "bold stroke" according to Robinson, we can see
the same disregard for the logical exigencies of the
scheme as occurs in the Secunda Pastorum. The mystery
cycle moves through the various levels of existence in
the Great Chain of Being, from God and the angels, to the
demi-gods Adam and Eve before the Fall, to man himself,
and this last division embraces most of the social orders
from kings and princes to peasants. Chaucer has the same
hierarchical scope in his collection of pilgrims with the
obvious limitation that the polarities are human and em-
brace only that section of society which might reasonably
be expected to appear on this sort of informal pilgrimage.
Since the pilgrims' tales generally relate more or less
to the social milieu of the teller, the same kind of hier-
archical arrangement is discernible in the tales. If we
consider the Miller's Tale a parody of the Knight's Tale,
we ought, I think, to see it as a parody in the same way
that the Fall is a parody of the first revolt of Lucifer
against God, and as the individual's submission to sin is
a parody of both, that is as a re-enactment of the same
event in a different context. When a recurrent pattern of
this sort has once been established, the introduction of a
comic treatment into any one of the series has the effect of producing comic potentialities in all the others. To recognize Eve in Noah's wife is to recognize the potentiality of Noah's wife in Eve. Because the vices were often treated humorously in the Middle Ages, the devil, as the exemplar of all vices, becomes a comic figure, particularly in the drama, and we might explain on this basis such apparently indecorous views as that which saw Joseph as a cuckold.

The **Miller's Tale**, as a number of studies has clearly shown, gives us a picture of courtly love *rusticorum modo*. It follows the **Knight's Tale**, which also gives us a picture of courtly love, this time in a courtly setting, and according to the miller his tale is meant to "quite" that of the knight. If we try to explicate the **Miller's Tale** as an autonomous entity we may be tempted to make one of two choices. We may regard it as though it were the sewage cart which proverbially follows the Lord Mayor's Show, in which case we will label it burlesque. What is serious, what has value in the poem for the cultured and educated will then be the courtly conventions, and laughter will follow from the inept attempts of the provincial suitors to ape the courtly behavior of their social betters. We can find plenty of evidence to

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support such a view. The distasteful physiological details and comic farm simile in Absolon's version of a lover's complaint illustrate the kind of effect admirably:

"What do ye, hony-comb, sweete Alisoun
My faire bryd, my sweete cynamome?
Awaketh, lemmman myn, and speketh to me!
Wel litel thinken ye upon my wo,
That for youre love I swete ther I go.
No wonder is thogh that I swelte and swete;
I morne as dooth a lamb after the tete.
(Works, I, 3698-3704.)

If, on the other hand, we want to regard the poem as a parody, what is serious, what has value in the poem is the animal realism of the protagonists, whose earthy desires break through the effete conventions of courtly love, and make the conventions themselves appear artificial and ridiculous. Such an interpretation could also be supported without too much difficulty:

And privelie he caught hire by the queynte,
And seyde, "Ywis, but if ich have my wille,
For derne love of thee, lemmman, I spille."
And heeld hire harde by the haunque-bones
And seyde, "Lemman, love me al atones."
(Works, I, 3276-3280.)

This direct approach of Nicholas might be favorably contrasted with the ineffectual sighing and moaning of such lovers as Falamon and Arcite, who are willing to fight to the death over a girl totally oblivious of their existence.

Two opposing attitudes are evidently being held in suspension here, and it would be a mistake to assign the principal intention to one at the expense of the other. If the fact that the tale belongs to the miller, an evident
churl with little patience for the niceties of courtly behavior, seems to add force to the parodic intention, the balance of paradox is restored when we consider, not the Miller's Tale in isolation, but the Miller's Tale and the Knight's Tale together in the context of the Canterbury Tales as a whole. The Miller's Tale is not a burlesque or a parody, but simultaneously both, since it reflects at the same time the views of both the miller and the knight. Both views are possible, as Chaucer recognizes by including both within the framework of the tales, and the reader is not forced to choose between them. The miller "quites" the knight simply by being there, and by offering a version of the Knight's Tale which throws its whole ethos into question. But the raising of a doubt is as much as the miller achieves. The knight and his point of view are not discredited, but remain to raise the same doubts about the ultimate validity of the point of view of the miller. It would be difficult to find a clearer example of structure.

21 Gardiner Stillwell has commented, in "The Language of Love in Chaucer's Miller's Tale and Reeve's Tale and in the Old French Fabliaux," JEGP, LIV, 1955, 693-699, on the contrast between the elegant or would-be elegant diction and the crudeness of situation or character. It is true that such a contrast exists in both groups of works, but to note the contrast as though it were a point of resemblance between them leaves too much unsaid. Courtly conventions, because they reflect an idealised view of life, are antipathetic to the dominant ethos of the French fabliaux, and have no genuine spokesman. The presence of the Knight's Tale in particular, and of the Franklin's Tale among others helps to redress the balance in the Canterbury Tales.
functioning to achieve that aesthetic viewpoint which Keats
designated "negative capability." It is a quality of the
poetic rather than of the rational mind, and explains in
essence the difference in quality between Chaucer's fabliau-
tales and the French originals.

The French fabliaux constitute, it seems to me, a
systematic attack on a particular type of abstract intel-
lectualism which we have associated with the thirteenth
century realism. They persistently expose it to ridicule
at the hands of thorough-going opportunists, who trust
their perceptions rather than their reason, who act in
conformity with the dictates of their appetites rather
than of ideas, and whose attitude to some extent reflects
the position of extreme nominalism. But such a position
is, like extreme realism, an intellectual abstraction.
Such a clear dichotomy in human behavior as we find in the
fabliaux does not exist in real life, where men vacillate
between one attitude and the other and behave finally in a
way which is consistent with neither. The kind of animal-
ism which the fabliaux favor constitutes a denial of man's
rational nature just as the rationalism which they attack
constitutes a denial of his animal nature. Natural man is
so intricate a mixture of both elements that any separa-
tion cannot help but give a distorted picture. Not that
such distortion is in any way bad in an absolute aesthetic
sense. All art, in that it reflects life without being
equatable with life itself, is obliged to distort in some
way. The particular type of distortion which we can detect in the fabliaux has positive virtues in that it promotes clarity and vigor in what the author wishes to say. Art seems to follow a pattern in which periods of analysis, of deliberate and systematic distortion for the sake of discovering and laying bare the elements of life, are followed by periods in which these elements are refashioned into an artistic whole which attempts to come closer to reality, employing the new insights analysis has provided. The movement is towards a more complete and satisfying picture of reality, although the ideal of completeness remains always beyond reach. Reality changes—is changed, indeed, by the very process which attempts to define it—and so the great construct which the refashioning artist has achieved once more suffers fragmentation and the process of analysis and reassemblage begins again. Chaucer, it seems to me, is such a refashioning artist, working from the achievement of, among others, the French fabliaux writers, who are primarily analysts. This constitutes a fundamental difference between them, but is not in itself a basis for saying that Chaucer is necessarily superior. Chaucer is undoubtedly an infinitely greater artist than any single writer of fabliaux, but this is apparent on grounds that have not been the concern of this paper and are really too evident to require demonstration. I wish only to point out a distinction which is not in itself valid grounds for preference. I personally admire the refashioning artist more than the
analyst, and I think the greatest figures in English letters have been artists of this type, but I hear behind such an opinion the voice of Arnold bemoaning the fact that his age was an age of criticism, and intoning the virtues of the architectonic element in literature. It is perhaps a prejudice of our time which some future period will reject.

We can abstract from the Miller's Tale the plot of a typical fabliau, but it is of interest to note just how much of an abstraction we then have compared to the rich complexities of the original tale. Three of the characters are thoroughly conventional up to a point. The carpenter is a typical dupe figure, much older than his wife, jealous and gullible. Nicholas the clerk is young, single, a lecher equipped with all the guile and subtlety necessary for the successful pursuit of his desires. "A clerk hadde litherly biset his whyle/But if he koude a carpenter bigyle" (Works, I, 3299-3300) is his boast, and he is soon resolved, with the wife, to "shapen him a wyle/This sely jalous housebonde to bigyle" (Works, I, 3403-3404). The contest of wit, then, is clearly between the husband and the clerk. The third member of the triangle, the wife, is charmingly described, but, as is usual when the lover has taken over the active role in the beguilement, she plays only a passive part in the major developments of the plot. The ruse is also to some extent conventional. The carpenter will be tricked into believing an incredible story by the well-tested device of arranging the evidence. Nicholas
locks himself in his room, and by following a rigorous pretence of shock at foreknowledge of impending doom, swearing the carpenter to secrecy, and painting an elaborate picture of what the future holds he is able to persuade the carpenter to spend a night hanging from his roof beam in a tub, while he has his way with the wife. No such plot appears among the extant fabliaux, but numerous fabliaux resemble it sufficiently for us to recognize the essential features of the genre, and only the most rudimentary detail is lacking for the tale to be as complete as most fabliaux writers would make it.

In our abstract, however, we have very little of the Miller's Tale. One important character, the rival lover Absolon, who has very few parallels in the fabliaux, has been discarded altogether. The effect of his inclusion in the plot is to set up a contrast between the two lovers, so that we begin to evaluate them critically in a way we should not otherwise be prompted to do. Absolon is ridiculous, with his serenading, his gifts of spiced ale and

22 The only comparable situation in the fabliaux is in Le Clerc qui fu repus derriere l'Escrin, MR, IV, 47, in which a clerk and a vallet vie for the favors of a bourgeoisie. The contrast between them is not developed, however, both remain very shadowy figures, and the situation is used only to satisfy the demands of a comic plot in the most perfunctory fashion. There is even less contrast in the only other fabliaux which feature rival lovers, Constant du Hamel, MR, IV, 166, and the related stories of Estormi, MR, I, 198 and Les Quatre Prestres, MR, VI, 42. In each case the wife has three suitors, none of whom is the least welcome to her, and they are disposed of in rotation by her husband, each being afforded exactly the same treatment.
piping-hot wafer-cakes, and his fastidious attention to have a sweet breath and well combed hair. But inept and parochial as his straining after "curteisye" appears, it serves to expose the almost brutal directness of the actions of "hende" Nicholas. Furthermore his presence prompts comparison with the rival lovers of the Knight's Tale and thus raises a vision of true "curteisye," compared to which the actions of both Absolon and Nicholas are abominable. It is Absolon, finally, who precipitates the catastrophe whereby all the major protagonists except the wife suffer some kind of physical hurt or indignity. The two lovers, who have pursued different paths to what the outcome hints is the same reprehensible end, are accorded punishments which unite them while differentiating between them. The fastidious and vain Absolon, his mouth sweetened with "greyn and lycorys," a "trewe-love" under his tongue, kisses Alison's "nether ye," and suffers an affront to his pride which banishes for ever his interest in paramours. The brutal and scabrous Nicholas is brutally assaulted with a hot plough-share. His cry of "Water!" wakes the carpenter, who crashes to the floor and breaks an arm. Besides being made a cuckold, then, the carpenter also suffers physically under circumstances which link him closely with Nicholas and with the nature of the ruse which was practiced on him. We are prompted to look for a moral issue in which Nicholas and the carpenter are equally guilty of offense. Such moral issues
do indeed color the tale throughout. Their nature is foreshadowed in the Miller's Prologue, when he announces:

An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf
Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wife.
So he may fynde Goddes foyson there,
Of the remenant nedeth nat enquire.
(Works, I, 3163-3166.)

The miller uses the same pun as that which figures significantly in the Summoner's Tale. There is a way, he implies, expressing a sentiment which the Wife of Bath will echo in her Prologue (see footnote 4, Chapter IV, page 78), in which life could be lived on the animalistic level which is the ideal of the fabliau genre generally. If men lived solely according to their desires, and dispensed with any kind of "inquisitiveness" altogether, there would be no cause for concern at a wife's infidelity, and there would be no friction. But the carpenter cannot so conduct himself. He is uxorious and jealous. In order to circumvent him Nicholas adopts a ruse which violates the other condition of happiness which the miller has proposed, for he pretends by his astrology to have discovered the advent of a second flood. The carpenter initially seems to be proof against such theorising:

Men sholde nat knowe of Goddes pryvetee.
Ye, blessed be alwey a lewed man
That noght but only his bileve kan!
(Works, I, 3454-3456.)

But he is soon beguiled into accepting Nicholas's predictions, and therefore shares his guilt, which is the same as that of the friar in the Summoner's Tale, except
that he pretends knowledge of "Goddes pryvetee" for financial gain, Nicholas for sexual gratification.

The burning of Nicholas unites all three offenders in a denouement which is a master-stroke of construction, and which pulls the threads of the story together into the neatest imaginable knot. But the threads of the story are so diverse that the final resolution, instead of providing the last satisfying answer, as the denouement of a closely knit fabliau usually does, raises instead a question as to why we should feel gratified by the outcome, which, says E.M.W. Tillyard, "sets the mind wondering and expanding as it does in the contemplation of all the greatest art." Even in a fabliau-tale as well plotted as this we cannot get at Chaucer's final meaning through the plot. We are pushed back always to an evaluation of character, the seat of "basic reality in the Canterbury Tales" as in Chaucer's work as a whole. This is clearer in a story such as the Merchant's Tale which has a comparatively untidy plot. The final pear-tree incident comes with no sense of inevitability as regards the development of the narrative, which has a very weak thread. But seen from the point of view of the old

\[23^{23}\text{Poetry Direct and Oblique (London, 1934), p. 164.}\]

knight's character, with his dreams of bliss symbolized in the paradisiacal garden, the false fruit of the pear-tree which turns the dream sour has a harshly direct relevance.

If we follow Matthew Arnold in his "touch-stone theory" and try to select from Chaucer's works those single lines which capture the essence of "high-seriousness" we can understand exactly this quality of Chaucer's art, and can see perhaps why Arnold himself failed to discover the quality he sought in Chaucer's work. For such lines would not be the expression of high idealism, which for Chaucer misses the mark of ultimate reality as far on one side of the target as does animal realism on the other. What we have when a line leaps out from Chaucer's text weighted with some deep insight into the meaning of the poem as a whole is a revelation of character, wavering somewhere between idealism, to which it is too weak to conform, and animalism, which it has too great an aspiration to accept. Such, for me anyway, is the effect of Criseyde's resolution, "To Diomede algate I wol be trewe," and it is a quality which can be found in the humbler fabliau-tales, although completely lacking in the French fabliaux.²⁵ It can be found, for example, in the

²⁵Germaine Dempster comments: "One smile softened with a little pity and mild sadness, and how far we feel from these charming enfants terribles, the French jongleurs." Dramatic Irony in Chaucer (Stanford, 1932), p. 38.
following brief passage from the *Reeve's Tale*, which we will look at in concluding:

Aleyn wax wery in the dawenynge,
For he had swonken al the longe nyght,
And seyde,"Fare weel, Malyne, sweete wight! The day is come, I may no lenger byde; But everemo, wher so I go or ryde,
I is thyn awen clerk, swa have I seel!"
"Now, deere lemman," quod she, "go, fareweel! But er thou go, o thyn I wol thee telle:
Whan that thou wendest homward by the melle,
Right at the entree of the dore bihynde
Thou shalt a cako of half a busshel fynde
That was ymaked of thyn owene mele,
Which that I heelp my sire for to stele.
And, goode lemman, God thee save and kepe!"
And with that word almoost she gan to wepe.

(Works, I, 4234-4248.)

The basis of the scene, as critics have recognized, is the traditional "aube" of courtly lyric and romance, in which two lovers bemoan the advent of dawn which signifies they have to part. The form is almost completely submerged beneath the vulgarities of the milieu and is barely recognizable. Chaucer himself sets the tone for the scene with the brutalizing "swonken" of the second line. Aleyn's boorishness is apparent in the grammatical inaccuracy and heavy north-country dialect of "I is thyn awen clerk, swa have I seel." Malyne's only term of endearment is the execrable "lemman" so strongly objected to by the Manciple, and not anyway a part of the genuinely courtly vocabulary. The best way she can think to show her affection is to reveal to Aleyn the whereabouts of a cake which she herself helped to steal. And yet despite all this vulgarity the form is not completely submerged.
It remains to reflect a measure of affection between Aleyn and Malyne, and we are forced to recognize that feelings are not the exclusive property of the cultured classes. The way is fully prepared for that marvellous last line, "And with that word almoost she gan to wepe." Malyne does not have quite enough sensibility really to weep, and yet she almost does. It is a beautiful touch! It makes Criseyde and Malyne part of the same human family, different not in kind but in degree, adrift in the same limbo, Criseyde not quite courtly enough to live up to her ideals, Malyne not so totally depraved that ideals play no part in her behavior. It captures in miniature the essence of Chaucer's unique contribution to the fabliau form.

The French fabliaux writers abstract two features from human behavior, rationalism and a kind of irresponsible spontaneity, and set them in opposition to one another. One feature, rationalism, is allotted the villain's role, the other the hero's, and characters are chosen to champion the two causes. Humor results from the head-on clash which follows. The same features are at the basis of the humor in Chaucer's fabliau-tales, but he starts with the complete human personality which embodies both features, albeit in unequal proportions. The struggle is an internal one, and virtue is seen as the sort of balance between the two which makes life meaningful and satisfying according to the inevitable limitations of the human
condition. Humor results from the contrast between that position on the scale to which we aspire and the position we actually reach, between what might be and what is. If the aspiration is low, the contrast tends to be comic, for we have always an implied comparison with others who have aspired higher. If the aspiration is high, the contrast has more tragic overtones, although the implied comparison with those who aspire less lends a comic element if the aspiration is too high. A subtle blend of tragi-comedy is the basis of the humor in either event, and it is a tone which Chaucer explores with surpassing skill.
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I, Roy James Pearcy, was born at Parkstone, in Dorsetshire, England, on June 27th, 1931. I attended the local Grammar School, and left when I was sixteen after taking the Oxford School Certificate. For the next three years I worked as a laboratory assistant with The British Drug Houses, and did some study towards the B.Sc. degree at Bournemouth Municipal College. In 1950 I joined the Intelligence Corps of the British Army and served for five years, almost four of them in Paris, France, one in Glasgow, Scotland, where I met my wife.

In October, 1955, I began study as an undergraduate at Queen Mary College, The University of London. I worked one year for the Intermediate B.A., and was then accepted into the Honors English course for the next three years. I was awarded a First Class Honors B.A. in July, 1959.

My wife and I came to The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, in September of that year. The university gave me full Master's degree credit and I began course work for the doctoral degree immediately. I also taught as a Graduate Assistant and Assistant until I was appointed Assistant Instructor in September, 1961, after I had taken the General Examination for Ph.D. candidacy.

I have accepted an Assistant Professorship with the University of California, Los Angeles.