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Unfinished Business: Character Conflict, Judgment Scenes, and Narrator-Audience Dialogue in the Old French Fabliaux

Thirty years ago Nykrog wrote that «[les] fabliaux ont été crées pour être récités» (30). Their written form notwithstanding, the Old French fabliaux do offer convincing testimony that, in the Middle Ages, they were habitually recited before an audience [1]. In fact, the narrator of *Le Prestre qui ot Mere a Force* claims to have devised the tale for just that purpose: «A cest mot fenist cis fabliaux | Que nous avons en rime mis | Por conter devant nos amis» [2]. Many prologues and epilogues underscore the recitation and audition of fabliaux by repeated use of verbs of telling, hearing, and answering [3]. Moreover, the fabliaux are punctuated by narrator 'hooks' placed to promote audience attention at critical points of the tale. Elaborate apostrophes, requests, and invitations indicate further that flesh-and-blood narrators, whether *jongleurs* or simple *conteurs*, regaled their audience with fabliaux: one narrator urges his audience to get

[1] The issue of the oral or textual primacy of the fabliaux has often been raised, notably by Rychner (141; see also Cooke, «Formulaic Diction») and Ménard (*Les fabliaux* 229), who assert that the circulation of written texts both attended and supported the oral diffusion of fabliaux.

[2] Montaiglon and Raynaud, ed., *Recueil général et complet des fabliaux* 5: 125. All quotations of fabliau texts in this article are from the Montaiglon-Raynaud edition (*MR*). References are to volume and page number in *MR*, followed by the number corresponding to the fabliau's order of publication in the *Nouveau Recueil Complet des Fabliaux* (Assen 1983ff.), whose standardized fabliaux titles I also adopt. At this writing, only volumes 1 and 2 of the *NRCF* had been published.

[3] The verbs most commonly used are *oïr, dire, conter, parler, entendre, tesmoignier, repondre,* and *escouter.* In the context of her study, Perry affirms (65) that the frequency of such vocabulary «ne laisse aucun doute: toute cette littérature était destinée à la lecture publique à haute voix ou à la récitation». In several fabliau prologues, for example in *Le Vallet qui d'Aise a Malaise se met* («Volés vous oïr du Vallet | Qui d'aise à malaise se met?» 2: 157; 10) and *Le Vallet aux douze Fames* («Seignor, volez que je vous die | Que il avint en Normandie?» 3: 186; 29), the narrator begins with a «teaser» — again couched in the vocabulary of dialogue — that hints at the subject of his tale. Such expressions, which Biller calls «formules d'ingression», also occur in declarative form, for example in *L'Oue au Chapelain* (6: 46; 86) and *Le Prestre et le Chevalier* (2: 46; 103).

up close to hear his story; another calls for silence; a third begs a drink when his tale is through [4].

To my mind, narrator interventions in the fabliaux go well beyond the commonly accepted function of ensuring audience attention. Indeed, in numerous cases the narrator suggests that his tale should be matched or continued by another teller. My purpose in this essay is to demonstrate, first of all, the provision for dialogue between narrator and audience in Old French fabliaux [5]. Though largely overlooked by scholars, cues for audience response are a recurring and, I believe, highly significant feature of the fabliaux. The mechanics of this dialogue are simple: in every case the teller of the tale, the narrator, offers to exchange roles with the listener. What is more, in several fabliaux, character conflict educes role reversal and heightens its pitch; more specifically, when contests, debates, and trials pit character against character, that tension transcends the narrative to enmesh narrator and audience as well. In such contexts the narrator cue becomes an overt challenge. It is therefore not enough merely to state that narrator and audience take turns telling and listening, although opportunity for dialogue abounds. One must also

[4] «Traiiés en chà; s'oiiés .I. conte», (2: 34; 103); «Or fetes pais, si m'entendez», (3: 62; 46; see also the call to order in 2: 183; 113); «Done-moi boire, si t'agree», (2: 36; 97). By far the most prevalent narrator interrogative formula, however, is the transitional question (e.g., «A quoy ferroi je lonc sermon?»; cf. «interrogation oratoire» in Biller 157 and Perry 64, and «interrogation fictive» in Ménard, *Le Rire* 659), where the narrator anticipates the listener's protest, interrupts the story with a question bearing on the narrative's form, length, or meaning, then moves to the next segment of the tale. Elsewhere the narrator uses *complexio* — a one-sided exchange of question and answer — to simulate dialogue with his audience. Thus in *La Dame qui Aveine demandoit pour Morel sa Provende avoir* (1: 29; 108): «Mais savez por qu'ele le fist? | Pour miex enlachier son mari | Et faire son voloir de li... For *complexio* in romance, see Biller 158 and Gallais. While it is true that transitional questions and *complexio* are only rhetorical «blanks» in the narrator's arsenal and therefore do not carry the charge of the challenges I am about to consider, still these interventions engage the audience and pull it into the tale at hand. When he asks such questions, the narrator requests only that the audience listen.

[5] Throughout this essay I distinguish between what Norris Lacy terms (reader) «identification» with the fabliau and narrator techniques for maintaining the attention of the audience. I fully agree with Lacy that 'identification' would destroy the intended comic effect» (107) of the fabliau. Even Lacy concedes, however, that «sensitivity to certain themes ... has the power to bridge that [esthetic] distance and negate its effects. Obvious examples of this phenomenon are reactions to ethnic, racial, and — more recently — antifeminist stories» (117). In any event, for my purposes the crucial matter is less what transpires during a tale than what happens thereafter.

support the claim by showing that, like wars of words among characters, extranarrative dialogue is inspired and sustained by a spirit of competition. Accordingly, I will demonstrate how by means of controversial character verdicts and appeals for audience verdict, the narrator provokes his listeners and draws out audience response [6].

Pratt argues that the storytelling situation is essentially a dialogue between narrator and audience. The nature of the exchange compels the audience to listen while the narrator spins the story. Contrarywise, the same tacit protocol requires that the narrator accept audience judgment on completion of his tale. The audience uses this interval not only to reclaim parity with the narrator but also to condemn or applaud the tale, or simply to laugh. Pratt concludes that «storytelling ... tends to establish its own turn-taking procedure such that if one speaker has been given the luxury of an uninterruptable turn, so should the others» (105). In the fabliaux, the narrator cues that authorize turn-taking assume many forms, but all are unmistakably interrogative in cast [7]. As the frame for narrator cues, the question blinds interlocutors in «immediate reciprocity»; by virtue of its incomplete structure, the question begs answers, since it cannot stand alone (Goody 3, 5, 23).

Two fabliaux in particular establish in forthright terms the alternation of speaking and listening roles, offering evidence that the narrator intends to initiate dialogue with his listeners. The first tale, *Les trois Dames de Paris*, relates the bar-hopping adventures and mock resurrection of the three female revelers of the title. At the end of this outrageous fabliaux, the narrator dares the audience to match his tale with another:

> Or pri à chascun qu'il en die
> Verité, s'onques aventure
> Oï mais tele en escripture ...
>
> (3: 155; 122)

[6] The notions of commutation and competition in dialogue are more precisely conveyed by the speech-tennis match comparison in Montaigne's «De l'expérience»: «Speech belong half to the speaker, half to the listener. The latter must prepare to receive it according to the motion it takes». For the French text, see *Essais* III, xiii.

[7] For analysis of character question formula in the fabliaux and, in particular, demonstration of the way interrogation shapes and structures the tales, see my «Truth-Seeking Discourse in the Old French Fabliaux», *Medievalia et Humanistica* (forthcoming).

Moreover, the narrator promises to resume his initial role when the audience has answered: «Et, tantost c'on le m'ara dit, | J'en finerai atant mon Dit» (*ibid.*). The cue simultaneously marks a pause, adopts the tone of a challenge, and invites the audience to continue the exchange. In another fabliau, the familiar *Le Sentier battu*, the narrator alludes to a battery of arguments just as apropos as the illustration he finally selects:

> Folie est d'autrui ramprosner,
> Ne gens de chose araisouner
> Dont il ont anuy et vergoigne;
> Ou porroit de ceste besoigne
> Souvent moustrer prueve en maint quas.
> (3: 247; 120)

This prologue allows for elaboration by analogous example; it provides for further, supportive argument. In both tales the narrator challenge serves as a cue for audience response. By virtue of their incompleteness, such fabliaux require a supplement from listeners, a sequel motivated by a desire to contradict and correct, a wish to confirm, a bent to elaborate, or simply an inclination to imitate the spirit and the letter of the initial tale, in short, a rejoinder infused with a kindred spirit of mockery and playful give and take.

At this point, two objections might be raised. To begin with, in order to respond to a tale, listeners must first have something to say. Now it is true that so long as individual fabliaux are viewed as isolated entities that «do not interconnect, develop, or use cross-reference», as Theiner contends (136), they offer no evidence of audience speeches, *per se* [8]. The potential for dialogue looms large, however, when one accepts the recitation of analogous fabliaux or quotation of fabliau summaries in proverb

[8] Echoed by Noomen, «Qu'est-ce qu'un fabliau?» 427, and Van den Boogaard, «Le Récit bref» 11. Theiner overlooks the substance of Van den Boogaard's observation («Amplification» 64; see also Pearcy, «Sentence» 243), that the beginning of *Le Chapelain* (6: 243-54) is identical to Haiseau's fabliau *Le Prestre et le Mouton* (6: 50; 87), in which a priest is butted by a ram. In *Le Chapelain*, when afforded the opportunity, the butting ram kills the priest. The animal is eventually convicted of the crime in a curious ordeal by bier-right. (For remarks on the interconnectedness of *Le Chapelain* and *Le Pescheor de Pont seur Saine*, see my «*Merveilleux*, Mirage, and Comic Ambiguity in the Old French Fabliaux», forthcoming in *Assays*). Besides this example of development, *Connebert* and *Les trois Chanoinesses de Couloigne* contain references to other fabliaux, as does Jean Bodel's *Les deus Chevans*, whose prologue (ll. 1-22) is a bibliography of the author's other fabliaux.

form as audience rejoinders in the exchange. That is, narrator-audience dialogue resonates not within a tale, rather it transpires among the tales as the narrator's story prompts a companion tale from the audience.

The second objection concerns the teller. Scholars have traditionally viewed fabliaux as the stock-in-trade of *jongleurs*, the versatile, wandering entertainers whose own Golden Age, the thirteenth century, produced fabliaux by the score [9]. According to Faral, jongleurs knew more tricks than Barnum had sideshows: performing as acrobats, dancers, mimes, and animal trainers, jongleurs also entertained with «des 'sons' d'amour et du printemps, des chansons de geste, des romans, des fabliaux, des lais bretons, mille belles choses, mille facéties» (64). No doubt, jongleurs played the primary role in presenting fabliaux at all levels of society. But is it reasonable to believe that only jongleurs recited fabliaux? After all, a good tale has no owner, no sole disseminator: once told, the tale belongs to all who have heard [10]. The very brevity of the stories promoted their retention and diffusion. Sometimes coarse, usually humorous, fabliaux are almost always short: rarely do they exceed 500 verses in length. Their conciseness, together with their vernacular language and light subject matter, made them easy to remember and untaxing to repeat. Fabliaux, in other words, were recited not only by experienced performers but also by those who, quite simply, knew and wished to tell a good tale.

Scholars have often stated that fabliaux are jokes in spirit and intent (see, e.g., Cooke, *Fabliaux* 156 ff. and Boutet 7). I agree with this appraisal while insisting on the diffusion of fabliaux by word of mouth. Carrying this line of thought to its conclusion, then, we may ask, what is more human than to trade tales, to swap jokes, and to go the teller one better? Given an audience of one or one hundred, the teller's humorous story generates others

[9] Payen («Goliardisme») compares the education, world view, urban environment, and preferred literary themes of fabliau authors and their Latin-language contemporaries, the goliards. Wailes also gives details of the dominant satiric themes in goliardic tradition and shows how the themes recur in the fabliaux. Neither scholar is concerned, however, with the actual presentation of fabliaux to an audience.

[10] In this connection, it is significant that in at least 13 fabliaux the narrator purports to repeat a tale he has heard himself. On the other hand, in at least 10 fabliaux, e.g. *Estormi* (1: 199; 1) and *La Dame escoillée* (6: 95; 83), the narrator claims a written source for his tale.

cut from the same cloth. Today, one regional joke answers another. Likewise jokes about travelling salesmen, men in rowboats or elevators, priests, elephants, even professors — all elicit answer-tales on an identical theme. This natural, challange-answer sequence of stories begins in the fabliaux, but the dialogue also continues among the tales. For fabliau characters, alternation of telling and listening roles provides refreshing after-dinner sport. The host and his guest in *La Damoiselle qui ne pooit oïr parler de foutre* exchange tales during a session that includes fabliaux (3: 81-2; 26). As it happens, neither of the characters is a jongleur. In three other fabliaux, characters tell tales in a contest setting. Entertainers at the banquet in *Le Vilain au Buffet* vie for a prize while adding to the merriment by telling tales and reciting debates (3: 203-4; 52). The action of *Les trois Chanoinesses de Couloigne* pivots on an exchange of anecdotes among the four protagonists (3: 141-4; 121), as each teller strives to surpass the salaciousness of the others. We find much the same situation in the fragmentary *Jugement* (6: 154-5), where, as nearly as we can tell, the audience is asked to judge which of three nuns has told the coarsest story. Especially in the last three tales, story-telling by characters is more than simple entertainment. By creating a series whose constituent tales both answer their predecessor and spark a new story, contestants weave a dialogue of tales.

Similarly, in narrator-audience dialogue the audience restores dialogic balance and prolongs the exchange by answering the narrator's story with a tale of its own. That fabliaux take opposite sides in a controversy can be illustrated by specific examples. For instance, *Le Pet au Vilain* (3: 103-5; 55) and *Le Vilain qui conquist Paradis par Plait* (3: 209-14; 39) debate the issue, Should a rustic be allowed in Heaven, or not? In *Le Pet*, when Christ refuses him entry to Heaven, the malodorous *vilain* guarantees that he and his peers will also be forever barred from Hell. At the end of the tale, when he has been rejected by Heaven and Hell alike, the rustic is left to wander «en la terre de Cocusse» (105). In *Le Vilain qui conquist*, by contrast, the candidate — also a yokel — perseveres in his efforts to gain entry to Paradise. Arriving at Heaven's threshold, he throws off challenges from SS. Peter, Paul, and Thomas. In the end he applies to the Lord himself, who — overwhelmed by the petitioner's serene argumentation — finally admits him to Paradise. Thus *Le Vilain* takes a stance in direct opposition to *Le Pet*, since it shows how

a rustic uses superior dialectical skills to gain passage through the Pearly Gates. This tit-for-tat effect is also created in two fabliaux whose issue appears to be, Is it possible to outsmart a minstrel? The knight in *Charlot le Juif qui chia en un Pel de Lievre* (3: 222-6; 112) fails miserably in his attempt, while the bridegroom in *Jouglet* (4: 112-27; 10) has repeated success. In these two tales the dupes even share the same humiliation when parts of their anatomy are covered with excrement.

A constellation of fabliaux debate the broader and considerably more ticklish issue opposing *ribaudie* and *glose*, or obscenity and euphemism. Medieval interest in this issue is underscored not only by its presence in numerous fabliaux but also its reprise at length in the *Roman de la Rose* (ed. Poirion, vv. 6979-7204). Just as Jean de Meun's Amors bans naughty words from Amant's speech while, on the other hand, Raison delights in calling a spade, so individual fabliaux in this group address the issue of gloss vs. plain speech. Muscatine attributes the liveliness of the debate to «an outbreak of decency» (10), the rising influence of courtly language and convention in thirteenth-century literature. Brusegan evokes the academic milieu of that century and its preoccupation with «ce problème du 'nommer', du rapport entre le mot et la *res*» (22-3), a conflict described by Pearcy as opposing «an attitude of mind that is essentially speculative, synoptic, and idealistic, and one that is materialistic, analytical, and existential» («Modes» 194), in other words, the quarrel of idealists and realists (but see White 190). Whatever the ultimate source of the debate, in the fabliaux the opposition is sharply drawn. The case for prudery is most clearly stated in *Le Lai d'Aristote*, while the antithesis is elaborated in what Muscatine terms (13) « anti-prudery poems»: *L'Esquiriel*, two versions of *La Damoiselle qui ne pooit oïr parler de foutre*, and *La Pucele qui abevra le Polain.* Arguments from both sides of the issue may be summarized by quotation from representative texts.

The fabliau *La Pucele qui abevra le Polain* tells of a young girl who first resists a suitor's overtures, then promptly consents when he sweetens the language of seduction with a soothing string of barnyard metaphor. The suitor initiates the girl by means of a catechism that substitutes «polain» for «vit», «deus mareschal» for «coillons», and so on, in a kind of bucolic version of the love-quest in the *Roman de la Rose.* From the outset, the narrator of this tale declares his solidarity with

Raison. How unreasonable, he maintains, that *foutre* should ever be construed as crude or vulgar:

> El monde n'a sote ne sot,
> Ne vieille de .IIII^{xx}. anz,
> Qui ne soit durement joianz,
> Quant el en oit .I. sol mot dire,
> Au meins l'en estuet il à rire.
>
> (4: 200; 26)

The narrator concludes by calling on women like the wilting *précieuse* of his tale to put an end to their squeamishness and call things by their proper name (206).

Though the action of *L'Esquiriel* begins with a taboo and unfolds with an elaborate seduction scene, the tale closes with an anti-prudery statement by the narrator. In this sense the fabliau may be said to express both positions on this linguistic issue. The opening scene presents a mother who cautions her adolescent daughter against idle chatter, warning her especially never to use a certain expression:

> Et une chose vous desfent
> Sor toutes autres mout trés bien,
> Que ja ne nommez cele rien
> Que cil homme portent pendant.
>
> (ll. 26-9)

As it happens, though, young Robin overhears the conversation. Through a catechism similar to that in *La Pucele*, Robin practices «deliberate submersion» of obscenities (Cooke, *Fabliaux* 57) to seduce the girl. In this way *L'Esquiriel* dramatizes the two phases of the mechanism of euphemism: «celui de l'interdiction, d'abord, qui frappe le nom des choses jugées dangereuses dans une société [the mother's taboo]; celui de la substitution, ensuite et dans la plupart des cas, du nom tabou par un nom différent [the catechism]» (Todorov, *Genres* 270). The narrator has had his fun with the tale, to be sure, but he concludes with the warning that children kept on a short tether are likely to rebel:

> ... tels cuide bien chastier
> Sa fille de dire folie,
> Et quant plus onques le chastie,
> Tant le met l'en plus en la voie
> De mal fere, se Dieus me voie.
>
> (ll. 201-6)

By imposing a regime of excessive prudery, the mother has made vulgarity that much more attractive to her daughter.

By contrast, other fabliaux extol or illustrate the use of equivalent euphemisms and metaphors. These poems recognize but do not transgress linguistic taboos. As the foremost fabliau interpreter of the arguments of Amors, the narrator of *Le Lai d'Aristote* favors the niceties of refined, courtly speech over the tastelessness of *vilonie*. His prologue is a frontal attack on vulgarity:

> Quar oevre où vilonie cort
> Ne doit estre noncie à cort;
> Ne jor que vive en mon ovrer
> Ne quier vilonie conter...
> Quar vilonie si defface
> Tote riens et tolt sa savor.
>
> (5: 244; not *NRCF*)

Numerous other tales, while lacking such explicit narrator manifestos, exploit the prudery-plain speech issue just the same; they lend new meaning to Todorov's dictum that «l'euphémisme est de la magie à l'usage de tous» (*Genres* 271). The male characters in *Porcelet* (4: 144-6; 67) and *La Pucele qui voloit voler* (4: 208-11; 65), for example, ply the evasive language of prudery to clinch sexual conquest. In such tales as *Celui qui bota la Pierre* (4: 147-9; 63) and *Le Prestre qui abevete* (3: 54-7; 98), even gestures are taken for mimetic equivalents of sexual intercourse. On another level, finally, in *La Saineresse* (1: 289-93; 36) the wife mocks her husband by reporting in medical terms her sexual interlude with a transvestite charlatan. In this respect, fabliaux that show prudery in action may be said to constitute answers to their anti-prudery counterparts. On the issue of prudery vs. plain speech, then, this group of fabliaux rehearses a dialogue, a veritable *sic et non* wherein recitation of a challenge tale spurs rebuttal on the same theme. In each case the alternative behavior is acknowledged but purposely eschewed.

To this point, I have based my argument for intrageneric dialogue on the brevity, the humor, and the oral diffusion of fabliaux while placing particular emphasis on the challenge, the narrator's taunting cue for listeners to continue the exchange. It is worthwhile to recall at this juncture that this particular manifestation of dialogue had counterparts in the literature of the time. Indeed, in his *Medieval French Literature and Law*,

Bloch calls attention to «a virtual renaissance of the dialogued mode», which, beginning with the Carolingian *conflictus*, also produced a raft of twelfth-century dialogued patterns. In her characterization of *jeu-parti*, *tenson*, *partimen*, and debate, for example, Speer states that these generic cousins «were marked from the beginning by humor; as contests of wit, they offer participants, whether *jongleurs* or gentlemen, the opportunity to dispay their mental quickness in formal, often illogical arguments on generally light subjects» (160). For his part, Bloch writes at length on the double *sirventes*. This form «consists of a pair of antithetical lyrics of the same length, schema, and, generally speaking, the same rhyme.... Theoretically, each poem within the pair, or the series of pairs, constitutes a response to its predecessor...» (167). Bloch matches challenge and riposte, parry and response by pointing out similarities in rhyme and meter in addition to identity of theme. There probably are no pairs or clusters of fabliaux that can be matched on the basis of all these criteria. I have shown, however, that by issuing a challenge in that same spirit, fabliau narrators often invite replay of character conflict in the form of narrator-audience dialogue. The narrator challenge is routinely either a statement of or an appeal to authority; just as word play is serious business for fabliau characters, the narrator challenge — despite its frivolous theme — is preoccupied with ultimate truth. This preoccupation is borne out in the most striking example of narrator challenge — fabliau judgment scenes.

Among the 127 fabliaux either certified by author or accepted as such by tradition, some 26 tales — or about one-fifth of the fabliau corpus — contain judgment scenes [11]. Fabliau judgment scenes invariably arise from character conflict where the issues range from property disputes to domestic strife and damage suits. These *scènes de tribunal* are of three types: there are seventeen CHARACTER JUDGMENTS where secondary characters (e.g., a bailiff, a bishop, a jury of citizens) hand down a verdict; AUDIENCE JUDGEMENTS are initiated in five fabliaux when the narrator requests an audience verdict in a character dispute; finally, there

[11] This tally excludes judgments in polymorphic fabliaux. For a list of fabliaux *à scène de tribunal* and a synopsis of their issue, see the Appendix to my «Truth-Seeking Discourse». Surprisingly, Ménard's only comment on this group of tales is that their ending is «parfois provisoire» (*Les Fabliaux* 44). In her recent work, Boutet notes only (17) the intermingling of fabliau and debate genres.

are four fabliaux with DOUBLE JUDGMENTS in which the narrator appeals to his audience a case previously weighed by a jury of characters. On the surface, it would appear that cases brought for judgment by characters should be decided within the narrative while cases of the second and third types, both involving extra-narrative judgment, must remain forever unresolved. In the fabliaux as in life, however, judgment is not always synonymous with resolution. Even character judgments frequently end on a nagging note of miscarried justice, for example when litigants face a crooked or prejudiced judge, or when a judge takes the advice of a court fool [12]. Such controversial judgments upset more than they settle; they habitually rule against plaintiffs and exonerate the accused. Character judgments, in other words, are strictly *pro forma*, offering only «a solution for this time» (after Jauss 85). In this sense, the controversy drags on even when the fabliau appears to have drawn to a close. The legal question has been raised only to stand unresolved at the end of the tale.

In controversial character judgments, the narrator reports a character verdict so transparently biased as to elicit a response from the audience. A case in point is the character judgment in *Les trois Dames qui troverent un Vit* (5: 32-6; 96), where an abbess acting as judge hands down an unexpected decision motivated by personal greed. In this tale three ladies on pilgrimage to Mont St.-Michel find a male sex organ («.II. coiz et .I. vit mout gros») along the way, and each pilgrim claims all or part of the windfall for herself. After a brief exchange of taunts and threats, the pilgrims take their squabble to the abbess of a nearby convent. The abbess receives the pilgrims and promises to settle their dispute, but first she insists on viewing the contested object. When the finder produces exhibit A, the abbess sighs three times, then summarily refuses to award the prize to any of the disputants. Further, she identifies the artefact as a misplaced dead-bolt from the convent door and reclaims it for her chapter. A second version of the tale shows the three pilgrims leaving the

[12] As Schenck explains («Functions» 32), «most of the judges who are asked to play the role of counselor ... reveal their inadequacy or deliberately corrupt the role and use it for their own ends». Again according to Schenck («Morphology» 38), «the fact that there are few Resolution functions and fewer cases of true justice indicates that the world of the fabliau is not one in which problems are actually worked out and resolved. On the contrary, these tales reflect a world where immediate retributory justice is administered by the injured party, and where the most clever person, not the good one wins».

convent in disgust: they grumble about the abbess' high-handed decision and swear henceforth to steer clear of legal disputes (4: 131-2). Indeed, only travesty of justice prevails when the decision favors the judge rather than satisfying the litigants. The legal question in this judgment scene is avoided rather than directly addressed. The judge never determines or distributes ownership of the object among the litigants, instead she evades the issue, mocks the pilgrims, and dispatches them empty-handed.

When, in several fabliaux, the character verdict is controversial or simply long overdue, the narrator makes an explicit appeal to the audience to act as jury in determining the outcome of the tale [13]. Such narrator appeals for extranarrative judgment are a significant form of narrator cue for audience response; they indicate that the crux of character conflict remains unfinished business at the close of the tale. Examination of three open-ended fabliaux will clarify the interrogative nature of narrator appeals and show how those appeals channel character conflict to the audience.

In *Les deus Chevaus* the narrator concludes by asking that the audience apply itself to a case — a dispute between a rustic and a monk over ownership of a horse — still pending in court at Amiens:

> Or vous proi-je communement
> Qu'entre vous m'en dites le voir,
> Se li vilains le [= le cheval] doit avoir.
>
> (1: 13; 50)

Fully expanded, the narrator's quandary may be construed, Is the monk entitled to the horse or must he surrender it the rustic? In such requests for judgment the narrator acknowledges the role of the audience in the exchange, for he leaves the story's completion to his listeners.

Le Jugement des Cons also closes on a note of irresolution. In this tale, three sisters have fallen in love with the same young man, Robin. In an effort to settle their dispute, the sisters' uncle

[13] This feature is by no means limited to the fabliaux. See Ménard, *Le Rire* 489, 495, and Benkov 172 ff. Pearcy («Genre» 60) suggests that Dunbar modeled his *Tretis* on fabliaux with audience or double judgment. Pearcy deals specifically with narrator appeals for judgment in Old French fabliaux (60-69), but never attempts a description of audience response to the questions posed by these highly structured games.

organizes a riddle contest where each sister must answer the same dilemmatic riddle: «Qui est ainsnez, vous ou vos cons?» After listening to the sisters' answers, a jury of legal professionals determines the youngest sister to be the winner, thus awarding her the right to marry Robin. The narrator intervenes at this point, however, to appeal the character judgment to the audience:

> Or vois querant par la contrée
> Se li jugemenz est bien fez;
> Que Dieus vous pardoinst voz meffez
> Se vous i savez qu'amender:
> Je le vieng à vous demander.
>
> (ll. 162-6)

This narrator appeal has a special character: first, the sisters' dispute has obviously not been resolved to the narrator's satisfaction, since he renews the controversy in the conclusion. The narrator serves as intermediary between characters and audience when he reviews character conflict in this incipient dialogue. Interestingly, the appeal also takes the form of a quest, that is, a question carried across space to a series of respondents, to a succession of audiences. Like *Les deus Chevaus*, this tale is a dialogue *en puissance*. The controversial verdict in the tale is meant to be balanced by audience judgment outside the story frame.

Character conflict in *Le Bouchier d'Abevile* (3: 227-46; 18) arises from a dispute over ownership of a sheepskin. Returning home from a fruitless day at the regional livestock show, the butcher David passes through the town of Bailleul. With vespers close at hand, David inquires about overnight lodging. A villager steers him toward the home of Gautier, a local priest who does not suffer laymen gladly. When David asks to stay the night in the priest's home, Gautier sneers that his hostel is exclusively for priests and recommends an inn in the next town. Seething with anger, David follows the road to the edge of Bailleul, where he spies a large flock of sheep. The owner of the flock, as David soon discovers, is none other than the inhospitable Gautier. David steals one of the plumpest sheep and carries it fireman-style back to the hostel. There he trades the mutton to the unsuspecting Gautier for a night's room and board in the priest's home. The fabliau might well have ended on this deception, but in fact this «petit chef-d'oeuvre de tromperie» (Ménard, *Les fabliaux* 193)

is barely half-way to its midpoint. The remainder of the tale shows how in a series of private bargaining sessions, David successfully obtains cash from the priest and services from the two female members of the priest's household, all the while using the purloined sheep: first the servant girl, then the priest's mistress exchange sexual favors for the sheepskin; finally, even Gautier pays cash for the handsome fleece. By the time a shepherd arrives to inform Gautier of the sheep-rustling incident the night before, David has already made his escape. The ensuing dispute over the hide is a complicated one, with the maid, the priest, and his mistress all staking exclusive claims. Although the disputants never bring suit, as in *Les deus Chevaus*, the priest threatens legal action if his mistress presses her counter-claim (246). At the end of the tale, finally, the narrator — speaking in the name of the author — intervenes (*ibid.*) in an apostrophe that recalls the language of contemporary *jugements d'amour*:

> Seignor, vous qui les biens savez,
> Huistaces d'Amiens vous demande,
> Et prie par amors, et mande
> Que vous faciez cest jugement.
> Bien et à droit et leaument,
> Chascuns en die son voloir
> Liquels doit mieus la pel avoir,
> Ou li prestres, ou la prestresse,
> Ou la meschine piprenesse.

By means of his appeal for audience judgment, the narrator emphasizes the provisional, open-ended character of his tale. From this perspective, tales that call for audience judgment are fabliaux about telling fabliaux. In a very real sense, fabliaux that deal with their own creation promise a sequel, they launch what Todorov terms (*Poetics* 61) a «narrative-to-be-spoken». There is continual play with infinity as the 'imperfect' narrative, sent off by a question, perpetually seeks its conclusion. Clearly, by virtue of their irresolution, fabliaux with either controversial character verdicts or narrator appeals for audience judgment are dilemma stories, since they «carry no assertion but end with a question» (Permyakov 66). Like other forms of medieval debate, these question-fabliaux solicit an active audience response, a supplement from beyond their narrative frame.

At this point we may usefully pause to consider other views

on this aspect of narrator-audience dialogue in the fabliaux. Some scholars appear simply to rule out any possibility of audience response. Benson and Andersson, for example, write that the narrator appeal in *Le Bouchier d'Abevile* is a «mock *question d'amour*: The answer, of course, is that [the characters] all get just what they deserve» (283). Payen's interpretation of the narrator appeal in *Les deus Chevaus* adopts similar language. Noting this fabliau's provision for extranarrative debate, Payen states that in fact the poet is initiating «un faux débat, dans la mesure où la conclusion va de soi» («Le statut de l'écrivain» 53). Still, he points out (*ibid.*) that the level of conflict has shifted from the courtroom in the tale to the arena of narrator-audience debate: «Jean Bodel transforme un *fablel* en discours implicitement contestataire . . . : la contestation s'inscrit ici dans le débat final tout autant que dans l'anecdote, et le fabliau se prolonge par un échange entre le jongleur et son public où se noue la complicité de l'auditoire et du poète».

Others see narrator appeals as something more than rhetorical questions. For his part, Rychner compares the appeal for judgment in *Les trois Dames qui troverent l'Anel* (for a synopsis, see below, pp. 395-6) with that in *jeux-partis*: such an appeal, says Rychner, «expose une question dilemmatique et doit provoquer la discussion; elle me semble caractéristique du métier de divertisseur et d'amuseur mondain» [14]. In elaborating his argument that the fabliaux addressed an aristocratic audience, Nykrog too points out that discussion was a favorite pastime of courtly society, adding that in such related genres as *jeu-parti* and debate, audience response was expected. Thus in fabliaux with extranarrative judgment, «le conteur laisse à son auditoire le soin de trancher la question et de rendre le verdict» (57, 94; see also Lee 33-5 and Várvaro 288-9).

Benkov's study takes a middle course. While acknowledging the channels for narrator-audience dialogue, Benkov stops short of specifying forms of audience response. Further, she denies

[14] Rychner 16. Quoting Zumthor, Buridant defines *jeu-parti* as «un débat ne comportant aucune référence externe et qui se déroule, à partir d'une proposition dogmatique, entre deux trouvères chantant alternativement des strophes de structure identique ... l'un des deux partenaires propose à l'autre une question dilemmatique et, celui-ci ayant fait son choix, soutient lui-même le terme de l'alternative resté disponible» (377-8). Ilvonen provides further specifics of the progression of such contests.

any significant links between fabliaux and medieval debate literature [15]. In fabliaux with narrator appeals for audience verdict, writes Benkov, «la réponse ou les réponses doivent demeurer dans un état d'éventualité car elles ne permettent pas de clôture au conte» (225). Still, Benkov argues that fabliaux *à jugement extérieur*, as she designates them, promise a sequel. Her remark on the narrator appeal in *Le Bouchier d'Abevile* applies equally to all appeals for extranarrative judgment: «il incombe à l'auditoire, aux juges, de compléter le fabliau et de donner une résolution satisfaisante d'après les éléments fournis par les personnages et par le narrateur» (194).

Though most scholars concede the likelihood of audience response, they balk at specifying the form that answer might take. We have already discussed at length the mechanics of that dialogue, its preparation and release. Briefly stated, the narrator challenge provides the opportunity, the conflictual setting the motivation, and the answer-tale the means for audience response.

[15] Benkov breaks with Rychner, Nykrog, and other proponents of audience discussion in denying the formal, thematic, and stylistic similarity of fabliaux and *jeux-partis*. In particular, she claims that «la seule ressemblance entre les *jeux-partis* et les fabliaux à jugement extérieur se trouve dans l'absence d'un jugement final rendu à l'intérieur du texte» (175). Benkov insightfully lists the pitfalls of such a comparison, yet her rejection of all but this single link is an overstatement of the case. In the context of my remarks on narrator appeals for judgment, I would argue rather the multiple ties between fabliaux and the various forms of literary debate. Both the wife in *Bérangier au lonc Cul* and the noble judge in *Le povre Mercier*, for example, force a *jeu-parti*, or dilemma, on other characters, and both make explicit use of the expression «partir .I. jeu». (For the general use of the expression, see Biller 79-80). In the first tale, Bérangier must decide whether to risk humiliation in a joust with his wife or plant a shameful if less painful kiss (3; 259; 34). The monk in the second tale faces another distasteful alternative, since the judge orders him either to leave the Church or pay the peddler (2: 21-2; 97). The *jeu-parti* is also rehearsed in *La vieille Truande* (5: 178; 37), *Le Preudome qui rescolt son compere de noier* (1: 303; 89), and *Le Couvoiteus et l'Envieus* (5: 212; 71), where the authenticity of the altercation is increased when a judge figure imposes the dilemma on two other characters.

Conversely, the texts of *jeux-partis* reveal a number of classic fabliau plots. Buridant has already noted the evocation of the erotic triangle priest-wife-husband in *jeu-parti* n° 37, «qui paraît offrir un embryon de saynète de fabliau» (407-8). Three further *jeux-partis* present dilemmatic questions that are echoed in the fabliaux: Jean Bretel's question (n° 116) refers to the episode of «Aristote chevauché», which is also the most memorable scene of *Le Lai d'Aristote*; the dilemma of Gillebert de Berneville's question (n° 140) concerning a beardless suitor is taken up in *Le Sentier battu*; the subject introduced by Perrot de Beaumarchais (n° 145), namely, whether it is better to love a knight who is skilled in battle but gauche in courtly society, or a handsome wit who shines in tête-à-tête but who shrinks from hand-to-hand, surfaces again in *Le Chevalier qui recovra l'Amor de sa Dame.*

Pursuing this line of reasoning, we may now ask, But where is the body? That is, can the demonstration of intrageneric dialogue be duplicated for issues raised by fabliaux *à scène de tribunal*? I think not, at least not, most probably, by matching dilemma with answer-tale. How, then, can the dialogue go on? In the introduction to this essay, I alluded to another form of audience response that may well hold the key in this matter — the proverb. While the nature of fabliau proverbs lies beyond the scope of this essay, a brief excursus is in order here since proverbs, which occur in two-thirds of the tales, are rich in dialogic implications for the fabliaux. By way of conclusion, I suggest that once the ludic, dialogic framework is established by the narrator, the audience might well answer appeals for judgment with a verdict in proverb form. In fact, this seems to be precisely the answer sought in *Les trois Dames qui troverent l'Anel* (1: 168-77; 11).

When the three ladies of the title find an expensive ring along the road, they agree to a contest not out of character for fabliau wives: the lady who plays the best practical joke on her husband can keep the ring. After presenting the 'dirty tricks' perpetrated by the first two ladies, the narrator provides a neat case summary in proverb form. Following the first episode, where a wife gets her husband drunk enough to join a religious order, the narrator closes with a comment which Pearcy («Sentence» 238-9) might classify as «antifeminist complaint»:

> Maint preudome a esté trahi
> Par fame et par sa puterie.
>
> (94-5)

Similarly, after the second episode, where the wife cleverly conjures a time warp that drives her mate to the brink of madness, the narrator steps in with a proverb encapsulating the case at hand:

> Li vilains reproche du chat
> Qu'il set bien qui barbes il lèche.
>
> (196-7)

There is no such proverb, however, after the final episode; when the third wife has bilked her husband into giving her away to a lover, the narrator's usual comment is displaced by the appeal

for judgment. Moreover, the narrator drops his storyteller pose to assume the role of advocate, for after making the appeal he inserts a plea for the first contestant:

> Je di que cele ouvra moult bel
> Qui moine fist de son seignor.
>
> (268-9)

He then finishes this new summary and repeats the appeal for judgment:

> Or dites voir, n'i ait menti,
> Et jugiez réson et voir
> Laquele doit l'anel avoir.
>
> (276-8)

The character dispute in this fabliau has escalated to include narrator and audience as well. By the incomplete structure of his three-part argument and by his role change to challenge the audience to answer his claims within the legal frame, the narrator actively elicits audience response, indeed he incites his listeners to match his summaries with a verdict in proverb form. In this fabliau, character conflict fuels extranarrative debate as the narrator effects a change of venue and initiates review of the case. His appeal presents the possible answers, but at the same time — like a partner in *jeux-partis* — the narrator declares himself prepared to defend the option(s) not chosen by the audience.

When set within this legal context, the narrator proverb may profitably be compared to the verdict in character judgments. The verdict is to the legal dispute what the proverb is to life's dilemmas. Like verdicts, proverbs are a provisional assessment of circumstance. Verdicts purport to resolve legal conflict; proverbs appear to reconcile opposites in practical or moral issues, they seem to balance risk against reward, prudence against profit. At the same time, just as fabliau judgments are unsettling, proverbs answer while compelling a response. Proverbs offer provisional judgment with a ring of truth; they exemplify the *mentir* ≠ *voir dire* opposition that runs through the tales (see Pearcy, «Sentence» 235-6). The wisdom of fabliau proverbs, like that of fabliau judgments, is always subject to appeal.

The apparent absence of companion tales for fabliaux with narrator appeals for judgment in no way vitiates the theory of the dialogue of tales. As I have shown, the range of audience

responses encompassed various forms of analogy, that is, the audience might answer with an utterance confirming or refuting the initial fabliau, or even with a tale on a similar theme. It is true that the narrator-audience exchange is a blind dialogue whose alternating speeches we acknowledge but whose direction we can never accurately predict. Further, on cursory examination, there appears to be little manuscript evidence for such a dialogue. In short, we cannot definitively establish that such-and-such a fabliau answers another in the same way, for example, that the challenge and answer components of *Les deus Bordeors Ribauz* (1: 1-6; 7ff.) constitute a dialogue nor, certainly, in the way the Reeve's fabliau matches the Miller's in the *Canterbury Tales.* Despite these shortcomings, the theory of the dialogue of tales throws new light on the enigmas of the fabliau genre [16]. Consistent with the truth-seeking preoccupation of fabliau characters, with the oral presentation of the tales, and with the dialectical undercurrent of contemporary literature, it allows a fresh perspective on the interconnectedness of the Old French fabliaux. Narrator-audience dialogue continues whenever the truth-seeking thrust of the tales intersects.

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[16] It would be interesting to determine to what extent intrageneric dialogue effected the «welding» of episodes in *La Dame escoillée* (the second episode begins at l. 395), the apparent contradiction of the two episodes in *L'Esquiriel* (for a synopsis, see above, pp. 8-9), and the stacking of episodes in *Le Pliçon* (6: 260-3; 117), to name but a few examples.

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