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## STERLING KEYNOTE

*The text of the Sterling Keynote Address given at the 2018 Annual Convention  
October 5, 2018, Cheyenne, Wyoming*

# The Joys (Juice) and Delights in Late Medieval Verse Narratives. Eroticism and Enlightenment in the Literary Discourse of the Old French *Fabliaux*

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Anyone who has ever studied the works by Boccaccio (*Decameron*) or Chaucer (*Canterbury Tales*), for instance, would know that much laughter about erotic episodes peels throughout the late Middle Ages. In fact, as recent research has amply demonstrated, pre-modern society was not simply the victim of widespread fear and despondence, nor entirely oriented toward the salvation of the human soul, as important as the theological discourse certainly proved to be. Modern notions about the European Middle Ages, however, sometimes tend to be determined by the idea that the Catholic Church held absolute dominion and influenced virtually every aspect of life, thus repressing simple enjoyments and the pleasures of the flesh. Hence, medieval literature must have been filled with doom, or fire and brimstone as well. Even Arthurian literature, seen from this perspective, would perhaps have to be read from a deeply religious perspective, whereas heroic literature pursues issues of honor and identity, both being also rather stern and ponderous. Would it hence be impossible to discover any interest in the basic human conditions, the joys of physical existence, the beauty of this world in its erotic and even sexual dimensions in medieval texts? On the other hand, there is the popular notion of the Middle Ages as a world just of games and fun, of sex and worldly enjoyment, which would be equally one-sided and mostly erroneous.

To be sure, many medieval poets were specifically interested in the lighter aspects of human life and thereby aimed at the critical examination of a host of different issues, which I want to bring to light by way of focusing on the intriguing genre of Old French *fabliaux*. Already the anonymous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (late fourteenth century) reveals how complex the entire situation was, with the protagonist being exposed to a deadly game, but at the end, having successfully preserved his life, everyone laughs about-

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-and with—him in sympathy. The genre of the *fabliaux* has already been discussed for a long time in studies by Joseph Bédier (1893), Jean Rychner (1960), Per Nykrog (1973), Howard R. Bloch (1986), and others, commonly with the purpose of identifying the specific gender discourse contained in them, the social-historical reflections on peasants, young scholars, clerics, and on women in the various classes as sexual subjects or objects (Alexandre-Bidon and Lorcin). As early as 1581 Claude Fauchet recognized the *fabliaux* as a literary text type *sui generis*, mirroring considerable changes in the social and economic conditions in the late Middle Ages, followed by Pierre Daniel Huet in 1670 (Kiesow). Until today, research has consistently identified the *fabliaux* as highly satirical, at times sexual, if not pornographic, texts of great significance for their time because of their great popularity and as remarkable literary documents of late medieval mentality. The study of the *fabliaux* facilitates an understanding not only of the world of the courts, but also of the world of the urban citizens and even the rural population.

Here I want to examine a selection of highly sexualized examples and investigate what the ultimate motive might have been behind drastic descriptions of sexual acts that obviously served for the entertainment of wider sections of late medieval society, both at court and in the urban centers. There are certainly numerous cases of medieval art and literature that border on pornography, as we would call it today, probably anachronistically, but this does not allow us to consider those images or textual themes as entirely self-serving and out of place (Ziolkowski; Jones; McDonald; Classen, *Sexuality*). To be sure, the *fabliaux* represent a literary genre filled with irony, satire, at times even with sarcasm (*Words that Tear the Flesh*), and they invite the audience to laugh about foolish people, especially in the countryside, where smart housewives, for instance, tend to have love affairs with the priest and unabashedly cuckold their boorish husbands (Crocker; Cooke and Honeycutt). But the deft humor in these verse narratives targets many different people and prompts numerous reflections on the complexities of life, so it would be misleading to read here only an expression of prurient interests. In fact, as I want to suggest subsequently, many of the sexual episodes do not only trigger enjoyment and laughter, they also convey a specific sense of social criticism and provide literary material for the investigation of epistemology hidden behind the sexual themes and motifs (Grubmüller). Nicole Nolan Sidhu now argues, for instance, that seemingly obscene scenes in a wide swath of late medieval literature and art served as a cover for social and moral criticism and even for protests against the authorities (Sidhu). This might certainly be true in some cases, but we have to probe further and come to terms with the puzzling phenomenon of the *fabliau* as such.

Recent medieval scholarship has strongly shifted our attention

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to the large issues of laughter/humor on the one hand (Classen, *Laughter in the Middle Ages*; Velten), and sexuality, love, and marriage, on the other (Classen, *Discourses on Love, Marriage, and Transgression*; Classen, “Love, Sex, and Marriage”). In this respect, the *fabliaux* have considerably gained in importance at least for a specialist audience, but they deserve much further analysis because their strong emphasis on sexuality, which certainly must have entertained the contemporary audiences, proves to be not the end in itself. Examining *fabliaux* allows us to penetrate deeply into the world of urban culture during the late Middle Ages, to gain insight into critical aspects of the history of mentality, and to understand many of the critical features of anti-clericalism contained in those verse narratives. Moreover, irrespective, or just because, of the heavy laughter which all those tales tend to evoke, the *fabliaux* reveal many aspects that determining gender relationships both in the urban centers, in the countryside, and even at court. Further, the *fabliaux* became the basis for many translations into Middle English (Chaucer) (Hertog) and late medieval German (Kaufinger and many others) (Classen, *Love, Life, and Lust*; Rippl), so they exerted a vast influence and signal how much erotic themes could establish a pan-European network of literary reception. After all, sexual jokes have always appealed to many different audiences and yet, in many cases, are not simply entertainment if we take them seriously. Bédier, however, wanted to pass over them quietly and leave those embarrassing texts behind as quickly as possible (326). If we reflect carefully on the social constellations and gender relations represented here, we can easily realize how important they are also as documents mirroring social-historical and religious-mental conditions in the late Middle Ages (Bloch; Lacy; Corbellari; Collet). Understandably, in previous times many scholars simply shied away from the *fabliaux* because of their seemingly pornographic content and because they constantly transgressed moral, social, and political norms, at least in the eyes of modern readers (Merveldt). There might be pornography contained in the *fabliaux*, but it has always proven to be difficult to define this aspect even in modern times, and even more difficult with respect to the Middle Ages (Krohn; Moulton; Burgwinkle and Howie; Classen, *Sexuality in the Middle Ages*).

As for laughter being presented in literary sources, we could even go much further back to the tenth century and consider how the north German canoness Hrotsvit of Gandersheim engaged with a wide range of sexual themes in her religious plays and narratives in order to provide models of ideal devout behavior by converted individuals and to teach moral and religious lessons (Classen, “Sex on the Stage”; Classen, *Sex im Mittelalter*). In many, if not all, Arthurian romances, the dimension of sexuality matters significantly, whether they deal with adultery, love relationships, marriage, sexual pleasures,

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or, on the downside, rape, incest, and sexual violence (Roberts.; Classen, *Sexual Violence and Rape*). Most famously, the Anglo-Norman poet Marie de France explored the wide range of erotic conditions in her *lais* (ca. 1200) in order to present cases of wrong or ideal behavior in private and public at court. However, she hardly aimed at simple entertainment and addressed mostly very serious issues in love and marriage. Many other late medieval poets followed her in that respect, but that is only one side of the same coin.

In fact, there is the huge corpus of late medieval Old French *fabliaux*, further developed in the Middle High German *mären*, the Middle English *tales*, and the medieval Italian *novelle*. Here we encounter a very different world where clothing serves to be removed, where genitals operate by themselves, where the sexual body is flaunted everywhere, and where erotic pleasures, disregarding the teachings by the Church or legal conditions, dominate. Modern readers continue to enjoy those short verse narratives and easily respond with laughter, although sometimes also with open embarrassment. However, many fundamental questions remain that require further investigation since there are often literary motives that have baffled modern readers. What are we to make, for instance, of a cut-off penis that finally enters a women's convent where the nuns immediately get into a huge fight over who might be allowed to possess it, which ends in all of them losing their virginity, as the torn and tattered veils indicate, while the penis has disappeared and might be in the possession of the abbess ("Das Nonnenturnier" (The Nuns' Tournament), quoted from Grubmüller, 944-77)? Other poets make the vagina wander around, feeling pretty lost all by herself (Classen and Dinzelbacher). By analogy, how should we respond to the large collection of highly 'pornographic' pilgrimage badges from the late Middle Ages, and hence also to the unabashed discussion of sexual violence from a man's perspective in the *Carmina Burana* (early thirteenth century), in Shrovetide plays (since the fifteenth century), or to images of sexual intercourse in many wooden misericords in Gothic cathedrals (Weir and Jerman; Lindquist.)?

Every instance of laughter, however, can serve as a catalyst to understand deeper meanings because it rips off all pretenses and exposes the inner truth of human existence. Despite all efforts by the Catholic Church to repress the instinct of the flesh and vilify all sexual desires, those entertaining poets disregarded any of the potential objections and developed a vast panoply of situations in which love, sex, witticism, criticism of traditional power structures, and encrusted gender roles are addressed and powerfully presented in hilarious fashion. Many times, the narrative focus is directed toward the lower classes, the life in a village, or in a city, and the interest in sexual relationships, both legitimate and illegitimate, proves to be dominant.

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The butt of the joke tends to be the village priest or other clerics, although they sometimes also succeed in turning the table and enjoy sexual pleasures despite their vow of chastity (Burrows). It all depends on the protagonist's wit and smartness, which increasingly counts the most in the late Middle Ages (Kiesow 111-15). Little wonder that food also often enters the picture, serving the purpose to express some sexual desire or to explain a sexual situation, as Sarah Gordon has illustrated recently.

As the poets of the *fabliaux* make abundantly clear, human life is deeply determined by desires, by strong physical needs, and by longing for fulfillment, both physical and spiritual. No external pressure, relying on moral, theological, political, or economic forces, can actually repress them entirely (Lidman, et al). In this regard, the critical examination of medieval narratives makes it possible for us to gain powerful lenses through which we can study basic human conditions, both in the past and also in the present, insofar as our own enjoyment of the *fabliaux* mirrors fundamental structures and frameworks of all people throughout time (Baldwin; Eisenbichler and Murray; Lochrie, et al.; Classen, *Discourses on Love, Marriage, and Transgression*; Berry and Hayton). Sex sells, and has always sold well, both in Roman antiquity and in the Middle Ages, and we are not far away from that situation either, as many historians and scholars in the field of Social Studies have confirmed (Salisbury; Erlach, et al; Bullough and Brundage; Karras; Harper and Proctor.; Classen, *Sexuality in the Middle Ages*; Simons). This is not to say that medieval people were the same as we are today, especially in the West, but the existence of the *fabliaux* with their more than direct focus on sexuality in its myriad of manifestations, underscores how much we still can understand what medieval poets laughed about and how they felt about the human body (Buschinger).

The corpus of *fabliaux* is expansive, and I can only choose a short selection with which to illustrate the central points of the present paper. I will primarily maintain that the theme of sex was widespread in medieval literature, perhaps much more than in the early modern era; furthermore, many of the *fabliaux* authors intended to formulate much more than superficial sexual aspects. Finally, as much as the *fabliaux* prove to be the catalyst for much laughter, they usually aim at much loftier goals, analyzing and criticizing their society not only for moral and ethical, but also for intellectual and political, shortcomings and failures.

Let us begin with a brief discussion of Eustache d'Amiens's "The Butcher of Abbeville" (early thirteenth century), where all the basic ingredients characteristic of *fabliaux* are assembled (Benson and Andersson; Dubin 530-63 and web; Noomen). The focus rests on a butcher, Master David, who does not find any good animals at the market and returns home

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without having spent his money. However, on the way back to his village he needs to find a place to stay for the night, which turns out to be difficult, especially because the village priest refuses to help him since he regards the stranger as a churl not worthy of his own abode. The deeply irritated butcher leaves and soon comes across the priest's herd of sheep, from which he steels the best animal. He returns to the priest's house and offers him the animal for their dinner, which changes the situation entirely since the priest is greedy. The two men then enjoy the evening together before they all go to bed, the priest joining his own concubine. As Rachel D. Gibson has pointed out, the spatial configuration matters significantly here insofar as the social roles are negotiated clearly according to the protagonists' position inside and outside of the priest's house, which proves to be rather characteristic of the entire genre and other types of medieval literature (Gibson).

Even though the priest had encouraged his maid to entertain the guest, at first she objects to the butcher's invitation, until he offers her the valuable sheepskin as a reward. Subsequently the two engage in love-making all night long, but the butcher does not seem to have exhausted his sexual needs even once the morning has arrived. While the young woman at that point departs from him to look after her work, he steps into the priest's bedroom where he finds the concubine all by herself, while the priest is reading mass in the church. The butcher quickly convinces the woman to sleep with him as well, for which he likewise promises her the sheepskin. After their love-making, he gets up and leaves the house, visiting the priest in the church, to whom he offers the sheepskin for sale, which the priest cannot resist.

The denouement begins when the shepherd arrives and reports the theft of the best of their sheep. At the same time the two women are quarreling over who owns the sheepskin, which the priest claims for himself because he has paid for it. Ultimately, they all have to realize that they were fooled by the butcher who was smarter than all of them and got the best for himself. If the priest had not been so haughty and refused him a place to stay for the night, Master David would not have stolen the sheep. He still might have slept with the maid, but the next sexual adventure with the concubine seems directly aimed at hurting the priest. The latter woman is foolish enough not to see through the operation, although she is afraid of losing the priest's favors if he were to find out that she cheated on him. Altogether, the two women and the priest end up having been deceived badly. While they all lament their losses, the butcher is no longer to be seen, and the aristocratic audience, specifically addressed to reach a judgment, is indirectly invited to laugh about this smart character and the ignorant priest.

The entire night is filled with love-making, the butcher with the maid,

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the priest with his concubine, and then, finally, the butcher also with the concubine. Master David proves to be difficult to satisfy in his sexual appetite, while the two women easily accept his invitations and offers, immediately ready to barter their bodies for the pelt. The priest is the one who turns out to be both a contemptible and arrogant character who loses his sheep, who happily pays for his own pelt when the butcher offers it to him, and who has to realize finally that the guest has slept both with his own maid and with his mistress, cuckolding him deftly. By contrast, the butcher demonstrates his superior wit and intelligence since he takes his revenge with the priest in multiple stages and enjoys his night and also the early morning by taking advantage of everything the priest owns. The latter should not have rejected the stranger in the first instance; he should not have commanded the maid to offer herself for sexual pleasures to the guest; he himself should not have a concubine in the first place, and he should have been more circumspect when the stranger offered him the pelt at such a low price. There is much anti-clericalism contained in the story, but also much enjoyment of telling sexual fantasies. The narrator does not go into all the physical details, but the audience can easily imagine what is going on in the various bedrooms.

Undoubtedly, this *fabliau* appeals to the audience's prurient instincts, but we would misread it if we ignored the many hidden messages and undertones addressing a variety of issues. First, the butcher emerges as a highly circumspect, rational, and pragmatic person who knows how to look out for his own interest and takes advantage of the gullibility of his social environment. The maid is easily convinced to grant her sexual favors to him in return for the pelt, which she does not receive after all. The concubine is equally driven by greed and loses out badly because she does not gain the pelt either and has exposed herself to the priest as being nothing but a prostitute. The priest reveals his evil character and ignorance, first turning away the stranger despite his desperate need for accommodation in the village, then accepting him once there is the offer of the sheep. For himself, it is not unusual to spend the night with his mistress before reading mass the next morning, where he subsequently strikes the deal with the butcher to purchase his own pelt. By contrast, the poet Eustach calls the butcher a man of honor: "But wise, courteous, and of good qualities" (10), who is neither avaricious [n]or covetous" (14), always ready to help poor neighbors in need. He was ready to pay for the night at the priest's house, but the latter was too contemptuous of lay people to grant this, or he might not have believed that the stranger would pay him enough for the accommodation. But when the butcher returned with the fat sheep, the priest has no concerns whatsoever and happily invites him in, looking forward to a splendid dinner free of charge.

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In short, while on the surface the focus might rest on the various sexual episodes, in reality, behind all the laughter, Eustache develops intriguing criticism of the priest and the women in his household, giving high praise to the worthy and intelligent butcher who knows how to make the best out of every situation and how to enjoy life to the fullest. This *fabliau* is not only simple entertainment predicated on sexuality; it is also a little literary masterpiece that reflects on the rise of rationality as the guiding principle in life, on the growing importance of money in all human relationships (Kiesow 91-105), and on the commodification of sex, not to mention the important theme of anti-clericalism. The verse narrative also concludes with the cleverly formulated question that asks the audience who among the three individuals, the maid, the concubine, or the priest, should have the pelt ultimately (584), whereas the critical issue really would be how to evaluate their morality and ethical standards.

In the *fabliau* “The Priest Who Peeked” (or “The Peekaboo Priest”) by the early thirteenth-century poet Guèrin, we encounter the opposite perspective, with the priest being the clever trickster who knows how to satisfy his sexual appetite with a peasant’s wife, who loves him as well (Benson and Andersson, 269-73; Dubin 490-97). Whereas in the previous tale the sexual encounters always took place in secrecy, here the priest takes the bold step to sleep with the woman virtually in front of her husband, who is made to believe that this is not actually happening. The priest comes for a visit with the peasant, who is having dinner with his wife. Both the wife and the priest have already developed a love relationship, yet since the husband is home, the priest must come up with an ingenious plot to remove the opponent and gain access to his wife. The priest pretends that when he is looking through a hole in the door he sees the two making love with each other. The peasant does not want to believe that this illusion takes place, so he switches their position. The priest immediately locks the door from the inside and proceeds to make love with the wife, but he pretends to the peasant on the outside that what he has perceived through the hole is nothing but a visual confusion in his mind, just as it was his own case before. The entire account is predicated on vision, illusion, and the power of the word to deceive the innocent victim whom the priest deftly cuckolded by means of his clever strategy.

This *fabliau* operates on several levels and invites the audience to participate in multiple ways in the priest’s deceptive strategy. First, we are told that the peasant’s wife loves him and enjoys sexual encounters with him. Then the priest visits the farmer’s house and finds it locked, with the couple inside, himself on the outside. However, by means of a hole or crack in the door he can look inside and observe them eating. By claiming that they are making love, he triggers the audience’s attention, and also makes the peasant



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curious about this strange claim because he knows that the opposite is the case. Yet, the priest claims higher authority and reprimands the couple for engaging in sex which he can observe with his own eye, although they do it in the privacy of their home. The issue focuses on the clash between the priest's claim and actual reality, which makes the peasant doubt his own ability to understand what is going on in his life. This proves to be the key in the priest's strategy because the two men then exchange positions, allowing the priest access to his mistress with whom he immediately begins to engage in sex. The poor peasant is entirely confused and upset, seeing what is actually happening in front of his eyes. He sees how the priest lifts his wife's dress, exposing her behind, and how he begins with the love-making. All this could be very upsetting for the peasant, if he were not convinced by the priest that this is all a delusion because of the hole in the door.

While the enjoyment of sexuality stands in the foreground, in reality the poet experimented with the new understanding of optics and perception that had grown since the twelfth century (Crisp; Lindberg; Stewart; Conklin Akbari). But the entire story is also predicated on voyeurism, inviting the audience to look through the hole together with the priest and then the peasant (Spearing; Lindemann Summers). Moreover, the perspective is shifting, with the priest only pretending to see what is happening on the inside in order to trick the peasant, while the latter truly sees what the priest is doing with his wife and yet is convinced that he is suffering from an illusion. Truth is at stake, in other words, along with the manipulation of reality at the hand of the priest who deceives the other man in order to enjoy sex with his wife.

In the anonymous "The Miller and the Two Clerks" (also from the thirteenth century), which was to become the basis for Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale" in his *Canterbury Tales*, two young clerks (students) enjoy sexual pleasures with the two women in their host's house. The story is simple enough to deceive us as to its full message because of the strong sexual theme that dominates the narrative front (Benson and Anderson 101-15). The two clerks lead a poor life, then try to find a solution through borrowing wheat that the miller steals from them. At least he allows them to stay in his house for the night, during which the two young men manage to get their revenge. One of them sleeps with the miller's daughter, the other with his wife, and at the end a big fight breaks out when the truth is about to be revealed. While the first part is mostly concerned with the clerks' economically dire situation and the theft of their wheat and mare, the second part plays with sexuality in a very explicit fashion. However, the clerks do not learn about the evil deed by the miller and his wife, and only spend a pleasant night in his house, getting the better of him, after all, even if this does not fundamentally solve

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their economic problems.

One clerk easily convinces the maid to sleep with him in return for an allegedly golden ring that would restore all virtues, even to a whore. That is a deception, and yet the young woman falls for it and greatly enjoys her time with the clerk. We learn at the end that he slept with her seven times, and yet she does not seem to be satisfied, so the clerk encourages his friend to go and to take his share. However, he is not saying this to his friend, as he assumes, but to the miller, who has mistakenly lied down in bed next to him assuming that it was his wife. The other clerk had heavily toiled all night with the miller's wife, who also had been tricked because the man had moved the cradle with the baby to his own bed, which confused her. Once she had returned from relieving herself, she becomes mistaken, which makes it possible for the clerk to make love to her repeatedly, and this to her great amazement, still believing that it was her husband.

Sex fully stands in the foreground, and we are invited to laugh with the two clerks about this ultimately enjoyable situation for them. Since they are two, they can beat up the miller when the truth dawns upon him. Moreover, the wife, whom he had called a whore for lying in bed with one of the clerks, suddenly reveals his theft, and the two clerks run away with their retrieved possessions, find another miller, get flour from their wheat, bake bread, and sell it to their own benefit. Although this *fabliau* sets out discussing their poverty, it concludes with remarks on their new economic success. The transformation of their destiny sets in when they are allowed to stay with the miller overnight, and thus find all the sexual pleasure they could imagine. Without these pleasures, they would not have learned the truth about the miller and would have had to leave without their stolen goods.

We also learn much about the miller, his wife, and daughter, all of whom prove to be gullible, unethical, and immoral. The maid, for instance, though safely locked in her room, lets the clerk have the key because of his promise to grant her a valuable ring as a reward, although it is nothing but a heavy metal ring that he had taken from the fireplace. The miller's wife closely collaborated with her husband in stealing the wheat and the mare, but she also seems to have been sexually frustrated insofar as she is greatly amazed about her 'husband's' sexual prowess all of a sudden. When the miller discovers that she has slept with the clerk, he accuses her of being a whore, although she defends herself energetically, knowing how to control her husband. The miller, in turn, is a mean-spirited thief, though he at least lets the clerks stay in his house during the night.

The two clerks are members of the church (deacons), and yet they operate in very pragmatic and realistic terms, looking out for their own economic well-being as well as their sexual pleasures. They do not, however,

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try to avenge the theft because they do not know the true culprit. However, they still manage to get even with the miller by way of sexual contacts with his daughter and his own wife. Moreover, the two clerks badly beat him up when the truth comes out and make a getaway with their stolen possessions at the critical moment of denouement. The misogyny is obvious, but the criticism against the greedy miller and his wife who steal even from the poor clerks, cannot be overlooked as a much more dominant theme. The laughter in this story is based on the two young men's ability to fool the women and to get even with the miller. Sexuality and economic concerns intriguingly combine in this *fabliau*, as is actually commonly the case in this genre. Sexual joys are the reward for cunning, intelligence, witticism, and boldness.

My last example, "The Priest and the Lady," also from the thirteenth century, confirms those findings, highlighting intriguingly how much the references to sexuality serve alternative purposes (Benson and Andersson 329-37; Dubin 502-13). Here, a merchant's wife invites the priest to come see her during her husband's absence, and they are just about to enjoy their meal and to take a bath together, both preparations for sexual intercourse common to this genre, when the merchant suddenly returns. The priest at first is hiding in a wicker basket, but when he tumbles down and is exposed, he unabashedly gets up and pretends that he had only returned the basket which the lady had loaned him. The three then sit down to dinner, and the merchant is made to drink too much, which allows the priest to fool him after all. He claims that he can carry three people and bets a goose in return if he wins. In order to deliver his proof, he makes the merchant lie down on the floor, then he places the maid upon him, and finally the wife. He lifts her dress and engages in sex with her, which the poet describes most drastically: "And he entered between her thighs. / Through the little opening he entered the belly; / There he put his own special ferret; It would be straight to the stew-pot / For the poor little hare that this ferret chased. / It is very tricky to chase such a hare" (134-39). The husband feels all the pushing and banging, and assumes that the priest is trying very hard to lift up the three bodies, and yet fails in that. When the priest promises to deliver the goose the next day since he lost his wager, the husband emphasizes that he himself had to suffer badly and deserves that reward: "I have carried a heavy burden" (165).

At first sight, the priest slept only with the wife, but he had both the maid and the husband underneath him. Little wonder that he therefore comments: "My balls are all sweaty / From the labor and the effort" (155-56). Because of his intelligence he fully succeeds in his desire to have carnal knowledge with the wife, and the narrator appropriately remarks at the end: "It is a matter of buying and selling" (169). Although the last stanza concludes with general praise of women's cunning and trickery, the poet highlights the

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priest's intelligence and presence of mind, insofar as he knows exceedingly well how to turn any situation to his advantage. The lady also profits from his superior strategy to outwit and cuckold the husband, but it is really the priest's amazing operation that wins the day. At the same time, the audience is strongly entertained through the titillating description of the sexual act, which does not simply take place in the privacy of the lady's bedroom, but in full view in the dining room, with the merchant and the maid right below the couple, both apparently not comprehending what is going on above their own bodies.

As virtually always in the case of *fabliaux*, we are strongly encouraged to read the narrative from various perspectives and to comprehend its meaning/s on several levels. On the one hand there is the trope of the lecherous priest and the lustful wife who wants to cuckold her husband. On the other, there is the quick-witted priest who easily finds a convincing explanation for his presence in the merchant's house. Moreover, the poet deftly plays with sexual imagery, and goes into minuscule details, which could even be called pornographic: "It is very tricky to chase such a hare; / It would be easier to catch two rabbits, / For this hare is so clever / That it could put on a good front / If it had a ferret in its nest" (139-43). Undoubtedly, the metaphor of the ferret chasing the hare speaks about the sexual act, but ultimately, the narrator really aimed at an economic principle of buying and selling in a balanced fashion (169). Sexuality thus transforms into a commodity which can be purchased if the suitor commands enough witticism and intelligence.

Altogether, as we have learned from our four representative examples, the poets of the *fabliaux* explicitly aimed at sexuality, but they do not end there, although previous scholarship has tended to see it that way (Bloch 11). Instead, the sexual encounters regularly profile a variety of other, only thinly veiled concerns, such as how to approach this world rationally, how to operate successfully by means of rhetoric and intelligent strategizing, and how to perceive reality or to make others get confused through illusion. As much as the poets of the *fabliaux* intend to make audiences laugh about the sexual themes presented here, this laughter serves as the catalyst for the critical examination of this new world of the thirteenth century where economic principles, rationality, monetary interests, and simply physical desires matter much more centrally than in the world of the Arthurian courts. Insofar as the *fabliaux* pull away the metaphorical curtain from the sexual act, they allow the audience to break out in laughter and then to start thinking anew about the critical approach to reality. The sexual references are never just self-serving, but serve as catalysts to recognize how much economic conditions determine gender relations, how much new forms of optical perceptions determine even ordinary epistemology, and how much rationality, wit, strategizing, and cunning

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had gained in priority in common relations among people. Laughter about sexual jokes has always been a common theme throughout time, and here we observe how much the *fabliaux* poets—by way of often rather excessive, if not pornographic, sexual allusions—allow us to see the many shortcomings of late medieval society and the profound changes in that world.

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