

*Cognitive orientations in the fabliaux:  
contribution to a study of the audience of  
thirteenth-century French literature*

Article

Published Version

Akerhurst, F. R. P. (1983) Cognitive orientations in the fabliaux: contribution to a study of the audience of thirteenth-century French literature. Reading Medieval Studies, IX. pp. 45-55. ISSN 0950-3129 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/85051/>

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Publisher: University of Reading

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Cognitive Orientations in the Fabliaux: Contribution to  
a Study of the Audience of Thirteenth-Century French Literature

The status of the fabliau in the corpus of the French literature of the Middle Ages has long been a subject of debate. Various theories have been proposed concerning the origin of these stories and scholars have suggested different solutions to the problem of determining the social class of authors and audience. The most celebrated of these identifications are those of Bédier,<sup>1</sup> for whom both producers and consumers were to be identified as the rising class of the bourgeoisie, and of Nykrog,<sup>2</sup> who identifies the fabliau as a courtly genre, written for and mostly appreciated by the aristocracy.

One of Nykrog's arguments in support of his identification of the aristocracy as the consumer of the fabliau is the attitude of the tales towards society: 'Le milieu social auquel appartient un public se manifeste dans le point de vue sur la société adopté dans les contes qui lui sont destinés'.<sup>3</sup> However, Nykrog seeks confirmation of this principle mainly in the success or failure of lovers of different classes: successful lovers are either nobles or clerks, whereas priests outwit husbands, by Nykrog's count, only five times out of twenty-two attempts in the fabliaux. (Nykrog, p.110.) The point of view of the authors in describing men's success in situations not involving disputes over women is seen by Nykrog as similar to that demonstrated in situations where seduction is involved. All this depends however on Nykrog's view that the audience wanted to see the success of persons of the class it approved of and the failure of persons of the other classes. The applicability of this criterion is somewhat attenuated by Nykrog's admission that in the fabliaux a person's class is not absolutely fixed, especially in the case of the bourgeois, whose personal attitudes and occupations can make him sympathetic or odious, akin more to the nobility or to the peasantry. While one may agree with Nykrog that the audience may be identified by the attitude of the stories (the attitude adopted by the conteur), one may find his demonstration unsatisfying, either because of its premise that the audience could not tolerate the depiction of success in a class it disapproved of (or discomfiture in a class it approved), or because of its examination of only the male protagonists, and that mainly in the 'love-triangle' situation.

Recent research on style in medieval texts has shown that an author's use of the most frequently occurring words, such as articles and conjunctions, may be idiosyncratic, unconscious and very hard to disguise or counterfeit.<sup>4</sup> The same might be true with respect to a person's attitudes about society. Recent research in anthropology has revealed that certain beliefs underlie behaviour and that these beliefs, while the individuals of a society might be quite unable to formulate them, nevertheless inform the way they all act and judge the actions of others. In the same way, speakers of a language are

often unable to formulate correctly the rules of their language, but nevertheless they obey the rules and immediately detect a breach of them. These attitudes of members of a society have been called the 'cognitive orientation' of the society.<sup>5</sup> Whereas an author might be able to write deliberately one story favourable to the bourgeoisie and another favourable to the nobility, it would be harder for him to write a story which contradicted a cognitive orientation which he accepted without knowing it. The detection of such a 'basic assumption' or 'implicit premise'<sup>6</sup> in the fabliaux would thus be a better indication of their audience. Let us begin the analysis with an example.

Fabliau X in the Montaiglon and Raynaud collection is called De Brunain la vache au prestre.<sup>7</sup> It tells the story of a peasant couple who hear a sermon in which a priest says that God will return double what is given to him. The couple give the priest their cow, Blerain, in the hope of receiving two from God. The priest, who is an acquisitive fellow, accepts the cow and wishes that all his parishioners would follow this example, for then he would have many animals (s'averioie plenté de bestes, v.36). The priest attaches the cow to his own cow, Brunain. Blerain however, with some difficulty, makes her way home, dragging the priest's cow with her. And so the peasants have indeed received back double what they risked. The story takes only 63 lines to tell but the moral continues for another nine lines:

Par exemple dist cis fabliaus  
 Que fols est qui ne s'abandone;  
 Cil a li bien cui Diex le done,  
 Non cil qui le muce et enfuet;  
 Nus hom mouteplier ne puet  
 Sanz grant éur, c'est or del mains.  
 Par grant éur ot li vilains  
 .II. vaches, et li prestres nule.  
 Tels cuide avancier qui recule. (vv.64-72)

The last line refers to the priest who had rejoiced at having an extra cow, but who lost even his own at the end of the story.

The attitude of the peasants in this story would seem to suggest that they believe that the only way to acquire riches is to risk even that which they have; they do not seem to think they can improve their lot any other way, by working harder, for example. The solution found by the peasants to the problem of acquiring wealth is quite different from that of the two poor clerks in Le Meunier et les .II. clerks' (CXIX), who borrow a horse and some grain in order to go into business as bakers; and different again from the attitude of the two starving brothers in Estula (XCVI), who steal their neighbour's sheep and cabbages. Whereas elsewhere in the fabliaux gambling, especially

at dice, is seen as the cause of speedy ruin,<sup>8</sup> in *Brunain* the deliberate risk is seen as wisdom and is indeed rewarded. Now this cognitive orientation or belief that honest riches can only be obtained by luck is one that characterises peasant societies, even in today's world.

The locus classicus for a discussion of a belief in luck is George M. Foster's 'Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good'.<sup>9</sup> It is true that Foster bases his conclusions on the observation of a twentieth-century agricultural peasant economy in Mexico but it is an economy which resembles that found in French villages in the Middle Ages. In a peasant economy, according to Foster, riches cannot be obtained by agricultural labour, and hard work ensures only subsistence. This is because societal forces tend to maintain an even distribution of wealth so that everyone has a fair share. But a 'fair share' only has meaning if it implies that if one member of the economy has more than his share of a fixed quantity of anything, then it is because another is deprived, and vice versa. The notion that land and wealth and other things are limited is called by Foster the 'Image of Limited Good' which he defines as follows:

By 'Image of Limited Good' I mean that broad areas of peasant behavior are patterned in such fashion as to suggest that peasants view their social, economic, and natural universes - their total environment - as one in which all of the desired things in life such as land, wealth, health, friendship and love, manliness and honor, respect and status, power and influence, security and safety, exist in finite quantity and are always in short supply, as far as the peasant is concerned. Not only do these and all other 'good things' exist in finite and limited quantities, but in addition there is no way directly within peasant power to increase the available quantities ... There is a primary corollary to the Image of Limited Good: if 'Good' exists in limited amounts which cannot be expanded, and if the system is closed, it follows that an individual or a family can improve a position only at the expense of others. [Foster's italics] (pp.296-97).

Foster goes on to point out that the only socially acceptable way for an individual to acquire more 'good' than he had before is through the action of luck and fate, such as the discovery of hidden treasure (or more recently by the winning of the state lottery) perhaps as a result of a pact with the Devil. In a closed society which believes (perhaps with good reason) in the limited nature of all commodities, treasure tales, says Foster 'are but one expression of a wider view that any kind of success and progress is due to fate, the favor of deities, to luck, but not to hard work, energy, and thrift'

(p. 307). Clearly the story of the priest's cow subscribes to this view, for 'The Image of Limited Good' underlies the moral given by the author (*Nus hom mouteplier ne puet / Sanz grant èur*, vv. 68-69) even though the events of the tale itself are treated with some irony (the peasant is the more willing to risk the cow because her yield is low: *Aussi rent-ele petit lait*, v. 17). Foster shows how the popularity of lotteries in poor countries can be explained by the belief in luck as the only socially acceptable way to acquire riches:

If fate is the only way in which success can be obtained, the prudent and thoughtful man is the one who seeks ways in which to maximize his luck-position. He looks for the places in which good fortune is most apt to strike, and tries to be there. ... The man who goes without lunch, and fails to buy shoes for his children in order to buy a weekly ticket, is not a ne'er-do-well. He is the Horatio Alger of his society who is doing what he feels is most likely to advance his position. He is, in modern parlance, buying a 'growth stock'. The odds are against him, but it is the only way he knows in which to work towards success. [Foster's italics] (p. 308).

In one sense the action of the priest in *De Brunain* is also seen in this light since his greed for riches (*plenté bestes*, v. 36) is punished by the loss of the one cow that he has. In a peasant economy one must not seem to have more than one's neighbour, or sanctions will be applied by society to preserve the equilibrium.

There are many peasants in the *fabliaux* and it may be asked whether they all subscribe to the 'Image of Limited Good'. In fact, it must be admitted that almost none of the vilains described in the Montaiglon and Raynaud collection do subscribe to this view. Some caution is necessary in making this assertion since those persons described as vilains in the *fabliaux* may well not be what Foster calls 'peasants'. At the beginning of the well-known *fabliau Du vilain mire* (LXXIV), we meet a vilain whose agricultural skills make his self-sufficient:

Jadis estoit uns vilains riches,  
Qui mout estoit avers et chiches;  
Une charrue adès avoit,  
Tos tens par lui la maintenoit  
D'une jument et d'un roncin;  
Assez ot char et pain et vin  
Et quanques mestier li estoit, ... (vv. 1-7)

This vilain is about to marry a demoiselle, daughter of a chevalier. After the wedding the vilain repents his marriage because he is afraid his wife will misbehave while he is away working (quant il ira à la charrue, v.47). A similar situation is found in La Chastelaine de Saint Gille, (XI), where a rich vilain is to be married to a young noblewoman and he sings in a refrain: L'avoirs done au vilain fille à chastelaine, (v.70). The wealth of this vilain is also derived from agricultural work: when the young lady has run off with her noble lover and the vilain has lost the money he gave her father, he does not despair:

Au laborer me covient prendre,  
Dist li vilains, sanz plus atendre,  
Et gaaignier novel avoir. (vv.231-232)

There are other examples of what could be called working men who manage to live comfortably. After having been a professional thief, in the story De Barat et de Haimet, (XCVII), a young man does well enough at an honest profession to have a side of bacon hanging from a noose in his own house and which his former associates come to steal. The hero of Du Boucher d'Abeville (LXXXIV) is actually described as Sages, cortois et vaillanz, (v.10) and has money to buy cattle at a neighbouring town fair, though he is not averse to stealing a sheep from a miserly priest who refuses to lodge him because he is a vilain, and afterwards selling the priest the sheep's skin which he also gives separately to the priest's serving girl and his mistress in return for their favours.

For certain lower-class characters in the fabliaux, then, a way to obtain riches, or at least to escape poverty, is hard work, even at agricultural work such as ploughing. The doctrine is actually put into words by the salt-merchant in De fole larguece (CXLVI), who drags his spendthrift wife up at the crack of dawn to pass another exhausting day hauling salt from the coast:

Bele suer, on doit avoir peine  
Pour avoir en cest siecle avoir,  
Car avoires fait souvent avoir  
Ricesse, joie et signourie  
Que povretes ne feroit mie. (vv.324-328)

If a belief in Limited Good, in the impossibility of doing more than assuring subsistence through agricultural labour and in luck or fate as the only way to obtain riches are characteristic of peasant cognitive orientations, then it must be admitted that the only peasants in the fabliaux are the one who make a pact with the Devil in Du vilain qui donna son ame au diable, (CXLI), and the two vilains in De Brunain la vache au prestre, (X), and that

the irony used by the author of this latter tale suggests that he hardly shares the views of his characters. This fabliau is, moreover, one of the earliest of the extant corpus and perhaps reflects an orientation of the previous century (Nykrog, pp. 165-167).

If the cognitive orientation of authors and audiences is not that of peasant societies, what then is their underlying belief about the nature of their society? The other two classes of lay society are the bourgeoisie and the nobility.

For many characters in the fabliaux a living and even riches are to be obtained in an urban setting. There are many examples of the relatively comfortable life in the towns. In C'est de la Houce, (XXX), a certain comfort in the town of Poitiers is evoked; and in another version of the same tale, La Houce partie, (V), a man becomes rich in Paris by commerce:

Ainsi fu li pseudom mananz  
 Dedenz Paris plus de sept anz,  
 Et achatoit et revendoit  
 Les denrées qu'il connoissoit.  
 Tant se bareta d'un et d'el  
 Que toz jors sauva son chatel,  
 Et ot assez de remanant. (vv. 55-61)

In Des trois boçus, (II), there is living in a town a boçu, who is very ugly and who has become the richest man in town:

Toute sa vie fu entais  
 A grant avoir amonceler;  
 Por voir vous puis dire et conter,  
 Trop estoit riches durement,  
 Se li aventure ne ment.  
 En la vile n'ot si riche homme ... (vv. 40-45)

In a more casual way the business occupations of certain husbands keep them away from home and allow their wives to dally with their lovers. Thus, in De l'enfant qui fu remis au soleil, (XIV), a merchant who has been away for two years comes home to find his wife and a very small child (she explains that she conceived by swallowing a snowflake). The other explanations which could have accounted for the husband's absence, such as a crusade or a pilgrimage, are thus rejected in favour of a commercial one. In De la borgoise d'Orliens, (VIII), a husband who is suspicious of his wife deceives her into thinking him absent by this ruse:

'Dame, fet-il, il me covient  
 Aler en ma marchéandie;  
 Gardez l'ostel, ma chière amie,  
 Si com preude fame doit fère;  
 Je ne sai rien de mon repère. (vv.52-56)

The economy of the fabliaux is not closed, for merchants travel abroad, and if we are to believe Le Dit des marcheans, (XXXVIII), which hardly seems a real fabliau, these traders lead a dangerous life and are very specialised already. As Nykrog has pointed out, the bourgeois may be a merchant or a changeor and, 's'il exerce des professions de ce genre, et surtout s'il s'adonne à l'importation des objets de luxe, il jouit de la pleine faveur de nos conteurs, ...' (Nykrog, p.125). The system is thus emphatically not a closed, peasant economy. The merchant operates by transporting goods from one place to another in France, as in De Fole larguece, (CXLVI), by seeking goods abroad, as in De l'enfant qui fu remis au soleil, (XIV), and by buying and selling, as in La Houce partie, (V). The increase of riches produced by this opening of society is remarked on by one author in De Grognnet et de Petit, (CVI), amid his lamentations about the 'bon vieux temps':

Dou siecle qui peu est courtois  
 Nous faist Girbers .i. serventois,  
 Car il se complaint en ces vers  
 Dou siecle qui tant est dyvers,  
 Avers, envieus et repoins.  
 Nequedent jadis fu .i. poins  
 Qu'il valoit miex que ors ne fait  
 En diz, em paroles, em fait:  
 Ce tesmoignent li ancien.  
Neporquant c'est il plus de bien  
Qu'il ne fu onques à nul tans, ... (vv.1-11)

If this new wealth is not equally distributed it is because some still have more than their share - complaints about misers increase during the thirteenth century - but the acquisition of wealth is not proscribed. In La Houce partie, (V), a man who is perhaps a nobleman is forced to leave Abbeville and come to be a merchant in Paris:

Se departi fors de sa vile,  
 Il et sa fame et uns siens fils.  
 Riches et combles et garnis  
 Issi com preudom de sa terre,  
 Por ce que il estoit de guerre  
 Vers plus fors genz que il n'estoit; ... (vv.26-31)

The uncertain social status of this man (does he leave sa vile or sa terre and is de guerre to be taken literally or figuratively?) reveals that it is not normal for a nobleman to go into business and that such a course could only be hinted at in the fabliaux.

The financial status of the nobility in the fabliaux is indeed the same as it is in the courtly romance. A nobleman can acquire riches only by winning a war, as in D'une seule fame qui a son con servoit .c. chevaliers de tous points, (XXVI), or a tournament, as the brothers in La Houce partie, (V), hoped to do, impoverishing themselves in the process:

Ce nous raconte li escris  
 Seignor, or avoit el païs  
 .III. chevaliers qui erent frère,  
 Qui erent de père et de mère  
 Moult hautement emparenté  
 D'armes proisié et alosé,  
 Mès n'avoient point d'eritage  
 Que tout n'eüssent mis en gage  
 Terres et bois et tenemenz  
 Por suirre les tornoiemenz. (vv.103-112)

The tournament, as a matter of fact, is seen in the fabliaux as a way to lose riches rather than gain them.<sup>10</sup> The way for an impoverished noble family to regain wealth is only by means of marriage. The chevaliers in La Houce partie, (V), understand this very well, and their first questions to a prospective father-in-law for their daughter/niece are about his wealth:

Li chevalier li ont enquis  
 De son mueble, de son avoir,  
 Combien il en pooit avoir, ... (vv.132-4)

It is even possible for a vilain to marry the daughter of a nobleman, if the vilain is sufficiently rich and the nobleman sufficiently poor, as in La Chastelaine de Saint Gille, (XI) and Du vilain mire, (LXXIV), although these marriages present problems. The finding of a husband for a poor noblewoman is seen to be a problem in the fabliaux, just as it had been in the romance of the twelfth century, such as Erec et Enide.

The cognitive orientation of the fabliaux would seem therefore to be this: that the economy is open, and the quantity of goods available is seen as adequate rather than limited,<sup>11</sup> but yet that the pursuit of riches by the nobility is restricted to participation in the noble sports of war and the tournament and the contracting of favourable marriages, while for the bourgeoisie

riches may be honestly obtained by means of commerce and trade.

One item seems to be in especially ample supply at all levels of society in the *fabliaux*: sex. Even here however there are some limitations. Both men and women seem to be ready for sex at any opportunity but whereas the women never tire and indeed seem to be insatiable, the men are sometimes exhausted or even impotent. In *D'une seule feme qui a son con servoit .c. chevaliers en tous points*, (XXVI), two women between them serve, improbably, the sexual needs of a garrison of one hundred men. When one of the women is killed, the other takes on the whole responsibility and manages quite well:

Tant fist qu'aussi bien les servoit  
Com lors quant deuz en y avoit,  
Ne ne se vont aparcevant  
De desfault nul ne que devant. (vv.181-4)

In two *fabliaux* sexual activity between husband and wife is referred to by a metaphor: in *C'est de la dame qui aveine demandoit pour Morel sa provende avoir*, (XXIX), a wife is requested by her husband to ask for *se jolif mestier amoureux* (v.77) by saying: *Faites Moriax ait de l'aveinne* (v.79). In *De porcelet*, (CI), the metaphor is of a pig:

'... Sire,' fait ele, 'or ne vos griet  
Que porcelez voldra mangier:  
Ne li faites mie dongier  
De vostre fromant qui est boens.' (vv.28-31)

In both cases the metaphor allows the writer to suggest female insatiability and the husband's inability to satisfy his wife's hunger. In XXIX this is expressed as 'l'aveinne est fallie' (v.305) and in CI the author says: *trestoz li fromans failli* (v.35). In *Le Sentier battu*, (LXXXV), a courtly game resembling Truth or Consequences permits a young lady to imply that a *chevalier* is impotent, while he in return is able to suggest that she is promiscuous. Here, as in the animal-feed metaphors, the joke permits the author to speak of something that society does not normally discuss. A woman's sexual capabilities, which are seen as unlimited, also allow her to earn money and even become rich. Thus, an impoverished couple can still receive offers (from priests) for the wife's favours, and the offers are quite high: more than eighty livres in *D'Estormi*, (XIX), and more than a hundred livres in *Du Segretain*, (CXXIII). It is only exceptionally that a man can earn his living this way, as in *Du foteur*, (XXVIII).

The conclusion that little is to be gained in a situation of limited good (male sexuality) but that even riches can be obtained in a situation where good is unlimited (female sexuality) is in keeping with the general cognitive

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orientation already detected in the fabliaux.

It remains to be seen whether this cognitive orientation is that of the bourgeoisie or that of the nobility. At first sight it would seem that the points of view outlined above concerning the enrichment of the bourgeoisie and of the nobility are acceptable to both classes. However, there is another body of literature which is the domain of the aristocracy alone, which was developed before the earliest fabliaux we have, and which shows a very different orientation. I refer of course to courtly literature. The cognitive orientation of the courtly lyric of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is clearly that of Limited Good. The Good in the lyric corpus is so limited that it can belong to only one person, for it is a lady's love, which is not supposed to be shared by several. If one man has it, he thereby deprives all others. Furthermore, although the lover does strive to deserve the lady's love and indeed tries to convince her that he is worthy of it, he admits that he is unlikely to succeed in obtaining it. Like the poor man described by Foster who spends his money on a long-shot bet, the purchase of a lottery ticket, the courtly lover puts himself in a position where luck can favour him. He can hardly hope to win the love of the superior lady, but what little hope there is makes it worth while to try: the rewards are infinitely great and no lesser recompense is acceptable. As Foster says: 'The odds are against him, but it is the only way he knows in which to work towards success' (p. 308). The goddess Amor plays an intermediary role: she controls the outcome of the love-request, much as the goddess Fortune in later centuries is seen to control all aspects of life: a supernatural intervention is the only chance for success.

If courtly literature does express the cognitive orientation of the nobility, it is clear that the fabliaux were not written for this class. The latter stories reflect much more the perceptions and beliefs of the bourgeoisie. If indeed they were appreciated by the nobility, it was because the nobles were gradually adopting the cognitive orientation of the new class of society which would eventually replace them.

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### NOTES

1. J. Bédier, Les Fabliaux: Etudes de littérature populaire et d'histoire littéraire du moyen âge, Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Etudes, fasc. 98, Paris 1893.
2. P. Nykrog, Les Fabliaux, Publications Romanes et Françaises CXXIII, Geneva 1957. (Nykrog.)
3. Nykrog, p.105. All subsequent references to this work will be made in the text.
4. J.R. Allen, 'Methods of Author Identification through Stylistic Analysis', French Review, 47, 1974, 904-16.
5. G.M. Foster, 'Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good', American Anthropologist, 67, 1965, 293. (Foster.)
6. These synonyms for 'cognitive orientation' along with 'cognitive view', 'world view', 'world view perspective' and 'ethos' are given by Foster, 294.
7. A. de Montaiglon and G. Raynaud [the latter collaborated for volumes II-VI only], Recueil général et complet des fabliaux des XIIIe et XIVe siècles, 6 vols., Paris 1872-90. Further references to the fabliaux in this edition will be given by citing the title and the number of the fabliau.
8. For example in the Dit des marcheans, (XXXVII), vv.159-160, and in D'Estormi, (XIX), vv.284-287.
9. See note 5. Further references to this article will be made in the text.
10. See Du prestre et du chevalier, (XXXIV), vv.5-15.
11. The term 'adequate good' has been used by R.W. Benjamin in his article: 'Cognitive Orientations and the Impact of Scarcity on Politics', Social Science Quarterly, 57, 1976, 402.