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Fabliaux and the Question of Genre*

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Generic questions are of capital importance for the medievalist, not least because our own notion of 'genre' is a post-medieval invention¹ – a fact that should make us look with some skepticism upon the generic pronouncements made either by medieval authors or by critics. Zumthor, among others, expresses considerable distrust of the very term 'genre', although at times he follows tradition and uses it for the sake of convenience.² It is true that any generic grouping inevitably entails some degree of distortion, as it emphasizes similarities among texts while blunting differences. To circumvent that difficulty we might in theory try to reject all groupings of works and simply speak of texts – individually. The advantage of such an approach would however be short-lived, since writers, readers and critics, who obviously need to categorize and compare works, would surely replace one set of labels by another.

Whenever we deal with a text that does not coincide with our understanding of a particular genre, we inevitably react in one of two ways: we either exclude the text from the genre or we broaden the boundaries of the genre. The latter phenomenon, especially, is quite common for modern literature, from the eighteenth century to the present. Such works as *Tristram Shandy*, *Finnegans Wake*, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, or the *nouveau roman* all required us to rearrange the limits of the genre. But if we are more or less accustomed to the progressive extension of generic borders in modern literature, we tend to resist it for the Middle Ages. Despite frequent critical assertions to the contrary, we continue in practice to conceive of *chansons de geste*, *romans*, fabliaux, etc. as discrete generic entities, and where they appear to overlap or merge (as with a text like *Huon de Bordeaux*), we are likely to leave our generic conceptions intact and consider the particular work an anomaly.

Problems of taxonomy constitute a particular affliction in fabliau

studies, both because of the contradictory generic pronouncements made in the texts themselves and also because of the tyranny of Bédier's definition, which is so thoroughly ingrained that it may by now shape the thinking even of many critics who consciously reject it.³ No one accepts his definition as conclusive, everyone has something to add or to alter, but we continue to quote him and take him as a point of departure. There is hardly a study of the fabliaux that does not use his definition in one way or another.

Even if we are able to leave Bédier aside, serious problems remain. We should note from the outset that the question we must answer is double: what did authors mean by the word 'fabliau'? and what texts are we to *count* as fabliaux? These are related questions, of course, but the relationship is by no means as close as it might appear. And it is just that connection that can cause some of the difficulty.

In his recent book *Les Fabliaux; contes à rire du moyen âge*, Ménard simply decides not to worry about the meaning of 'fabliaux' – although it is not clear how he can write a book about the fabliaux without doing so (and, of course, his generic presuppositions are evident on every page, at least by implication).⁴ But he also makes a revealing comment about the problem of defining fabliaux; he points out (p.35) that we cannot properly define the genre without studying in detail every text that belongs to it – except that we can certainly not determine which texts *do* belong to it without first defining the genre. And here is the circularity that confronts any critic who dares talk about genre; we choose texts that *are* fabliaux in order to decide what fabliaux *are*. If this circularity may sometimes be ignored or circumvented in practice, no one has, to my knowledge, managed to resolve it in theory.

It appears now to be the vogue to work with self-nominated fabliaux (those which are designated as fabliaux by their own authors, or by scribes). Jodogne, Ménard (in spite of his disclaimer), Noomen, and others do so.⁵ The assumption is, of course, that while works not *called* fabliaux may or may not *be* fabliaux, those so designated by the author certainly *are*, and it is from them that we can derive the characteristics of the genre. Presumably the characteristics thus isolated could then help us identify as fabliaux a certain number of texts not so-called.⁶

It must be noted, however, that while such an approach might appear eminently sensible, the presupposition underlying it presents certain problems. First, it attributes to medieval authors a generic

precision which the study of texts themselves does not confirm: it is far from certain that authors really know the difference (assuming there is one) between fabliaux and *dits*, *contes*, *exemples*, *fables*, etc.⁷ The fact that a number of the works that call themselves fabliaux *also* describe themselves as something else as well (either in another manuscript or in the same one) throws into doubt the assumption that the genre was sharply defined. Moreover, it is difficult to know how we might determine that a particular poem which calls itself both a fabliau and a *dit* is one instead of the other – or whether it is both. This is a problem which Noomen sidesteps in his article 'Qu'est-ce qu'un fabliau?', pointing out only that 'fabliau' and 'lai' appear to be mutually exclusive designations.⁸ As for the other terms, he lists them and then ignores them.

The first problem attending such an approach is thus our inability to know just how concrete and definite might have been the generic consciousness of the medieval author. To complicate matters further, we must consider at least the possibility that an author, if he did have a specific conception of genre, might intentionally misname a text for a particular purpose. That certainly happened in one direction, as when the author of *La Borgoise d'Orliens* calls it an *aventure assez cortoise*.⁹ I have elsewhere suggested that such a misnaming might contribute significantly to the comedy of a text, as the author establishes and then violates a generic 'contract' with his audience.¹⁰ While it is less easy to demonstrate that the poet might intentionally call a non-fabliau a fabliau, we cannot know with certainty that he would *not* do so. In any event, authors (of whatever period) are rarely reliable guides to the study of their works, either in terms of interpretation or generic identification.

There is, as I implied earlier, yet another difficulty, and perhaps the major one. As Clayton Koelb has noted,¹¹ we may be talking about two entirely distinct matters when we deal with generic terminology. On the one hand, there is lexicography, the study of what a term may have meant at a certain time or to a certain author; on the other, there is the critical question concerning what texts we are going to designate as fabliaux. If these two questions are not always mutually exclusive, they are certainly not identical, and perhaps not even complementary. Trying to discover just what the thirteenth century meant by 'fabliau' may appear to be the proper and reasonable question, but it can in fact confuse the issue and distract us from functioning as critics and making basic judgments about literary

taxonomy. The fact that authors of fabliaux themselves used generic labels indicates not that those designations were necessarily accurate or valid, but only that the Middle Ages shared our need to categorize, label and compare. Not only may medieval usage have been imprecise, but it is of limited use in our attempts to understand what texts resemble each other sufficiently, and in what ways, to be studied together.

The validity of using self-nominated fabliaux as the basis for taxonomic considerations is called into question not only by the distinction proposed by Koelb, but also by Noomen's own study, for he is obliged to describe a dozen of the seventy works in question as 'fabliaux impropres' (p.427), works that call themselves fabliaux but are not really, or at least not entirely. Such a qualification casts considerable doubt on the reliability of self-nomination: if nearly 20 per cent of the authors are acknowledged to be, at best, only partially right about their own works, we cannot be entirely confident about the others. If the authors of such works as *Le Songe d'Enfer* and *De lupo et ariete* had not called them fabliaux, no one would be likely to suspect them. Furthermore, the list of self-nominated fabliaux includes a good many that, by any measure, resemble one another less closely than do a good number of other poems. For example, were it not for the single word 'fablel', Noomen would certainly not have given any attention to a single poem from Marie's *Isopet* – or else he would have given equal attention to dozens, if not all, of them. He would doubtless have noted first a work like *De Vidua*, a close analogue of a self-nominated fabliau, *De celle qui se fist foutre sur la fosse de son mari* (MR, III, 118).

But if self-nomination is not a reliable basis for generic decisions, we must either find another basis for them or else discard them entirely. Some possible points of departure may be found in a consideration of subject matter, of intent, of the external shape of the work. In fact, however, most of these approaches will prove to be of comparatively little help in establishing the fabliau corpus.

One example of such a method is offered by Alfred Ewert, who insists that Marie de France's *Equitan* is a *lai*, and not what he calls a '*mere fabliau*' (my emphasis).¹² In explanation, he insists that Marie is concerned principally with the analysis of feelings. Even if we acknowledge that such an analysis is not the primary concern of fabliau authors and that they expend comparatively little time and effort on it, the distinction is at best a matter of degree. There is little

reason to exclude *Equitan* from the fabliau corpus unless we also exclude a work such as *La Veuve* (MR, II, 197), in which the action is reduced to a minimum in order to describe the reactions or desires of the widow. Moreover, we cannot easily disregard the 'fabliau-like' action and the general tone of *Equitan*, which are such that few readers, unless told otherwise, would consider the poem to be a pretext for psychological analysis. In other words, discounting the action, the tone, and the fundamental character of the work, Ewert bases his judgment solely on Marie's supposed interest in feelings – perhaps in an attempt to make this poem resemble her others.

Nor can we reasonably base our definition on suppositions about the degree of humour or the degree of moralizing offered by a work. It is by no means obvious that in certain compositions traditionally assigned to the canon (e.g., *Lai d'Aristote*, MR, V, 243; *Du Vilain qui conquist paradis par plait*, MR, III, 209; or *Le Preudome qui rescolt son Compere de noier*, MR, I, 301) the humour is more important than the moralizing intent. Similarly unclear is the distinction between the moralizing of *Le Preudome qui rescolt son Compere de noier* (usually accepted as a fabliau) and that of the 'non-fabliau' *La Housse partie*. Subjective judgments about *how* comic or *how* serious a work is can lead only to endless contradictions and critical anarchy.

Finally, we must also question the exclusion, on the grounds that only one such text calls itself a fabliau, of works inserted into collections (from the *Isopets* to Marie's *lais* to the *Disciplina clericalis*). From every point of view except self-nomination, a number of these stories are indistinguishable from the acknowledged fabliaux. For that matter, even the exclusion of works in prose appears to be an artificial distinction; it is a distinction we would surely not make in regard to the romance, in which the verse and prose compositions are considered variant forms, with definite historical and esthetic implications, but by no means distinct genres.

While the present discussion may appear to be destroying a useful and accepted generic label without replacing it by anything concrete, there is good reason to expand the borders of the form. The label and the distinctions that go with it appear to be misleading and critically indefensible, and they are certainly more damaging than useful. They confine us to the study of an artificially limited number of texts, thereby excluding a large number which may be very similar and the study of which could be quite revealing. Critics need to be studying

themes, techniques, forms in medieval short fiction, rather than limiting themselves to a group of 70 or 140 specific texts chosen not because they resemble each other internally, but because they all contain a single word or, at best, share a single characteristic.

What, then, is a fabliau – if it is anything? I once suggested that the modern form most closely related to the fabliau is the joke.¹³ I now think even that is too restrictive a parallel, because it too takes humour as the single necessary ingredient. An acceptable synonym of 'fabliau' may instead be 'anecdote', for the term suggests the restricted form and content, while allowing for a range of intents and effects, from bawdy humour to amusing portraits and even (conceivably) to moral lessons. Rychner also offered a definition that has much to commend it 'de bonnes histoires à servir après le repas'.¹⁴ The generality of that definition, or of the synonyms 'anecdote' or simply 'story' or 'short narrative intended for diversion', may appear to be their weakness, but is in fact their virtue. If there is indeed a fabliau genre, it is clearly not definable with absolute precision, and our definition should reflect that generality. Humour may not be an essential component, but amusement, in a broader sense, is; the shift of emphasis suggested here (and in Rychner's definition), will let us include a number of entertaining and engaging texts which are not primarily comic and which may even contain a degree of moralizing.

Of course, we can isolate other characteristics of the form, provided we *recognize* them as characteristics, and not as criteria on which we can construct a rigid definition. For example, as various critics have suggested, the comparative brevity and narrative simplicity of works contribute in important ways to the intended effect. Although not all fabliaux limit themselves to a single action, they do consist, at least, of closely related actions occurring within a restricted period of time. Brevity, temporal compression or delimitation, and economy of narration are thus important considerations (although these too are relative matters, for they may not enable us to distinguish a long fabliau from a short romance, or any fabliau from a *lai* or a *conte*). Brevity imposes other demands, including the scarcity of details concerning identity, geography, psychology; in short, all the details whose *absence* contributes importantly to the comic or other effect sought by authors of short narratives.¹⁵

Finally, there is clearly a level of style, a *registre*, appropriate to the fabliaux. Frappier and, following him, Noomen have suggested that the fabliau and the *lai* appear to be mutually exclusive forms.¹⁶ If

so, it is in part because of style and tone – except, of course, when the fabliau assumes a high style or a courtly tone for comic or parodic purposes.¹⁷ Although Jodogne's definition of fabliaux is awkward and open to question on more than one point, his reference to their *ton trivial* may identify an important characteristic of the genre.¹⁸

Thus, a workable definition of a fabliau might be: a brief narrative text composed in a low or middle style and intended for amusement. That is not far removed (in spirit) from Rychner's definition, quoted above. But by expanding generic boundaries, it also raises the question of the fabliaux' relationship to other forms, and especially to the *conte* or *nouvelle*. In fact, there is neither theoretical justification for, nor practical utility in, the distinction of fabliau and *nouvelle* (except, perhaps, as a simple fact of literary history or chronology); we might with justification speak simply of 'short narrative' (or *Kurzerzählung*, the term used by Tiemann and endorsed by Zumthor).¹⁹ This suggestion has, of course, the disadvantage of complicating study of the fabliaux, because it expands the corpus considerably (although we do not seem to object to similar expansion in the romance form); but it may enable us to forget a number of quibbles and talk about such essential matters as *how texts work*. The narrative economy, the desire to entertain, the necessity for the *mot juste*, in some cases the comic techniques – these are shared by a considerable number of works that call themselves fabliaux – and also by a considerable number that do not. Further distinctions (with the possible exception of chronological ones) appear to be pointless, unprovable, and ultimately groundless.

Finally, it might be suggested that traditional approaches to the generic question pay insufficient attention to the periphery of the genre; that is, we should not neglect works that are somewhat unlike those of our central corpus, and we should not necessarily consider them quirks. It is perhaps not those works that are anomalous, but rather our conception of genre itself. While we tend to think of a genre as a containing entity, into which works somehow either 'fit' or do not fit, perhaps we should see literature, in terms of its various forms, as a continuum, with works spread across its entire length, but clustered more or less heavily at certain sections. Instead of 'genre', the appropriate notion – at least for medieval literature – may be that of a 'nexus', a group of texts that resemble each other rather closely without excluding others. Their resemblance may be ultimately less important than the extension of taxonomic boundaries to include

other, less similar, texts. As experiences with the epic or the romance will show, the study of works situated on the periphery of a form is often both intrinsically valuable and practically instructive for an understanding of the very form on the periphery of which it is located.

Moreover, once we study the peripheral texts, we often find that it was nothing more than critical prejudice that ever identified them as peripheral. Chrétien de Troyes is taken, probably justly, as the finest writer of romance, but once we devote sufficient attention to other romances, we cease to assume that *only* a work by Chrétien can serve as an adequate model for the genre. The result is that our conception of genre, and indeed of literature, becomes less narrow and parochial. There is clearly *practical* value in imposing narrower generic boundaries – editions of fabliaux, for example, must have some limits – but we should accept those limits as a practical necessity and convenience, not as a critical reality.

In conclusion, the problem may be less our understanding of the word 'fabliau' than our understanding of genre itself. I am not suggesting that we purge our critical vocabulary of the term 'fabliau' – we need taxonomic distinctions, and if we stop calling these works 'fabliaux', we will start calling them something else. But we should recognize that our terminology is no more than a convention, capable sometimes of facilitating, but just as often impeding, our understanding of texts. By devoting excessive attention to such matters, we risk expending our energies on problems that are peripheral to the real questions concerning the methods of short narrative fiction. The reality is that we need to study kinds of writing, and the methods of composing short fictional texts do not necessarily vary with the label given them by their authors – or by us.

Notes

* A version of this article was first presented as a paper at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association in Washington, D.C., 28 December 1984.

¹ Paul Zumthor, *Essai de poésie médiévale*, Paris 1972, p.160.

² *Essai*, p.160.

- ³ Joseph Bédier, *Les Fabliaux*, Paris 1893; 6th ed. 1964, p.30.
- ⁴ Philippe Ménard, *Les Fabliaux: contes à rire du moyen âge*, Paris 1983, pp.10, 33-37. Ménard rejects the validity of basing a definition on *fabliaux certifiés* and quotes Bédier's definition with some sympathy, but he refrains from offering a precise definition, noting that the genre is too complex and diverse to permit that. His implicit definition appears to be 'stories that most people agree are fabliaux'.
- ⁵ Per Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, Copenhagen 1957; Omer Jodogne, 'Le Fabliau' in *Le Fabliau et le Lai narratif*, Fasc. 13 of *Typologie des Sources du Moyen Age Occidental*, Turnhout 1975. For Noomen, see below, n.6.
- ⁶ As Noomen does; note that he refers to about 70 self-nominated fabliaux, but that his list, preceding the new edition, includes 127. See Willem Noomen, 'Qu'est-ce qu'un fabliau?' in *Atti di the XIV Congresso Internazionale di linguistica e filologia romanza*, (Napoli, 15-20 Aprile 1974), Napoli 1981, pp.421-432; Willem Noomen and Nico van den Boogaard, eds., *Nouveau Recueil complet des fabliaux*, vol. 1-, Assen 1983.
- ⁷ As Zumthor points out, Jauss suggests that, for a brief period after 1200, *estoire* and *dit* were distinguished from 'fabliau' and 'fable' on the basis of their truth content. See *Essai*, p.159
- ⁸ Noomen, p.431; his conclusions are based on the studies done by Frappier and others on the *lai* (see Noomen, p.430).
- ⁹ See A. de Montaiglon and G. Raynaud, *Recueil général et complet des fabliaux*, 6 vols., Paris 1872-90; see I, 117. (This edition is hereafter abbreviated MR; references are given in the text).
- ¹⁰ 'Types of Esthetic Distance in the Fabliaux' in *The Humor of the Fabliaux*, ed. T. Cooke and B. Honeycutt, Columbia 1974, pp.109-110.
- ¹¹ 'Some problems of Literary Taxonomy', *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, Autumn 1977, pp.235-238.
- ¹² A. Ewert, ed., *Lais*, by Marie de France, Oxford 1969, p.168.
- ¹³ In a presentation for the Symposium on Medieval Laughter, Univ. of Southern California, Los Angeles, March, 1983.
- ¹⁴ 'Les Fabliaux: genre, styles, publics', in *La Littérature narrative d'imagination*, Paris 1961, p.51.
- ¹⁵ See on this subject Paul Zumthor, 'La Brièveté comme forme', in *Genèse, codification et rayonnement d'un genre médiéval: la Nouvelle*, ed. Michaelangelo Picone, Guiseppe Di Stefano et Pamela D. Stewart, Montreal 1983, pp.3-8.
- ¹⁶ See above, n.8.
- ¹⁷ Even *Equitan*, the most fabliau-like of Marie's *Lais*, makes extensive use of a *registre* that is characteristic of courtly romance. See, for example, Marie

de France, *Lais*, ed. Alfred Ewert, Oxford 1960, p.27, lines 51-60:

Mut la trova curteise e sage,
 Bele de cors e de visage,
 De bel semblant e enveisie;
 Amurs l'ad mis a sa maisnie.
 Une s(e)ete ad vers lui traite,
 Que mut grant plaie li ad faite,
 El quor li ad lancie e mise;
 N'i ad mestier sens ne cointise;
 Pur la dame l'ad si suspris
 Tut en est murnes e pensis.

We should however note that even the distinction between the styles or *registres* of fabliaux and of *lais* is blurred at the edges of the genres. In a composition like *Du Chevalier qui recovra l'amor de sa dame* (MR VI, 138-146, a work accepted as a fabliau, although it deals with knights, ladies, and a tourney), we would be hard-pressed to distinguish some of the language that presents the protagonist's love for a woman from that of *Equitan* or other 'courtly' texts: 'Cil chevalier voloit s'amie / Faire d'une dame, et grant poine / Sofroit por lui qu'el fust certaine / Que il l'amoit ...' (lines 6-9).

¹⁸ Jodogne, p.23. His complete definition is 'un conte en vers où, sur un ton trivial, sont narrées une ou plusieurs aventures plaisantes ou exemplaires, l'un et l'autre ou l'un ou l'autre'.

¹⁹ See H. Tiemann, *Die Entstehung der mittelalterlichen Novell in Frankreich*, Hamburg 1961. The term, as Zumthor remarks, designates 'un ensemble générique cohérent'; see *Genèse, codification et rayonnement*, p.7. It is significant that the essays in the latter volume deal not only with the *nouvelle* as a specific genre, but also with *lais*, fabliaux, and other forms, thereby reinforcing the contention that they are all variants of Zumthor's 'ensemble générique cohérent' – the short narrative.