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> The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral: scene individable, or poem unlimited.
>
> Shakespeare, *Hamlet* II, ii

LIKE SHAKESPEAREAN SCHOLARSHIP, medieval fabliau studies have long been dominated by a preoccupation with questions of genre and particularly the fate of individual texts that do not fit standard generic categories. More recently, literary critics have acknowledged that the path of post rem classification is covered with pitfalls. It is folly to force texts into categories invented by another era—whether that of Aristotle or the nineteenth century—since those categories bear no relation to medieval discursive practices.

Hans-Robert Jauss foregrounds the idea that a single literary work can be grasped or understood in light of more than one genre.[1] Jauss gives the example of Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose,* in which satire, parody, and moral allegory intersect. The critic's question then becomes that of determining the *dominante*: the generic system governing the text; in the case of Jean de Meun, Jauss sees the *dominante* as the encyclopedic genre.[2] The notion of the dominant or predominant generic group presupposes that any text bears within it independent functions (Jauss calls them *constitutives*) and dependent functions (termed *concomitantes*). Jauss offers the example of satire: through the twelfth century, satire appears solely as a dependent function in texts; only in the thirteenth century, with authors like Rutebeuf, does satire take on an independent function, becoming the dominant system in texts that can be grouped together as satires (83).

A binary, intertextual model, however, identifying the text and the dominant, the historical group of texts to which the text belongs, does not suffice to account for the strikingly heterogeneous character of many medieval texts. As Curtius and Auerbach demonstrated in their early studies of the Christian or mixed style in medieval literature, the tendency to intergeneric composition is characteristic of medieval texts.[3]

The discovery that medieval texts are related not just intertextually but also intergenerically opens the door to the possibility of redefining medieval textuality.

It is possible to expand the usefulness of the binary conceptualization of the relation between text and dominant if we theorize it in conjunction with another theoretical concept, that of the interpretant. The idea of the interpretant was first articulated by Charles S. Peirce, who moved beyond binary linguistic paradigms to posit the nature of the sign as triple, and expressed this by means of a triangular model, composed of a sign, its object, and the idea mediating between the sign and the object, their interpretant.[4] For Umberto Eco, the interpretant both signals and triggers a process not of triangulation but of infinite semiosis: "In other words, in order to establish what the interpretant of a sign is, it is necessary to name it by means of another sign which in turn has another interpretant to be named by another and so on."[5] Michael Riffaterre rewrote Peirce's definition to make it a model for the literary sign: the text stands for an object (intertext), and the idea to which this relation gives rise is the interpretant (a mediating intertext).[6]

In my own work on medieval textuality I have found the idea of the interpretant useful for understanding medieval parody. In that context, I redefine the sign as the parody (text), the object as the target (text parodied), and the interpretant as the third text, fragment of text, or tradition, which determined the specific direction in which the parody rewrote the target text.[7] The triple model enables us to recognize that many medieval parodies have been marginalized as unclassifiable problem texts simply because critics did not expect to encounter complex parodic play in medieval literature. Jauss's working idea of the dominant, perceived in conjunction with the interpretant, brings new discursive practices to light: the two constructs accurately describe not simply medieval parody but also the medieval "problem text."

Within the context of modern literature, critics have posited two types of literary interpretants: the lexematic interpretant, which is a single word, and the textual interpretant, which is one identifiable text.[8] As a reader of medieval literature, however, I would posit a different type of interpretant, the one that functions most regularly in the medieval text: the generic interpretant. The generic interpretant would be that genre other than the dominant, other than the obvious generic system, the idea of which is suggested by the relation between the text and its genre. The generic interpretant indicates the palimpsest, as it were, the

paradigm underlying the apparent deviations of the problem text. Most commonly, these "deviations" are of four types: character and setting; sociolinguistic register; meter; and autonomy or length of episodes.

The notion of the interpretant may enable the modern reader to understand better the specifically intergeneric nature of all medieval literature, that alterity which the Aristotelian model of genre can never grasp or describe. The mixed text is the sign, the sign which points to its object, the dominant, and the interpretant is the generic system that mediates or accounts for the apparently anomalous relation between the problem text and its genre (that category into which it does not neatly fit). To rewrite Peirce's definition: the interpretant is the generic group mediating between a text and its dominant generic system. The text stands for its genre, and the idea to which their particular relation gives rise is the interpretant genre.

Among the most vexed critical disputes over genre are those surrounding the "problem fabliau." The availability of standard, clear definitions of the medieval fabliau in medieval scholarship, might suggest that the genre is not problematic: Bédier defined the fabliaux very simply as "contes à rire en vers," a definition substantially accepted by Per Nykrog.[10] More recently, Willem Noomen lists necessary criteria: fabliaux must be short, narrative, and cast in rhymed octosyllabic verse; must consist of an autonomous episode, and their agents must be human beings.[11] But the apparent serenity of these definitions is cruelly misleading, as the following two cases will show.

The anonymous 12th-century *Richeut* is a 1,318-verse text in Old French, composed late in the 12th century.[12] The outrageous tale of a prostitute named Richeut and all her clients can be summarized as a three-part story. First, the life of Richeut, the prostitute and *mater* of the tale: she manages to become great with child, then goes out to visit her wide clientele, which includes a bourgeois, a knight, and the local priest, to compliment each on his virility and ask for child support. Upon his birth, Samson, Richeut's splendid son, becomes the hero of the narrative. Samson's *enfances,* as Joseph Bédier termed this portion of the narrative, describe his instruction in the liturgy, grammar, music, dialectics, equestrian arts, sonnet-composition, playing the harp, reciting *lais bretons,* counting money, cheating at dice, drinking, and sexual seduction. In the second part, Samson leaves his mother in search of *aventure.* A cynical womanizer and *arriviste,* his conquests include the corruption of a monastery and the seduction of an abbess who is subsequently

reduced to becoming a *jongleresse.* The final part of the text relates Samson's return to the *sein maternel.* Needless to say, there is as much trickery, sex, food, money, and obscenity in *Richeut* as in any uncontested fabliau.

The debate over the generic status of the *Richeut* is long and acrimonious. Méon first published *Richeut* in his 1823 collection of fabliaux, but Montaiglan and Raynaud did not include it in their receuil of 1872.[13] In 1895 Joseph Bédier classified it as the oldest fabliau, stating that it is the model of the fabliau genre (40, 306). Next, Lecompte, in his 1913 edition, argued that it could not be considered a fabliau because of its unusual strophic form: a tail-rhyme strophe (2, 3, or 4 octosyllabic verses followed by one short 4-syllable verse, and an 8a 8a 4b 8b rhyme scheme) perhaps derived from Latin liturgical chant.[14] In 1921 Edmond Faral returned to Bédier's opinion that *Richeut* was the first fabliau in the French language.[15] But in 1957 Per Nykrog excluded it from the fabliau genre, calling it both a *conte* and a *petit roman burlesque* (255). Philippe Ménard, in his 1983 study of the fabliaux, relegates *Richeut* to an appendix of "contes apparentés."[16] In 1986 Charles Muscatine argued that *Richeut* should not be mingled with the "true fabliaux," but conceded that it *includes* a fabliau which begins at verse 985 and concludes the text.[17] In 1988 a new edition of *Richeut* was published by Philippe Vernay, who stated that, because of its form, "Richeut n'appartient pas au genre des fabliaux" and concluded that the text remains "inclassable" (84).

If we were to take as a given and a point of departure the intergeneric nature of the medieval text, the so-called anomalous features of *Richeut* could be studied as the intersection of conflicting generic codes. While the dominant of *Richeut* is clearly the fabliau, how do we determine the interpretant, the mediating genre accounting for *Richeut*'s extended length, number of characters, and the presence of two characters in recurring episodes?

In the case of *Richeut,* the same medievalists who recognized the fabliau as the text's dominant also identified, however unwittingly, the palimpsest of its interpretant. It was Bédier who first described that text as an epic "enfances" (307). Faral then argued that *Richeut* is reminiscent of the chanson de geste, especially of those genealogical chansons contemporaneous to its approximate date of composition in the latter part of the twelfth century (261). Both Bédier and Faral exclaimed over the fact that *Richeut* tells first of the parentage of its hero, his birth and

education, then his moment of truth when he must choose between *clergie* and *chevalerie,* and his final conquest. Muscatine admired its "mock-heroic" structure (161). Finally, André Vernet has recently suggested that the extant text is but one part of a cycle of the *menestrel Richeut:* Vernet has discovered two other fragments of the cycle, including one that appears to be a *moniage Richeut.*[18]

The author of *Richeut,* then, rewrites the fabliau dominant, giving it a consistent new direction through the systematic use of a generic interpretant: the genealogical chanson de geste. The epic interpretant accounts for the length of this problem fabliau as well as the extended roles played by the two main characters, Richeut and Samson.

Yet another recalcitrant fabliau is Douin de Lavesne's thirteenth-century *Trubert.*[19] This case is unlike that of *Richeut:* it is not obvious that Douin's text actually belongs in the fabliau category. The story's opening closely resembles the fable of the "Boy and his Pig."[20] Trubert is a poor boy from the woods, but he evolves into a trickster hero as he journeys to the court of Burgundy where he manages to cuckold the duke, rape the duke's daughter, become a knight, and ride into battle.

Douin's text is 2,986 lines, a key element in the taxonomic battle over *Trubert:* can such a long text be classed as a fabliau? In 1823, Méon counted *Trubert* in, but in 1838 Amaury Duval counted it out, calling it a *roman* and complaining that Douin misrepresented his own text when he referred to it as a fabliau.[21] In 1904 Jakob Ulrich declared *Trubert* the first *Schelmenroman,* or picaresque novel; another German medievalist, Frederick Manoine, entitled the text *Trubertroman* in 1930.[22] In 1957 Nykrog rejected *Trubert,* calling it a *roman à rire* (15). Jean Rychner reclaimed it yet again in 1959, protesting the practice of defining the fabliau on the basis of modern norms, and in 1966 Omer Jodogne pleaded with medievalists to honor *Trubert* with its rightful place in the fabliau category: "c'est un fabliau incontestable."[23] Roger Dubuis tried to put *Trubert* away in a new genre, in 1973, calling it a *roman à tiroirs.*[24] Guy Raynaud de Lage retrieved it with a new edition in 1974, stating that *Trubert* is a fabliau quite simply because its author says so. Unfortunately, during that same year, the editor contradicted himself in a separate article, arguing that the hero is a fabliau character even though the text is not a true fabliau.[25] The most recent full-length study of *Trubert,* Badel's *Le Sauvage et le sot,* replaces the text in the fabliau genre.[26] Ménard's 1983 study begs the question of *Trubert*'s genre, repeatedly trying to put the question to rest by calling it "a special case," "a very special case

that must be considered separately," and "a very particular case," but never actually settling the matter (27-28, 33-34, 250). Muscatine feels that only separate episodes of *Trubert* could be admitted into (what he terms) the canon of true fabliaux (19). Trickster that he is, *Trubert* has baffled critical expectations of a standard fabliau.

Even though *Richeut* and *Trubert* have both been marginalized as problem fabliaux, they represent two different types of cases. I believe, as I have argued in *Vilain et Courtois* (113-40), that *Trubert* is an example of a medieval parody that has not been recognized as parody and has therefore been categorized as a problem text.

What can account for *Trubert*'s extended length, complex plot, noble characters and courtly setting, the recurring appearance of several principal characters in a series of scenes, and the story's closure in marriage, as well as its sexual trickery? If *Trubert*'s dominant is the fable, or perhaps we should say the fable-type fiction so popular in twelfth-century France, where are we to look for its interpretant?[27] The same critics who fought over the fate of *Trubert* recognized the ghostly profile of its interpretant. Duval, Ulrich, Manoine, Nykrog, and Dubuis: all five refer to the text as a *roman*. More specifically, its interpretant is the trickster romance, newly popular in the thirteenth century (see Gravdal, 120-22). The trickster hero and the importance of scandalous tricks in *Trubert* are clearly identified by R. Howard Bloch: "The poet as trickster culminates in the figure of Trubert, who participates in practically every mode of scandal. . . ."[28]

When we read *Trubert* as a text whose dominant is fable and whose interpretant is trickster romance, the presence of explicit sexual tricks and obscene language in a courtly setting and romance format can be examined as the conflicting codes or registers which indicate the presence of the interpretant. In *Trubert,* Douin rewrites the fable through the mediating genre of trickster romance. As early as the fourth verse of his text, the well-known "en fabliau doit fables avoir," Douin recognizes and underscores the intergeneric nature of medieval textuality. The poet himself alludes to the presence of a genre within the genre.

Intergenericity is the medieval body we continue to stumble over, bury, then inadvertently exhume. The notions of the generic dominant and the interpretant may serve to elucidate more than one type of problem text, for that label has not been confined to fables and fabliaux. Such anomalous texts may conceal a system of mixed composition that is not "problematic," one that reveals the intergeneric nature of medieval literature.

The preceding discussion, as a theoretical prolegomenon to further study of the problem text, may prove useful in re-viewing other groups of problem texts. While the simple tripartite model appears most apt to describe problem texts of the early Middle Ages, texts belonging to the late medieval period, such as those discussed in this volume by Roberta L. Krueger and Anne Berthelot, doubtless admit of more than one interpretant. Eco's understanding of the interpretant as the liminal moment in a process of unlimited semiosis in which every interpretant is itself a text, with an interpretant of its own, may generate new insights into such textual production (68-69, 71-72).

As a tentative and rudimentary working definition of the medieval problem text, I propose the following: The problem text is that text in which the generic interpretant is unusually pronounced or overdetermined. Apparent anomalies in the key taxonomic pattern of the dominant—elements such as length, tone, sociolinguistic register, character or setting—point to the generic interpretant in a particularly visible way. It is the visibility or prominence of the interpretant that has caused such texts to be labelled negatively.

Like Polonius, who tended ultimately to put his finger on the truth in spite of his obsessive preoccupation with definitions, so too have past critics, by dint of their anxiety over post rem classification, allowed us to arrive at a closer understanding of medieval signifying practices. Polonius's effusive exclamation in the epigraph, "poem unlimited," sends us off, paradoxically, in two directions.[29] It points forward to Eco's twentieth-century vision of unlimited semiosis. It also returns us, in a most uncanny way, to the intergeneric nature of medieval literature.

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Notes

1. Hans-Robert Jauss, "Littérature médiévale et théorie des genres," *Poétique* 1 (1970): 83.
2. "Une même œuvre peut également se laisser saisir sous les aspects de divers genres; ainsi *le Roman de la Rose* de Jean de Meung... Une telle composition ne dispense d'ailleurs pas le critique de poser la question de la dominante qui gouverne le système du texte: dans notre exemple, il s'agit du genre de l'encyclopédie laïque, dont Jean de Meung a su élargir de manière géniale les formes de représentation" (83). To translate Jauss's *"dominante"* I will borrow the English substantive, "dominant" (with apologies to the fields of music and genetics).
3. The classic formulations of this insight are found in Erich Auerbach, *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages,* trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Random House, 1965), and in Ernst Robert Curtius, *European*

Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973).

4. "That for which (a sign) stands is called its *object,* that which it conveys, its *meaning;* and the idea to which it gives rise, its *interpretant.*" Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1931-58), I, 171, par. 339.
5. "However, the most fruitful hypothesis would seem to be that of conceiving the *interpretant as another representation which is referred to the same 'object.'* " Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1976), 68.
6. Michael Riffaterre, "Sémiotique intertextuelle: L'interprétant," *Revue d'esthétique,* n.s. 32 (1979): 128-50.
7. Kathryn Gravdal, *Vilain and Courtois: Transgressive Parody in Medieval French Literature of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1989), 9-10.
8. Michael Riffaterre, "Interpretants," in *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978), 81-114.
9. Joseph Bédier, *Les Fabliaux: Etudes de littérature populaire et d'histoire littéraire du moyen âge,* 5th ed. (Paris: Champion, 1925), p. 30.
10. Per Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux: Etude d'histoire littéraire et de stylistique médiévale* (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1957), 14-15.
11. Willem Noomen, "Qu'est-ce qu'un fabliau," in *Acts of the International Congress of Romance Linguistics and Philology* (Napoli: Gaetano Macchiaroli, 1981), 421-32.
12. Philippe Vernay, ed., *Richeut* (Berne: Ed. Francke, 1988).
13. Dominique Martin Méon, *Nouveau Recueil de Fabliaux et Contes inédits* (Paris: Chasseriau, 1823), I, 38-59; Anatole de Montaiglon and Gaston Raynaud, eds., *Recueil général et complet des fabliaux des XIII^e^ et XIV^e^ siècles,* 6 vols. (Paris: Libraire des Bibliophiles, 1872-1890).
14. I. E. Lecompte, "*Richeut,* Old French Poem of the Twelfth Century, With Introduction, Notes and Glossary," *Romanic Review* 4 (1913): 265-66.
15. Edmond Faral, "Le Conte de *Richeut:* Ses rapports avec la tradition latine et quelques traits de son influence," *Bibliothèque de l'Ecole des hautes études* 230 (1921), 253.
16. Philippe Ménard, *Les Fabliaux: Contes à rire du Moyen Age* (Paris: PUF, 1983), 243.
17. Charles Muscatine, *The Old French Fabliaux* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1986), 19, 161.
18. André Vernet, "Fragments d'un *Moniage Richeut*?" in *Etudes de Langue et de Littérature au Moyen Age offertes à F. Lecoy* (Paris: Champion, 1973), 585-97. Muscatine also discusses the likelihood of a Richeut cycle (175).
19. Guy Raynaud de Lage, ed., *Trubert, fabliau du XIII^e^ siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 1974).
20. E. Cosquin, *Contes populaires de Lorraine* (Paris: F. Vieweg, 1887), II, 338-41.
21. Amaury Duval, "Trubert," in *Histoire littéraire de la France* 19 (1838): 734-47.
22. Jakob Ulrich, ed., *Trubert,* in *Gesellschaft für Romanische Literatur* (Dresden, 1904); Frederick Manoine, "Ist der Trubertroman ein Fragment?" *Zeitschrift für Romanische Philologie* 50 (1930): 740-44.
23. Rychner, 45. Omer Jodogne, "Considérations sur le fabliau" in Pierre Gallais and Yves-Jean Riou, eds., *Mélanges offerts à René Crozet* (Poitiers: CEMES, 1966), 1048.
24. Roger Dubuis, *Les Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles et la tradition de la nouvelle en France au moyen âge* (Grenoble: Presses Univ., 1973), 247-64.
25. Raynaud de Lage, xxii. Guy Raynaud de Lage, "Trubert est-il un personnage de fabliau?" *Mélanges offerts à Charles Rostaing* (Liège, 1974), 845-53.
26. Pierre-Yves Badel, *Le Sauvage et le sot: Le fabliau de "Trubert" et la tradition orale* (Paris: Champion, 1979), 5.
27. On the twelfth-century taste for fable-type texts, see Muscatine, 1-23.
28. R. Howard Bloch, *The Scandal of the Fabliaux* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), 100.
29. *Hamlet* II, ii, in Alfred Harbage, ed., *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), 948.