

## Theatricality and metatheatricality in the Old French *fabliaux*

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*Abstract* – The Old French *fabliaux* dating from the 12th and the 13th centuries consist of short comic narratives. Despite their status as written texts, the prologues and epilogues of the *fabliaux* are only fully realised through recitation by solo *jongleurs*: travelling artists. This paper will connect the performance of the *fabliaux*, guided by the *jongleur* as both actor and narrator, to the *fabliaux*'s theatrical mode of storytelling. This form of storytelling is characterised by the depiction of characters as actors and stage directors, and the use of facial expressions, voice modulations, and props both inside and outside the narrative world. The *fabliaux* of Jean Bodel and Rutebeuf will be highlighted as fruitful sites for considering theatricality in narrative since these authors also produced dramatic works. Although some scholars have renewed interest in medieval performance culture, they have not adopted a specifically 'theatrical' analysis of the *fabliaux*. This essay seeks the latter: it will explore the theatricality of the *fabliaux* by interrogating the following interrelated issues: How are theatricality and metatheatricality manifested in the narratives of *fabliaux*? How do the *fabliaux* in performance differ from those experienced through private reading? What benefits do we gain, and what difficulties arise, from a theatrical approach to the *fabliaux*? In general, modern interactions with written narratives occur through subvocalisation, except where reading aloud is concerned. Whilst medieval manuscripts were not consumed in a purely 'oral' culture, this paper will expose our neglect of the ways in which the *fabliaux* were most effectively actualised in performance.

*Keywords*: Old French *fabliaux*, medieval narratives, theatricality, metatheatricality, *jongleur*, performance contexts

## List of abbreviations

### Jean Bodel (c.1165–c.1210)

<i>Barat et Haimet</i>	<i>Barat</i>
<i>Le Vilain de Bailloul</i>	<i>Bailloul</i>
<i>Brunain la Vache au Prestre</i>	<i>Brunain</i>
<i>Gombert et les deus Clercs</i>	<i>Gombert</i>
<i>Du covoteus et de l'envieus</i>	<i>Covoteus</i>
<i>Le Vilain de Farbu</i>	<i>Farbu</i>
<i>Des deus Chevaus</i>	<i>Chevaus</i>
<i>Le Sobait des Vex</i>	<i>Sobait</i>
<i>Le Jeu de Saint Nicolas</i>	<i>Saint Nicolas</i>

### Rutebeuf (c.1230–1286)

<i>Charlot le Juif</i>	<i>Charlot</i>
<i>De la Dame qui fist trois Tors entor le Moustier</i>	<i>Moustier</i>
<i>Frere Denise</i>	<i>Denise</i>
<i>Le Pet au Vilain</i>	<i>Pet</i>
<i>Le testament de l'anne</i>	<i>Asne</i>
<i>Le Miracle de Theophile</i>	<i>Theophile</i>

### Garin (early 13th century)

<i>Berengier au lonc Cul</i>	<i>Berengier</i>
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### Anonymous

<i>Boivin de Provins</i>	<i>Boivin</i>
<i>Le Prestre Crucefié</i>	<i>Crucefié</i>

## Introduction

As the teenage actor Luke McGibbon recites *Le Vilain Asnier*, a 13th-century *fabliau*, his smile almost breaks into open laughter as he reads the description of the *vilain* loading manure onto the asses' backs. Luke's classmates chuckle in the background. The interaction between McGibbon and his on- and off-screen audiences – in a 2019 YouTube reading from the channel 'Medieval Tales in Performance' produced by Eve Berge Vitz – is a recent affirmation of Willem Noomen's statement: '[c]'est dans la performance que le fabliau se réalise' (Noomen, 'Performance et mouvance: à propos de l'oralité des fabliaux' 129).<sup>1</sup> Brian J. Levy and Norris J. Lacy's calls for prioritising 'la vie concrète' (ibid) of the *fabliaux* extend the 'théâtralité' of medieval literature (Zumthor, *La lettre et la voix de la « littérature » médiévale* 289) to the role of the *jongleur* – a costumed minstrel – in interpreting *fabliaux* for courtly and popular audiences.<sup>2</sup> The notion of the 'théâtralité' is defined by the primacy of the voice as articulated through the body (ibid), though it is noted that Anglophone scholarship renders 'la théâtralité' as both 'theatricality' and 'theatricality'. The latter refers to a semiotic reading associated with Jean Alter concerning 'the constant process of re-creation through transformation which revives old texts in new performances', as can be seen in medieval and modern adaptations of the *fabliaux* (Alter 115).

The aforementioned scholars in medieval French studies tend to promote a broad interest in performance contexts over a specific reading of theatricality in the *fabliaux*. This essay will instead explore the theatricality of *fabliaux* by interrogating a series of interrelated issues:

1. How are *fabliaux* created through live *jongleur* performances compared to private readings of these works?
2. How are theatricality, and by extension metatheatricality (signals to spectators within the texts which draw attention to the performed nature of the *fabliaux*), manifested in these narratives, and what are the

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<sup>1</sup> 'The *fabliaux* are created through performance'. All translations into English given in the footnotes are the author's own.

<sup>2</sup> 'Concrete life'. 'theatricality of medieval literature'.

consequences of these manifestations for modern and medieval audiences?

3. What benefits do we gain, and conversely what risks and difficulties arise, from a theatrical approach to the *fabliaux*?

Modern interactions with written narratives generally occur through subvocalisation – internal speech through personal reading – except on rare occasions such as reading children’s bedtime stories aloud. Whilst medieval manuscripts were also consumed privately by individuals outside of the collective culture of oral transmission, scholars have somewhat overlooked how medieval texts were – and can still be – actualised in live performance to much greater effect.

The influence of *jongleurs* on how audiences received the *fabliaux* remains one of the ‘great imponderables of medieval literature’ (Busby 70). Scholarly engagement with the theatricality of these works has largely focused on intratextual references (Noomen 1990) and some historical evidence for the performance settings in which *jongleurs* transmitted the *fabliaux*, such as the medieval French *Provins* fair (Faral 1964). More recently, the critics Caroline Foscallo and Josefa López Alcaraz have considered the theatrical qualities of the *fabliaux* in relation to later versions of these texts as farces (Foscallo, 2009; López Alcaraz, 2013). This essay, however, will also take into account works that did not ultimately become plays, and it aims to encourage modern readers to analyse the dramatic nature of the *fabliaux* by making hypotheses about which verbal and non-verbal aspects of these narratives could be emphasised during live recitations.

### **Defining ‘narrative’, ‘theatre’, and *fabliaux***

In this examination of elements of theatricality, working definitions for both ‘narrative’ and ‘theatre’ are not rendered antithetical, as is sometimes the case in discussions amongst critics. This essay takes ‘narrative’ to mean a written work in which the guiding figure of a narrator mediates the plot and the voices of characters throughout, alternating between making

comments in the first- and third-persons. ‘Theatre’ is regarded as a means of storytelling that often lacks mediation between characters and the audience. It involves the distribution of roles amongst multiple actors who utilise facial expressions, gestures, costumes, voice modulations, props and stage directions, and, to a lesser extent, scenery in improvised setups.

The context of the early Middle Ages also shapes this distinction between ‘theatre’ and ‘narrative’. Before the rise of the *fabliaux* in the 13th century, theatre originated in the performance of 12th-century liturgical rituals. With their rudimentary stage directions and clunky dialogue, early vernacular plays, including *Le Jeu d’Adam*, hardly constituted well-defined dramas. Hence, ‘theatre’ will be interpreted using relatively wide parameters to encompass lesser refined works.

Similarly, the definition of ‘narrative’ in the *fabliaux* does not map onto other medieval genres or what Hans Robert Jauss saw as historic ‘families’ of texts. As Roy Percy notes (Percy 125), even *fabliaux* which internally label themselves as such have been excluded from Joseph Bédier’s definition of the text-type for not containing conventional narrative structures, as well as from Noomen and Nico van den Boogaard’s *Nouveau recueil complet des fabliaux* (NRCF). Whilst *fabliaux* regularly feature third-person narrators, some types of *fabliaux* – including *dits*, which are dominated by a first-person speaker, like in Rutebeuf’s *Dit de l’herberie* – must be acknowledged as problematic cases within contemporary medievalists’ attempts to classify the *fabliaux* genre.

### ***Les fabliaux* in question**

Out of the 150 surviving *fabliaux*, this essay focusses on the 16 works cited earlier in the ‘List of abbreviations’ by Bodel, Rutebeuf, Garin, and anonymous authors. The applicability of this paper’s reflections is therefore restricted to furthering an understanding of theatricality in these narratives only. Bodel and Rutebeuf’s *fabliaux* are fruitful sites for the exploration of theatricality in narrative, since the two *trouvères* – poet-composers – also produced dramatic works (*Le Jeu de Saint Nicolas* in 1200 and *Le Miracle de Theophile* in 1260s, respectively). Judging by his appeal to Louis IX’s

generosity in *La Pauvreté* and claims in *La Mort Rutebeuf*, Rutebeuf was a Parisian *jongleur*. Bodel was likewise involved in the performing arts: ‘Il est possible que, pendant sa jeunesse, il ait parcouru les villages de l’Artois comme jongleur *forain* [...] [I]l devint [...] héraut de la Confrérie dite ‘des Ardents’ [...]’ (Rossi and Straub 15).<sup>3</sup>

The *fabliaux* listed under ‘Other’ contain structural or thematic elements that are suited to performance or aligned with more strictly ‘dramatic’ forms, such as 14th- and 15th-century farces.

The problematisation of theatricality and metatheatricality, as well as their appearance as themes, in the above corpus will be investigated: first, through a consideration of characters as actors and of objects as props in the *fabliaux*, and second, through overt references to *jongleurs* as performers.

### **Transformation: characters as actors and stage managers**

One major aspect of the *fabliaux* which should be examined is the depiction of characters as both actors and stage managers, roles they change between in performance. This notion of a play-world draws on the structuralist approach of Mary Jane Schenck, according to which ‘the fabliau characters are revealed primarily through their actions, i.e. the functions they execute’ (Schenck 30).

Such actions operate on the narrative level for readers, as well as on the visual and aural planes for live audiences. As Sophie Marnette has shown, *fabliaux* characters fit stock categories: ‘le dupeur [...], la dupe et le dupeur dupé [...]’ (Marnette, ‘Voix de femmes’ 106).<sup>4</sup> This structure of the comic narrative, which was noted by Hermann Bausinger, recurs in the 13th-century play *Le Garçon et l’Aveugle* and the 15th-century *Farce de Maître Pathelin*, revealing an almost in-built sense of narrativity in medieval drama (Bausinger, ‘Bemerkungen’ 118-136).

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<sup>3</sup> ‘It is possible that, during his youth, he travelled around the villages of Artois as a festival *jongleur* [...] he became a herald of the so-called Confraternity of Burghers and *Jongleurs*’.

<sup>4</sup> ‘The trickster, the tricked and the tricked trickster’.

Furthermore, theatricality emerges as a guiding force in the *fabliaux* through the characters' ability to shapeshift across the divides between men and women, the courtly and the bourgeois, the living and the dead, and humans and objects. These individual movements amongst a panoply of actors are choreographed by the *jongleur*, who works simultaneously as a single performer and a director in front of live spectators. For Edmond Faral, this narrative changeability implies a 'theatrical' mentality in both characters and *jongleurs*: '[...] donner l'impression qu'on est un nouvel individu - c'est [...] le principe de l'art dramatique' (Faral 237).<sup>5</sup>

In Rutebeuf's *Denise*, the opening moral 'li abiz ne fait pas l'ermite' exposes the construct of identity on the basis of clothing.<sup>6</sup> The *fabliau*'s first seven lines emphasise the deceptive nature of clothing and foreshadow the plot through sartorial nouns and adjectives – 'ermite' (v. 1), 'draz' (v. 3), 'vestus' (v. 3), 'vesteüre' (v. 5), 'habiz' (v. 7) – and a general appeal to the audience 'nos demoustre' (v. 7).<sup>7</sup> As the *jongleur* ends their metatheatrical comment, the motif of Denise's 'guise' (v. 80) dominates the narrative, being associated with her transformation into a Franciscan friar. In a set of reported speech imperatives, Rutebeuf informs the audience of Frere Simon's instructions to Denise before she carries them out at vv. 134-141. The narrative framing here means that Frere Simon's disingenuous manipulation of Denise's costume change is itself ironically overseen by Rutebeuf's mocking narratorial stance, which in turn parallels the way that the characters' depictions are ultimately manipulated by the *jongleur* in an instance of metatheatricality:

Mais si celement feïst  
 Copeïr ces beles trecés blondes  
 Que ja ne le seüst li mondes,  
 Et feïst faire estauceüre  
 Et preïst tele vesteüre  
 Com a jone home couvandroit [...] (vv. 74-79).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> 'The aim of the dramatic arts is to give the impression that one is a new individual.'

<sup>6</sup> 'The habit does not make the monk.'

<sup>7</sup> 'Monk', 'cloth', 'clothing', 'to clothe', 'habit', 'shows us'.

<sup>8</sup> 'But rather that Denise should secretly / have her blond braids cut / unknown to anyone, and have the tonsure done / and dress herself as was fitting for a young man'.

Ces biaux crins a fait reoignier ;  
Comme vallez fu estaucee  
Et fu de boens houziaus chauceie  
Et de robe a home vestue  
Qui estoit par devant fendue  
Pointe devant, pointe derriere (vv. 134-139).<sup>9</sup>

La robe de l'Ordre li done,  
Et li fist faire grant corone [...] (vv. 147-148).<sup>10</sup>

The recurring elements of this costume change are the cutting and tonsuring of Denise's hair and her wearing boys' clothes and the Franciscan habit. These descriptions are enhanced by the medieval androgyny of Denise's name (Zink 494), which in Old French refers to both male and female forms. The *jongleur* may have further constituted Denise's gender identity by wearing a Franciscan habit in performance and imitating the pitch of a 'pucele'.<sup>11</sup>

After escaping Frere Simon, Denise adopts another alias. This time, the chevalier's wife dresses her for bed – 'La vest ansois qu'ele couchast' (v. 308) – and lies to Denise's mother about her convent upbringing before she is married off, becoming 'ma dame Denize' (v. 334).<sup>12</sup> The involvement of guardian figures in both of Denise's costume changes presents the young protagonist as a somewhat unwilling actor. The obsession with costume changes throughout the *fabliau*, down to the final word 'abit' (v. 336), highlights the creative possibilities, but also the social transgressions enabled by this facet of theatricality.<sup>13</sup> This reflects how, for Charles Muscatine and Gabrielle Lyons, 'the prime motivation of the fabliaux is an interest in mutability, coupled with a mistrust of fixed hierarchies' (Gaunt

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<sup>9</sup> She cut her beautiful locks short / Like a boy's and tonsured her crown / She wore a good pair of leggings / And likewise a tunic and robe, and, like a man's, the front stayed open, with stitching in back and in front'.

<sup>10</sup> 'He gave her the robe of the Order / And gave her a large tonsure'.

<sup>11</sup> 'A little girl'. The costume change also corresponds to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, implying 'the stylization of the body' via 'bodily gestures, movements and enactments' on the narrative plane and the oral delivery of the lines to spectators (Butler 519).

<sup>12</sup> 'She dressed her before she went to bed'. 'My lady Denise'.

<sup>13</sup> 'Habit'.

235). The instances of role-play in these narratives also echo those of public performances like the *festum fatuorum* in which priests ‘dressed as women [...] or minstrels’ (Gilhus 24).

Other *fabliaux* exhibit theatricality through costume changes that extend beyond the religious–lay binary into the realm of the supernatural. In *Crucefié*, the priest’s depiction as an actor contrasts with *Denise* since he removes, rather than puts on, clothing, and poses as a naked Christ on a Crucifix to evade the attention of Rogier the sculptor. However, the priest, like Denise, is ordered to adopt a new identity by Rogier’s wife, before the role change is actualised in performance by the *jongleur* through polyptoton (a form of repetition) of the verbs ‘despoilliez’ and ‘estendez’ and the *jongleur*’s exaggerated tone. Although Alison Williams suggests that this is ‘not a staged event’ because the wife reacts to her husband’s unexpected return, the combination of her performative language and the priest’s literal performance nevertheless emphasises how this moment of transformation becomes one of dramatic improvisation (Williams 52).

Despoilliez vous, et si alez  
Leënz, et si vous estendez  
Avoec ces autres crucefis (vv. 35-37).<sup>14</sup>

Toz s’est li prestres despoilliez ;  
Entre les ymages de fust  
S’estent, ausi con s’il en fust.’ (vv. 40-42).<sup>15</sup>

Medieval audiences might also have noticed a thematic parallel between narrative and drama: this costume change reverses the direction of Saint Nicolas’ transformation from a wooden statue into an embodied holy figure to convert the Saracens in Bodel’s drama *Le Jeu de Saint Nicolas*. Indeed, *Crucefié* was composed in the early 13th century just after or while Bodel was working on the play and on his own *fabliaux*, ‘quite plausibly’ in tandem (Taylor 142). For modern audiences, a theatrical interpretation of *Crucefié* illustrates how composers of narratives formalised elements of performance, such as visual spectacle. However, this effect could not be

<sup>14</sup> ‘Strip off / and go into that room / and lie down with the other crucifixes’.

<sup>15</sup> ‘The priest quickly stripped off / and lay down with the other wooden statues / as if he was one of them’.

achieved by a single *jongleur* in the same way as a larger theatrical production, like the farce version of *Crucefié* (c. 1490-1520), in which the priest cries out upon climbing the cross (Levy, ‘Du fabliau à la farce: encore la question performancielle?’ 97).

A work that mirrors *Crucefié* but diverges from *Denise* is Bodel’s *Bailloul*. It too concerns the orchestration of a male character’s reluctant costume change by a female figure, Dame Erme:

Une part li fist en un angle  
Un lit de fuerre et de pesas  
Et de linceus de chanevas ;  
Puis le despoille, si le couche ;  
Les ieus li a clos et la bouche ;  
Puis se lest cheoir sor le cors  
‘Frere, dist ele, tu es mors :  
Dieu ait merci de la teue ame ! [...]’ (vv. 54-61).<sup>16</sup>

Dame Erme’s skill as a dramaturge is evidenced by the way she prepares a convincing representation of her husband’s death through the scenery of ‘un lit de fuerre et de pesas’ and ‘de linceus de chanevas’; her manipulation of his clothes (‘le despoille’), face (‘Les ieus li a clos et la bouche’) and body (‘Puis se lest cheoir sor le cors’), as well as her performative deployment of language through the statement ‘tu es mors’ and use of the optative subjunctive ‘ait’. The theatrical overtones of this moment are complemented by a narrative intervention that would have been uncharacteristic of a strictly ‘dramatic’ performance back then: the narrator reports the thoughts of the *vilain*, who has been persuaded a little too forcefully of the *vraisemblance* of his new role: ‘entresait cuide mors estre’ (v. 65).<sup>17</sup> As the *vilain* later watches his wife and the priest copulating, he shifts from actor to audience member – or ‘dramatised observer’ in Lacy’s terms (Lacy 19), thus joining external spectators in a metatheatrical moment that enables us ‘to fully appreciate its comedic potential’ (17).

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<sup>16</sup> ‘On one side, she made up in a corner / A bed of fur and a straw mattress / And linen sheets / Then she made him strip off and lay down / She closed his eyes and mouth / Then she let his body fall / ‘Brother’, she said, ‘you are dead:’ / May God have mercy on your soul!’

<sup>17</sup> ‘He immediately believed that he was dead.’

Whilst the wife's transformation of her husband into a corpse implies her directorial qualities in the *fabliau*, the narrative description of her actions also bears some linguistic similarity to the stage directions at the start of *Le Jeu d'Adam*. Despite the differences in how action is represented in profane narratives compared to religious drama, these verbal parallels suggest how readily characters from the *fabliaux* may be reimagined in a theatrical context. Both texts use temporal conjunctions to evoke the stages of this dramatic ritual – 'Puis le despoille, si le couche' in the former and 'Tunc incipiat lectio' for the latter – and to highlight a particular location: 'Une part li fist en un angle' (v. 54) and 'Constituatur paradus loco eminentiori' (Aebischer 1964).<sup>18</sup> Rogier's wife may ultimately be following (stage) directions from the narrator.

Overall, both women in *Crucefié* and *Baillet* are portrayed as stage managers whose actions divide the narrative into scenes. The women's organisation of other characters' costume changes is aligned with their goals of deceiving male authority figures and enacting their own transitions from lover to wife. A theatrical reading of Lyons' 'avoir et savoir' approach to the *fabliaux* (Lyons 1992) here links the 'savoir' of these female characters to their dramaturgical skill in the physical shaping of the domestic sphere.

Crucially, the *fabliaux* do not only contain elements of theatricality within the text-world. Audiences of these works also encounter metatheatrical reflections on the moral judgements of the *fabliaux* and the links between deception, theatre, and gender. The success of the *dupieur* – trickster – in driving the narrative forward leads spectators to appreciate the *dupieur*'s dramaturgical flair, couched in pejorative terms of duplicity. At the beginning of *Boivin*, the *jongleur* becomes a character who is himself involved in deceitful dressing 'por ce que mieus samblast vilain' (v. 16), as highlighted by a list from lines 5-19 describing Boivin's costume as Mabile's uncle Fouchier de la Brouce.<sup>19</sup>

Williams' vision of the prankster as 'an actor whose existence depends upon the presence of an audience' cements this metatheatrical valuation of

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<sup>18</sup> 'Then let the lesson begin'. 'May Paradise be located in a prominently high place'.

<sup>19</sup> 'In order to better seem like a peasant'.

the *jongleur* (Williams 2). A tension arises between the harmful artifice of the characters depicted by the *jongleur* and a rejection of actors' association with immorality from Graeco-Roman drama. This interpretation requires spectators to adopt the *jongleur's* mindset despite the narrator's discouragement of such an approach. For example, in Bodel's *Barat*, Travers complains about the believability of Haimet's imitation of his wife:

Dieus! Comment pot il resambler  
Si bien fame en fet n'en parole (vv. 374-375) ?<sup>20</sup>

Despite the audience's instinct to wait for the epilogue's judgement of the two thieves, the final proclamation on Barat and Haimet obfuscates the success of the deceivers and seems ill-matched with the story in which Travers was also initially a robber:

Por ce fut dit, seignor baron,  
Mal conpeignon a en larron (vv. 517-18).<sup>21</sup>

This works against the pattern observed by Marnette, where 'les dupeurs masculins qui réussissent sont habituellement présentés de façon neutre ou parfois même positive, mais jamais de manière négative comme les femmes' (Marnette 111).<sup>22</sup>

However, a clearer sense of the relationship between the thieves and the *jongleur* can be derived from the main narrative. Haimet's technique of vocal mimicry features in Bodel's *Gombert* and is an essential skill for any *jongleur*, especially the one performing in *Barat*. The moral condemnation of the epilogue must be tempered by the audience's own complicity in deriving pleasure from vocal manipulations inside and outside the text-world.

Contrastingly, *Berengier* provides an example of the narrator somewhat praising the female deceiver, described by Jean-Claude Aubailly as the quintessential comic hero within the *fabliaux*, who has most consciously acted within the plot (Aubailly 117). This diverges from epilogues railing against 'dupeuses', such as in *Bailleul*. In *Berengier*, the wife performs her

<sup>20</sup> 'God! How can he imitate his wife so well in speech and action?'

<sup>21</sup> 'So it is said, lords and barons / That thieves make for bad companions.'

<sup>22</sup> 'Male tricksters who succeed are commonly presented in a neutral, or sometimes even positive, manner but never in a negative manner as with female tricksters.'

own costume and register change into that of a ‘chevalier’ (v. 177) to tackle the embarrassment of her husband’s pretend encounters with other knights.

Given the prologue’s apparent courtly bias in judging those who ‘se marient bas por avoir’ (v. 27), theatricality in the form of disguise allows the wife to remedy the mistakes of her father who arranged her marriage to the son of his creditor the *vilain*.<sup>23</sup> The epilogue of Version I of the tale offers the cagey compliment or even resounding litotes that the wife ‘ne fu sote ne vilaine’ (v. 299); this is further undermined by the proverb ‘[a] mol pastor chie lous laine’ (v. 300).<sup>24</sup> However, as Lisa Perfetti comments, the anonymous Version II ends with a warning to the audience about the dangers of boasting. Moreover, ‘twenty lines are devoted to how the wife ponders (‘porpense’) the best way to verify her belief that her husband is lying’ (Perfetti 21), showing a rare principled basis for the wife’s artifice, which is neither motivated by sexual desire – as in *Bailleur*, *Crucefié*, and *Denise* – nor greed – in the case of *Barat*. Version II of *Berengier* thus implies a model of ethical theatricality which coheres less with the *jongleur*’s tactics than in *Barat*.

## Objects transformed into props

While characters may be transformed into actors and directors, objects in the *fabliaux* become props through narrative attention from the *jongleur* and performance possibilities, as imagined by modern audiences.

In Rutebeuf’s *Pet*, the bag attached to the *vilain*’s behind experiences its own narrative development alongside the fart it contains. It is first described as ‘un sac de cuir’ (v. 29) before ‘li saz emplit’ (v. 46), and is tied by a devil.<sup>25</sup> The *fabliau*’s climax occurs when the apparently innocuous bag is thrown into hell and the personified fart escapes:

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<sup>23</sup> ‘Marry below their station for greed’.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Was neither idiotic nor a peasant’. ‘When the shepherd is weak, the wolf excretes wool’.

<sup>25</sup> ‘A leather sack’. ‘The sack is filled up’.

Tant ala cil qu'il vint a porte  
 Atot le pet qu'en sac aporte.  
 En enfer gete sac et tout,  
 Et li pez en sailli a bout (vv. 51-5).<sup>26</sup>

The bag is key to the scenes which compose the *fabliau*, making it suitable for farce, as evidenced by the work it inspired: André de la Vigne's 1496 *Le Meunier de qui le diable emporte l'âme en enfer*. The quotidian nature of the bag would have made it an easy visual aid for a medieval *jongleur* to present repeatedly to spectators. An olfactory imitation of 'buef aux aux' (v. 35) and 'graz humei' (v. 36) would have also rendered the invisibility of the fart within hell more concrete – though in the farce version the fart was replaced by wine.<sup>27</sup>

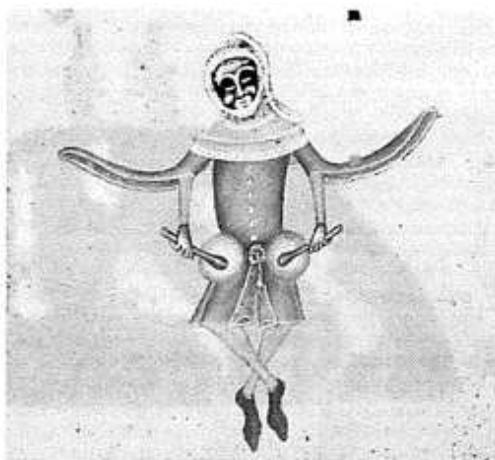


Figure 1: Luttrell Psalter, London, British Library, Additional ms. 42130, fol. 176 (Levy, 'Performing fabliaux' 138)

In a more tangible manner, we can link a potential prop for Bodel's *Sohait* to the costumes worn by medieval English musicians. For Levy, the drawing of a kettledrummer from the early 14th-century Luttrell Psalter

<sup>26</sup> 'The devil went away and came to the entrance to Hell / With the fart which he carried in his bag / He threw the whole thing into Hell: the bag / And the fart came out in one go'.

<sup>27</sup> 'Garlic beef' and 'fatty broth'.

(see Figure 1) ‘conveys (in its own musical medium) [...] the comic performance potential of the narrative fabliau’ (Levy, ‘Performing fabliaux’ 138). Bodel emphasises the magnitude of certain ‘coilles et viz’ (v. 83) at the market in the wife’s dream by repeating the adjective ‘gros’ and employing a simile comparing the size of the testicles to the blade of a spade:<sup>28</sup>

Li meilleur erent li plus gros,  
Li plus chier et li miauz gardé (vv. 98-99).<sup>29</sup>

C’a un estal est asenee  
Qu’ele en vit un gros, un lonc (vv. 102-103).<sup>30</sup>

Gros fut darriere et gros par tot (v. 105).<sup>31</sup>

De la coille, que il ot tele  
Com lo paleron d’une pele (vv. 111-112).<sup>32</sup>

A theatrical interpretation of these passages suggests performance possibilities that correspond to the *fabliau*’s narrative focus. A *jongleur* could initially show the different market produce on offer with virtual props by using their hands or miming going from stall to stall. Later in the narrative, the account of the wife hitting her husband (vv. 137-142) is underpinned by verbs in the semantic category of beating: ‘esmee’, ‘ferir’, ‘fiert’, ‘l’asene’ as she imagines herself still in the dream-world, about to buy a particularly impressive penis.<sup>33</sup> The position of ‘esmee’, ‘l’asene’, and ‘fiert’ at the end of the octosyllables could be emphasised by the *jongleur* striking the concrete prop of drums or ‘nakers’, which resemble large testicles, to communicate the wife’s release of sexual frustration.

The entertainment provided by *Sobait* derives both from the wife’s actions on the narrative plane and the metatheatrical drag of a male *jongleur* portraying her on stage. However, a drawback to interpreting *fabliaux*

<sup>28</sup> ‘Testicles and penises’.

<sup>29</sup> ‘The best were the largest / The most expensive and best preserved’.

<sup>30</sup> ‘[The wife] came to a table / Where she saw a large and long penis’.

<sup>31</sup> ‘[The penis] was large from the back and all over’.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Testicles which were as big / As the blade of a spade’.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Beat’, ‘to strike’, ‘lashes’, ‘hits him’.

narratives through a theatrical lens also emerges here: the miming of virtual props in a *jongleur's* presentation of the marketplace of penises suggests that the comedy of the *fabliaux* may at times derive from the imaginative defying of physical possibilities and the limits of performability, rather than in the literal spectacle conveyed to the audience.

The consideration of these items as props, both virtual and physical, which change function like their human counterparts further reveals how the *jongleur's* delivery may have explored narrative tensions through these objects, creating a kind of excitement for the audience that would have been less attainable in private reading.

Nevertheless, such hypotheses are limited by the historical uncertainty around the use of props in *fabliaux* recitations and the difficulty for a single *jongleur* to handle multiple objects simultaneously.

### **Overt references to the *jongleur* as a performer**

Whilst theatrical deception connects performers to the *fabliaux* characters they depict, additional aspects of metatheatricality emerge through the *jongleur's* self-conscious relationship to spectators via addresses in the narrative, as well as prologues and epilogues. Such addresses are signalled through the first-person plural (as in the phrase 'Rutebues nos dist et enseigne' at the end of *Asne*), the second-person plural ('Vos conterai briement la some' at the start of Bodel's *Sobait*) or the appellation 'Seignor' at the beginning of *Covoteus*.<sup>34</sup> Moral judgements, proverbs, and advice from the narrator to the audience also feature more prominently in the *fabliaux* than the *lais* (Marnette, 'L'énonciation féminine' 102). Metatheatricality thus manifests itself in the corpus through reflections on the realities of working as a *jongleur*, contested claims to authorship of the *fabliaux*, and the encouraged engagement of the audience.

Rutebeuf's *Charlot* highlights the *jongleur* profession, showing how a *jongleur* could embody the spirit of the prankster just as much as the characters of the *fabliaux* themselves, despite the *jongleur's* own awareness

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<sup>34</sup> 'Rutebeuf tells and informs us'. 'I will briefly recount the summary'.

of their separation from the narrative world. This *fabliau* opens with an extradiegetic warning to medieval audiences to oblige the *jongleur* with remuneration after the performance or be forced to do so through the menacing reference to ‘sa bource vuide’ (v. 6):<sup>35</sup>

Qui menestrel vuet engignier,  
Mout en porroit mieulz bargignier;  
Car mout soventes fois avient  
Que cil por engignié se tient  
Qui menestrel engignier cuide,  
Et s'en trueve sa bource vuide (vv. 1-6).<sup>36</sup>

The setting of Guillaume’s cousin’s wedding reflects the historical reality of minstrels – semi-permanently employed *jongleurs* at court – like those present at the wedding of Matilda of Brabant and Robert I, brother of Rutebeuf’s patron Louis IX (Faral 99). The marginal figure of Charlot, who meditates on how to punish the squire for his underpayment for four lines (v. 108-112) before ‘fist en la pel la vilonie’ (v. 114) reinforces the threats of the prologue, underscoring the power of the *jongleur* inside and outside the text-world.<sup>37</sup> Charlot’s status is all the more liminal because of religious factors: as a Jewish *jongleur*, we may see him as an *exemplum* of Gaunt’s general observation about ‘the mobility the *fabliaux* impute to other hierarchical structures’ (Gaunt 275). In particular, Charlot overcomes the antisemitic measures of Louis IX’s reign and his financial dependency on his royal patron to have the last laugh. Drawing on Daron Burrows’ analysis of priests in the *fabliaux* (Burrows 2005), James R. Simpson has observed the relative rarity of Jews in this genre compared to their presence in *dits*, which meant that ‘features elsewhere associated with them [were] mapped onto corrupt priests’ (Simpson 446). Once again, we encounter the deceptive nature of the *jongleur* as a trait for the audience to be wary of, but also to celebrate.

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<sup>35</sup> ‘His empty purse’.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Whoever wants to deceive a minstrel / Ought to think twice / Because many a time has it happened that / He who acts as a trickster / He who desires to deceive a minstrel / Finds his purse empty’.

<sup>37</sup> ‘He defecates into the hare skin’.

As Noomen suggests, the paratexts of prologues and epilogues were often amended in writing by scribes, or in speech by *jongleurs*, reflecting Paul Zumthor's concept of *mouvance* (Zumthor, *Essai de poésie médiévale* 84-96). For example, the ending of *Charlot* highlights how *jongleurs* not claiming to be authors faced the dual difficulties of navigating their relationships with the composer and audience:

Rutebuez dit, bien m'en sovient,  
Qui barat quiert, baraz li vient. (vv. 131-2).<sup>38</sup>

Concerns around authenticity emerge here regarding the manuscript itself. Noomen deliberates as to whether the coda was written by Rutebeuf 'en vue de la récitation par un autre diseur' or even 'plus tard par un exploitant de l'œuvre de Rutebeuf' (Noomen, 'Auteur' 331).<sup>39</sup> Likewise, in terms of the *jongleur's* self-presentation to spectators, the comment 'bien m'en sovient' could be delivered to imply a conversation with Rutebeuf or simply an understanding of the proverb as common knowledge.<sup>40</sup>

These prologues and epilogues, as well as the self-representation of *jongleurs* in the *fabliaux*, would have enabled performers to define their mediation between authors and audiences, as well as their profession and personas in the 'increasingly competitive' world of 13th-century literature and entertainment (Levy, 'Performing' 127). Despite Noomen's argument that the paratexts of *fabliaux* – such as *Charlot* and *Chevaus* – are superfluous to the actioned performance, or may have been excluded after the author's death, these works nonetheless remain crucial in challenging modern spectators to question the claims made about truthfulness by both characters inside the narrative world and *jongleurs* positioned at its limits.

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<sup>38</sup> 'I remember well how Rutebeuf says / Deception finds those who desire it'.

<sup>39</sup> 'Given its recitation by another speaker', 'later by a plagiarist of Rutebeuf's work'.

<sup>40</sup> 'I remember well'.

## Conclusion

In response to the questions this paper has sought to interrogate, *les fabliaux se réalisent* in live performance, compared to private reading, through the *jongleur's* vocal and bodily characterisation; through the thematisation of spectatorship, orchestration, and disguise; and through the audience's interaction with the *jongleur*. This 'être multiple' is no passive vehicle for the narrative, but rather a figure with significant control over spectators' interpretations of both text and paratext (Faral 1).<sup>41</sup> Theatricality, and by extension metatheatricality, is manifested in these narratives through the devices employed by the *jongleur* – a personal claim to authorship and self-promotion – which resemble those of the characters the *jongleur* depicts. Consequently, we encounter the *jongleur* as both a mediator of characters in these narratives and an individual concerned with social mobility and financial security, who provokes suspicion, moral debate, and amazement amongst modern and medieval audiences. A closer consideration of the role of the *jongleur* as both narrator and performer does not distance us from the text-world. Rather, this lens beneficially instigates a re-examination of the defining thematic features of the *fabliaux*, such as their focus on domestic objects and the humorous fleshing out of social classes by register and costume.

The *fabliaux* in question have been considered as dramatic performances in relation to the *jongleur's* visual and aural amplification of the texts. A theatrical approach to the *fabliaux* comes with the risks and difficulties of historical uncertainty and a need to avoid both conflating narrative with drama and romanticising the *jongleur*. Nevertheless, performances of the *fabliaux* can be creatively imagined and acted out in a manner that is tied not only to medieval sensibilities but also to a transhistorical sense of the body's capacity for dramatic expression.

Beyond their own delivery by *jongleurs*, the *fabliaux* have entered other performative and dramatic contexts, from the similar folkloric sources – drawn on in both Bodel's *Covotens* and *exempla* from Jacques de Vitry's preaching manuals – to the farces based on *Crucefié* and *Pet* (Levy 124). Theatrical readings may equally enter *fabliaux* scholarship to provide new

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<sup>41</sup> 'Multifaceted being'

interpretations of Lyons' 'avoir et savoir' dynamic in relation to deceivers' dramaturgical skills and Simon Gaunt's considerations of the mutability permitted within the narrative, but also by the very performance of the *fabliaux*.

If the *fabliaux* are to remain a source of 'inextinguishable laughter' for McGibbon and his peers, then we must continue to embrace the *jongleur's* dramatic instinct (Levy 140). This instinct suited the structure, language, and preoccupations of the *fabliaux* more than any other type of narrative in early medieval French literature.

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