LIBROS DE BUEN HUMOR:
UNDERSTANDING THE COMIC IN FOURTEENTH-CENTURY FRAME NARRATIVES

A Dissertation
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Spanish

By

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Washington, DC
April 25, 2014
This dissertation is a comparative study of the functions of humor in three fourteenth-century frame collections: the Iberian text, *El Libro de buen amor*, Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, and Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*. With the *Libro de buen amor* as the backbone of my investigation, I isolate several specific comic trends present across the three texts, identifying the nuances of their function and analyzing their relationship to other intersecting elements such as hermeneutics, parody, didacticism and reception. This study is the first piece of scholarship to treat all three of these canonical collections side-by-side for an in-depth examination of their humor.

Humor is an essential element in each collection as well as an important commonality among them, but it is also one of the most complex themes for critical treatment. The way in which the comic functions in narrative discourse is at once central to self-expression and yet also impossible to fully theorize or describe. In order to manage the vastness of my project, I have focused my investigation on several very specific comic modes so that I may examine their roles in-depth and trace their functions across each collection.

I begin by contextualizing the comparative nature of the study and the analytical approaches that it implicates. Chapter I presents an investigation of the collections’ commonalities, inscribed audience, and theoretical lenses. Next, in Chapters II, III and IV, I
introduce the specific trends of humor that I have identified as integral to these frame collections. The comic moments that I explore in greatest depth include three specific modes of humor: a comic trend of “wit-for-guilt” substitution present in fabliau episodes from each collection; a variation on “wit-for-guilt” substitution that occurs at the level of the extradiegetic or external frame; and finally a comic mode that I call “hermeneutical humor,” in which the texts parody the very interpretive strategies that they invite.

Through my investigations of humor’s complex relationship to and intersection with elements of parody, hermeneutics, didacticism, intertextuality and inscribed readership, this dissertation addresses the need for a more nuanced understanding of the role of the comic in the frame tale tradition. By placing these fourteenth-century comic discourses in dialogue with one another for the first time, the project makes a meaningful contribution to the interdisciplinary and comparative approaches necessary to any study of the European literary tradition of the Middle Ages.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research and writing of this dissertation is dedicated to the many people who helped along the way. First and foremost, I extend my gratitude to my committee, Dr. Emily Francomano, Dr. Barbara Mujica, and Dr. Lucia Binotti, for their invaluable feedback. I am especially indebted to Dr. Barbara Mujica for her mentorship, in teaching and in scholarship; to Dr. Gwen Kirkpatrick, for her support and her faith in me throughout my graduate studies; and to Dr. Adam Lifshey, for being there to offer good advice when I most needed it.

My completion of this study would also not have been possible without the encouragement of my family and friends. A big thank you goes out to all of my graduate colleagues at Georgetown, and especially to Ashley Caja, Anthony Perry, and Patricia Soler, for their solidarity at various stages of my research and writing process. I am also grateful for the support of my parents, my brother Mark, and my husband Manuel, the most patient man in the world.

Most of all, however, I would like to thank my advisor and mentor, Dr. Emily Francomano, who has promoted this project from its infancy to its final stages and whose guidance has been instrumental in my development and growth as a scholar. Something that I have appreciated perhaps most of all has been her encouragement to take intellectual risks in my explorations of this thesis topic. Her mentorship and example has pushed me to pose questions that I otherwise might not have asked, to pursue investigations that I otherwise might never have attempted, and, consequently, to forge connections where I otherwise might never have done so.
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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

My dissertation explores the complex relationships between humor, parody and didacticism in three fourteenth-century frame collections: the *Libro de buen amor*, the *Decameron*, and *The Canterbury Tales*. These texts are arguably the most famous frame tale collections of fourteenth-century European literature, yet there exist no comparative studies dedicated to treating all three of them side-by-side. By placing these three fourteenth-century comic discourses in dialogue with one another for the first time, my research makes a meaningful contribution to the interdisciplinary approaches necessary to any study of the European literary tradition in the Middle Ages. Specifically, my project advances a more nuanced understanding of humor’s complex relationship to parody, hermeneutics, didacticism, and inscribed readership, thus addressing the dearth in scholarship on the role of humor in late-medieval frame tales.

The frame tale collection holds a unique place in the marriage of orality and written textuality in Western Middle Ages.

1 Spanning multiple millennia, cultures, and contexts, the frame tale genre took fourteenth-century Europe by force, reaching an unparalleled height of popularity between 1312

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1 My understanding of the frame tale genre aligns with the definitions proposed by Bonnie Irwin in her study “What’s in a Frame?” and I will further explain my working definition of the genre in the pages that follow.
and 1400. With its potential to bind numerous, diverse story-telling events within one literary container, the very structure of the frame tale tradition facilitates the juxtaposition of humor and hermeneutics in a way that no other genre can match.

Broad surveys of comic literature in the Middle Ages typically dedicate significant attention to at least one or two of these three texts. However, very few of these comparative studies have focused on humor specifically, and those that have done so tend to be limited to questions of influence, in particular, the debates surrounding Boccaccio’s possible influence on Chaucer. Such disputes about influence have already received significantly more scholarly attention than the collections’ textual commonalities themselves, and my project directs attention

\[\text{[Footnote]}\]

2 I cite these dates based on Irwin. The frame tale genre’s prominence in the fourteenth-century is remarkable, however, certainly its earliest traceable origins reach back much further, to eastern and European works dating from the early Middle Ages. The genre gained popularity during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with texts such as Johanne’s translation of The Seven Sages of Rome and Alfonso X’s translation of Kalila wa-Dimna. (See Irwin 27-29)

3 The suggestion that Chaucer read the Decameron before writing The Canterbury Tales, a conjecture that was traditionally denied by past Chaucer scholars, has more recently been revisited with increasing attention and consensus. Carol Falvo Heffernan’s recent study, Comedy in Chaucer and Boccaccio, offers a fairly comprehensive review on this debate, especially in the context of the fabliau episodes discussed in my Chapter II about comic substitutions of wit for guilt.
instead toward other important comparative questions—such as the nature of their shared modes of humor—that are ripe for further exploration.

Although there are no studies on humor that address all three of these canonical collections, there are a small number of comparative studies that treat the texts in various combinations of two. The Decameron and The Canterbury Tales have been studied rather extensively as a pair, though humor is typically a peripheral topic rather than a main focus in those analyses. There is a much smaller, though respectable, number of comparative studies on the relationships between the Libro de buen amor and the Decameron, as well as on the relationships between The Canterbury Tales and the Libro de buen amor.

Scholarship’s reluctance to treat all three of these works simultaneously is understandable when we consider the sheer enormity of scope that is required for such a project. In order to manage the vastness of my project, I have pinpointed particular portions of the texts in order to trace their common modes of humor in isolated moments of narration. Humor, although perhaps one of the more obvious and memorable commonalities among the three collections, is also one of the most complex themes for critical treatment. This dissertation does not offer a comprehensive treatment of humor in these works, as such a critical task would be so large as to be impossible. However it does offer an in-depth, comparative analysis of various comic trends that they share. My aim is to identify and analyze several very specific comic modes that occur in similar narrative moments across all three frame collections, and to discuss the functionality, reception and implications of these specific trends in greater depth in each of my chapters.

The Libro de buen amor is the backbone of my study. My fascination with humor’s role in frame collections began with the Libro, and my research on the other two collections has been
informed and structured by my initial observations of comic modes that I identified in the Iberian text. As I expanded my comparative project, I began to discover that the humor of these three collections is not only interrelated but that the amount and specificity of their common ground is truly astounding. The comic trends that I initially located and analyzed in the *Libro* both inform and are informed by the analysis of those same trends in the *Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales*. These frame collections beg to be studied together; and despite the immense task implicated by the comparative treatment of their humor, their mutual study is the best key to their understanding and appreciation. I have limited my scope to include only a handful of trends because restricting the breadth of my study has enabled me to look at each of the comic moments that I do identify in greater depth. I refine my close-readings through a variety of tasks and critical approaches: surveying the enormous pool of extant scholarship on these canonical works and integrating the most relevant literature that will shed light on the comic trends identified; applying reception studies and incorporating debates on historical audience in order test my own suggestions about the nature of humor’s very presence and context; and selecting only the most appropriate theoretical approaches to humor in order to tailor a coherent analysis for each comic mode that I identify.

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4 Humor in medieval Iberian literature is a vast subject with a respectively small pool of corresponding scholarship. As Frank A. Domínguez points out in his preface to *La corónica*’s recent edition on parody, there is a notable dearth in comprehensive Hispanomedieval studies on subjects of the burlesque (Domínguez 44). Perhaps one of the most commented among the medieval Iberian texts studied for its humor is the *Libro de buen amor*. 
The narrative structure of a frame tale collection provides endless challenges for any investigation that wishes to treat a single theme across multiple episodes or levels, especially one that necessarily implicates questions of reception (such as humor). Although many of the contained stories of these collections can stand on their own, the subdivisions between the interpolated tales and the overarching frames are not “mutually exclusive” relationships (Irwin 30). The tensions between the message of the frame and the message of a contained tale are not irrelevant incongruities but in fact highly important and often intentional, as they serve to heighten the audience’s awareness of the problematics of interpretation itself. As my research will demonstrate, these “frame v. tale” tensions, coupled with the focus on questions of reading and interpretation, function humorously for a specific kind of audience that I see inscribed in these works. In fact, as I will suggest through my analysis, the target audiences of the humor in these collections likely appreciated the nature of the added responsibility to sort through the entertainment-value of humorous episodes and the serious didactic messages also contained in these collections. “[T]he ostensibly entertaining frame tale always includes serious messages for its audience, whether they be overt or veiled. An author often uses this dual nature of the entertaining frame tale to place a heavier burden of interpretation on his audience” (Irwin 30). Not surprisingly, the two examples Irwin uses to support this observation come from the *Decameron* and the *Libro de buen amor.*

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5 The presentation of bawdy tales within an outer frame that promises more serious or sober stories is a typical example of this breed of incongruity, however, as my chapters will explore, there are far more complex levels also at work.
In the opening Chapter of this study, I will discuss the commonalities among these three canonical texts and outline the approaches I have used in my analysis of their humor. I consider their inscribed readership and review related studies about their historical audiences. Additionally, Chapter I assesses numerous critical lenses for humor. I explain how I have evaluated the best approaches through which to study these texts’ comic commonalities.

Chapter I also presents my initial stance on the problem of studying “readership” of these collections, a challenge that I continue to address in all four chapters of my study. Throughout this dissertation, my alternating references to “readers,” “listeners” and “audience members” are necessarily problematic. On the one hand, one cannot conceive of the audiences of these frame collections strictly as “readers.” However, on the other, and in the context of this study specifically, several of the modes of humor that I identify are characterized by their inscription of a bookish, clerical, reader—someone who likely read alone and in silence. The acknowledged elements of orality in these collections need not contradict my conclusions that some of their humor inscribes a scholarly readership, however it sometimes complicates them. I address these complications in my chapters as I introduce each mode of humor and discuss imagined moments of its reception.

In Chapter II, “Word for Word, Wit for Guilt: The Comic Power of Substitution,” I identify a comic trend that I call “wit-for-guilt” substitution and explain its common functionality in three fabliaux episodes, the *Libro’s “Pitas Payas”* (stanzas 474-489), *Decameron* IX, 6, and Chaucer’s “The Shipman’s Tale.” The proclivity for the theme of wit or “out witting” is certainly not unique to the fourteenth-century frame tale tradition, however, its thematic importance across these three collections is undeniable, especially in their fabliau episodes. In
this chapter I demonstrate how an emphasis on wit—specifically, the shift that occurs when a story’s focus on a character’s guilt is replaced by an emphasis on his or her wit—functions to generate the comic climax of each of the episodes analyzed. According to my reading, this “wit-for-guilt” substitution (wit’s replacement of guilt as the subject of audience attention) not only constitutes a unique form of fabliau humor in these collections, it also extends beyond the fabliau episodes when it is replicated at the extradiegetic level by the author-narrator figures.

Chapter III traces the mode of “wit-for-guilt” substitution to the level of the extradiegetic narrators and author figures of the collections: the Archpriest of Hita, Boccaccio and Chaucer the Pilgrim. I identify this new level of wit-for-guilt substitution as the “self-fashioned mock-trial,” and I analyze its role in segments from the Archpriest’s prose sermon, Chaucer’s prologue to The Miller’s Tale, and Boccaccio’s commentary in his Introduction to Day IV and Conclusione. In each of the “self-fashioned mock trials,” the author-narrators draw concerted attention to the scandalous nature of their texts in order to stage an entertaining display of cunning in which they avert of potential culpability. In all cases, the defenses are intentionally tongue-in-cheek rather than earnestly apologetic, as the external narrator figures appear to bring the topic of their own guilt to the table merely so that they may display their skillful wits in disproving any grounds for blame. They amuse the audience through wit-for-guilt substitution while also subtly advertising the titillating nature of their narratives and heightening audience interest. In addition to investigating how the presence of the “wit-for-guilt” mode across all three collections is significant, my Chapter III also discusses the complex relationship that this trend has with themes of didacticism and related rhetorical norms of the period. Specifically, I explore how historical shifts in theory and practice of criminal jurisprudence—such as, the rise of inquisitio
that occurred under fourteenth-century canon law—might shed light on why themes of defense and accusation were so ripe for comic interrogation. I also begin to examine how wit-for-guilt humor, and especially its extradiegetic manifestation in the “self-fashioned mock-trials” of the author-narrators, bring issues of signification to the fore by shifting the interpretive responsibility toward the audience, a topic that my last chapter examines in even greater depth through the identification of the mode of “hermeneutical humor.”

The final Chapter in this dissertation is entitled “From Beginning to End, and the Roads In Between: Hermeneutical Humor in The Nun’s Priest’s Tale and the Libro de buen amor,” and it explores a comic mode that I call “hermeneutical humor.” Hermeneutical humor is fundamentally different from the trends that I explore in Chapters II and III (“wit-for-guilt” substitution and the “self-fashioned mock trial,” respectively), primarily because its inherent complexity inscribes a smaller and more bookish target audience. “Hermeneutical humor” can best be understood as a comic meditation on the typical strategies that readers use to interpret texts, a playful parody of the hermeneutical tradition. In the Chapter, I explain that the audience members most likely to enjoy this kind of humor were those who tended to employ the reading strategies that it parodies, and I address the problem of relating these conjectures about audience to my analyses of the other two modes of humor, trends that are accessible to a wider variety of audience members. As I discuss in greater detail in the chapter itself, some of the “bookish” interpretive approaches that become the subject of parody include the common application of exegetical approaches to vernacular texts, the propensity to envision texts as a “reading road,” and the assumption that tropes such as an opening exemplum or closing moralitas are promises of a coherent and valuable hidden meaning. Hermeneutical humor targets audience members
who practiced these reading strategies because only readers familiar with the hermeneutic approaches in question would recognize the “fun” of mocking them. My chapter explains how this readership would have enjoyed the comic maelstrom that results when their tried and true approaches to interpretation are turned inside out.

As a closer look at these three canonical collections will reveal, their amount of comic commonalities is uncanny. When we consider that these texts were composed and enjoyed in different parts of Europe, at around the same time, and with no actual evidence of direct influence between their writers, then it is easy to understand the import and the intrigue that those comic commonalities represent. If the textual communities of fourteenth-century Europe did share a certain sense of humor, then these three texts house valuable resources to explore the roles and functions of its literary representation, expression and enjoyment.
CHAPTER I
COMMONALITIES, AUDIENCE, AND LENSES OF HUMOR

The *Libro de buen amor*, the *Decameron*, and *The Canterbury Tales* are frame collections that have both delighted and perplexed readers for many of the same reasons during their six centuries in circulation. It should not be surprising, then, that they have also often presented scholars with many of the same challenges during the history of their academic study. If the *Libro de buen amor*, the *Decameron*, and *The Canterbury Tales* could actually sit down and converse with one another, they would swiftly discover that they have quite a bit in common, and they might start by commiserating about their shared trajectory of treatment at the hands of literary scholarship. For example, traditional scholarship on the *Decameron* rationalized the text’s secular and scandalous nature as a mere reaction against or parody of earlier works dedicated to medieval Christian spirituality, such as Dante’s *Commedia*,\(^6\) an approach that parallels Menendez Pidal’s early characterization of the *Libro de buen amor* as the “despedida burlona” to an era of earnest spiritual didacticism that allegedly preceded it.

In recent decades, and in the case of all three frame collections (though perhaps especially for the *Libro* and the *Decameron*), more nuanced critical approaches have recognized

\(^6\) See Mazzotta 4-5. The *Decameron* was in taken to be “the objective parable of the eclipse of traditional moral values” and Boccaccio’s ambivalences and attitudes were seen as “symptoms of a historical shift from medieval spirituality, identified, predictably enough, with Dante, to the vision of secular modernity that the *Decameron* is said to embody.”
the short-sightedness of classifying these frame collections merely in terms of their relationship to Christian spirituality. Such scholarship has moved toward a more complex appreciation of satire in general as well as adopted a better awareness of the many dimensions of alterity that exist between twenty-first century researchers and medieval texts. As John Dagenais observed in 1994, the change in attitude toward the *Libro de buen amor* has been moving increasingly “toward a more nuanced view of the *Libro*’s didacticism, informed by a deeper understanding of the many ways in which medieval didactic ideas differed from modern ones” (xiv)—a comment that could arguably apply to the evolution of scholarly approaches to the *Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales*, too. This sort of awareness of and sensitivity towards the alterity of didacticism is equally critical to any study of humor in medieval texts.

The next critical approach that these texts might bemoan in their mutual grumbling is scholars’ ridiculous insistence on “making sense” of them. The assumption that clear and unified meanings must exist in these works has led to tireless attempts to extract those “messages.” Decades of criticism have sought to identify the qualities or elements that could effectively epitomize some central and coherent message emitted from these collections and/or the individual tales they contain.7

7 As Mazzotta observes, such an approach is typified by De Sanctis, whose analysis of the *Decameron* is founded on the goal of establishing a “unified sense” of the work in order to interpret it correctly, i.e. a “universal abstract meaning” such as “social morality” or “realism.” (Mazzotta 6)
Perhaps the hope that such a “key” to unlock unified meaning even exists for these frame tales sprang from the texts’ own insistent focus on the matter of their interpretation. These texts’ commentaries on their own meanings and the need to decipher them are so abundant that listing examples seems almost as silly as claiming to have finally solved their puzzles. However, some of the instances that receive most attention in my study include: the Archpriest’s imploration in the prose prologue to “bien entender e bien juzgar la mi entençion, por qué lo fiz, E la sentencia de lo que y dize, e non al son feo de las palabras” (“Understand and judge my intention correctly, as well as the reason for writing the book, and its meaning, and not to be misled by the deceiving sound of the words.”);⁸ the call to seek hidden meanings that is expressed in the closing verses of Chaucer’s The Nun’s Priest’s Tale (“taketh the fryt, and lat the chaf be stille”);⁹ and Boccaccio’s Conclusione, which returns almost obsessively to the notion that there are no dirty meanings in his novelle unless the reader chooses to find them there. It is not surprising, then, that centuries of readers and scholars have approached these texts with the desire to isolate and extract unified and coherent messages, to “figure out what they mean.”

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⁸ Unless otherwise noted, all Spanish citations from the Libro de buen amor are from G.B. Gybbon-Monypenny’s Castalia edition. All English citations, unless otherwise noted, are from Elizabeth Drayson MacDonald’s translation as it appears her 1999 dual-language edition.

⁹ Middle English citations for The Canterbury Tales are from The Riverside Chaucer. Where appropriate I have also included Modern English translations from Coghill’s edition (Penguin Books, 2003), which has no line numbers.
In any case, more recent scholarship has developed a better tolerance for the lack of unity that these texts display and accepted their distinctive incongruity as inherent to their nature. For example, the work of scholars such as Catherine Brown exemplifies contemporary efforts to better understand the characteristically self-conscious didacticism and intentional self-contradiction of medieval texts, especially works that “are characterized not just by contrary things but by the teaching of contrary things” (Brown 2-3). Brown’s study names both the Libro de buen amor and Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales specifically and analyzes their intentionally incongruous didacticism in depth. Erich Auerbach has also acknowledged this affinity for contradiction as characteristic of the Libro de buen amor specifically, commenting that the writing of the Archpriest displays “a kind of objective irony implicit in the candid, untroubled coexistence of the most incompatible things” (322).

10 If greater tolerance for ambiguity and less inclination toward exacting categorization are important in approaching these texts in general, then they are especially indispensable to the study of their humor specifically. The successful examination of the comic in these texts requires a nuanced understanding of its self-consciously focused elements and its contradictory nature in relationship to interpretation. For that reason, I have avoided theoretical approaches to humor that define the comic in such a way that the joke, by its very nature, must have an object, a

10 “Typical of this mixture are [the Archpriest’s] Christian themes, his moralizing, his sensuality, and his verve. Moreover [. . .] the Archpriest is something of a clown. This mixture of the cleric and the jongleur seems perfectly natural, for both were engaged in literary activity and it was their common trade to speak to the hearts of men.” (Auerbach 322)
victim or “butt.” In the case of much of the humor that I identify in the Libro, the Decameron, and The Canterbury Tales, the comic takes on a multidirectional and self-reflexive nature, collapsing categories such the “laughers” and the “laughed at.” For example, the trend of “hermeneutical humor” that I describe in my fourth chapter achieves comic effect by mocking the process of interpretation itself, a process that it simultaneously invites, embodies, and, at times, exalts.

THREE COLLECTIONS WITH MUCH IN COMMON

The Decameron, The Canterbury Tales and the Libro de buen amor have abundant things in common independent of the comic modes analyzed in this study. Although my dissertation focuses on humor specifically, in this introduction I will attempt to mention several of the other commonalities that relate to the role of the comic across all three frame collections. Such copious common ground is reason alone to study these texts side-by-side with increasing attention, and it provides ample impetus for continued comparative study.

Fourteenth-century Narratives

First and foremost among the commonalities of these texts is, of course, the calamitous fourteenth century, a period infamous for its political turmoil and abundant disasters of all categories. Not least among the havoc is the Black Death that eliminated one third of the European population. Although Boccaccio may have begun parts of the Decameron prior to the
plague in 1348, he presumably composed most of the collection between 1349 and 1351.\textsuperscript{11} The Decameron had been in circulation for two full decades by the time Chaucer made his first recorded visit to Florence in 1372-1373.\textsuperscript{12} It was in the last decades of the fourteenth century that Chaucer undertook his own frame collection project, and, judging by the numerous manuscript fragments of The Canterbury Tales, he did not finish it before his death in 1400.

The origins of Libro de buen amor, much like its author, are a bit harder to track.\textsuperscript{13} There are three surviving manuscript copies in addition to numerous fragments dating from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The earliest manuscript copy is the Toledo manuscript, dated at some point in the mid fourteenth-century, followed by the Gayoso manuscript, dated 1389. The third is the Salamanca manuscript, dating as late as 1420-1440. Libro scholars will notice that my classification of this study as an analysis of “fourteenth-century frame collections” is not entirely accurate, as the only manuscript copy of the Libro that includes the prose prologue or sermon (MS S) dates from the early fifteenth-century rather than the fourteenth century. My consideration of the Libro as a fourteenth-century text, while problematic, is justified by the fact that the other fragments of the Libro are undoubtedly fourteenth-century manuscripts. I cannot

\textsuperscript{11} Three stories from the Decameron make appear in his earlier writings, as parts of the Comedia and the Filocolo.

\textsuperscript{12} For a more detailed summary of the numerous studies about Chaucer’s exposure to the Decameron and his potential borrowings from Boccaccio, see Heffernan’s introduction to Comedy in Chaucer and Boccaccio.

\textsuperscript{13} Chapters III and IV discuss the author figures of each collection in greater depth.
disprove the speculations that the Prologue may represent an afterthought composed by an entirely different individual in a later era.\textsuperscript{14} However, there is also no evidence to confirm that the Prologue could not have been composed earlier, and that MS S is a fifteenth-century copy of that fourteenth-century original manuscript. As Laurence De Looze points out, none of the three manuscript editions can truly be considered to be the authentic “original text” that was read by fourteenth and fifteenth-century readers, rather, each MS merely offers glimpses of different layers and processes of the Libro’s composition.\textsuperscript{15} Citing De Looze’s study, Francomano

\textsuperscript{14} As Francomano and De Looze have observed, Manuscript S is decidedly the most “clerkly” edition of the Libro: not only is it the only manuscript copy that includes the prose sermon and the “Cántica de los clérigos de Talavera,” it is also the only one that includes rubrics or titles to introduce its contained sections and episodes. For reasons such as these, MS S can also be considered to exude a much more palpable presence of the Archpriest as an author-narrator figure than the Toledo or Gayoso manuscripts. (See Francomano “Este manejar es dulçe: Sweet Synaesthesia in the Libro de buen amor” 128; and De Looze “El Libro de buen amor y la crítica textual”)

\textsuperscript{15} “Han sobrevivido tres manuscritos (G, S, T) pero de hecho muchas pueden ser las capas ya que no tenemos idea de cuántas recensiones hubo entre las diferentes versiones ni cuántas manos recibieron, reescribieron o recrearon porciones del texto. Tampoco podemos distinguir rigurosamente entre las reelaboraciones del autor y las de aquellos escribas que redibieron y reprodujeron la obra [. . . ] Los manuscritos existentes G, S y T nos brindan tres instantáneas

16
describes the Salamanca Manuscript as “a moment caught in time,” and considers that it is a fourteenth-century text just as much as a fifteenth century one ("Este manejar es dulce” 128). Although there has not been space in this study to synthesize conclusions about the shared historical context of these works in greater depth, I hope that it can serve as a springboard for those future explorations.

Stories About Story-telling

In the Libro de buen amor, the Decameron, and The Canterbury Tales, narration is both a central theme and an organizing principle. Boccaccio’s brigata departs from a plague-ridden city into the Florentine countryside. In their quest for self-preservation, narration itself, with its mimetic function and procreative potential, becomes their means of existence as well as their social tool for survival. Through the pretext for the brigata’s story-telling, the Decameron’s outer frame inscribes the act of narration at the very center of the work.

Similarly, in Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales, pilgrims swap stories while en route to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket at the Canterbury Cathedral, and in this case their narration functions as both an exchange and as a competition, a theme I will expand on below. Chaucer’s development of this outer frame devotes relatively little attention to the details of the journey

16 “In my view, MS S is simultaneously a fourteenth and a fifteenth-century book, a ‘moment caught in time’ . . .” (Francomano “Este manejar es dulce: Sweet Synaesthesia in the Libro de buen amor” 128).
itself (how long it takes, events along the way, landmarks), rendering the enclosed narrative events, rather than the pilgrimage that unites them, as the indisputable focus of attention. Chaucer’s pilgrims, the diegetic character-narrators of the tales, also comment about the nature of storytelling in the transitions between those story-telling events.

The *Libro de buen amor* is not structured around story-telling events by an established group of characters in quite the same fashion as the *Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales*. However, the *Libro* does include segments narrated by other inscribed characters that interact with the main autobiographical narrator who calls himself the Archpriest of Hita. Specific characters trade stories and *exempla* in competitive spirit. For example Trotaconventos exchanges tales with Doña Endrina and with Doña Goroça, and the Archpriest swaps stories with Don Amor in their debate on the nature of love and relationships. More importantly, the *Libro* can be considered a book centered on story-telling in the sense that the concepts of narration and interpretations are constantly interrogated as principle themes.

*Framed Fabliaux*

The presence of fabliau episodes across all three collections is another readily observable commonality connected to the role of the comic in these texts. Consequently, related studies about fabliaux composition and reception in medieval Europe have important implications for all three texts. Known for raciness, bodily-focused humor and dirty jokes, the fabliaux genre was traditionally (and erroneously) assumed to be literature designed by and destined for a more popularist, unsophisticated readership. Each of the three collections includes various fabliau episodes, interspersed with other interpolated tales such as beast fables, allegorical anecdotes,
parables of wisdom literature and other framed narratives. As will be discussed more in depth below,\textsuperscript{17} twentieth-century and contemporary fabliau scholars have contested the earlier, traditional assumptions about the genre’s low reception in order to suggest that the fabliaux enjoyed wide readership with audiences of sophisticated and learned circles, perhaps even finding their most eager fan-base among clerical readers.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, the literary history of the fabliau genre as a whole mirrors many elements of the trajectory of scholarship pertaining to the \textit{Decameron}, the \textit{Libro de buen amor}, and \textit{The Canterbury Tales}. Moreover, the fabliau episodes in these texts, such as those analyzed in the following chapter of my study, account for many of the comic moments in the collections because they set the stage for substitution humor in many case scenarios, not least of which is the substitution humor explored in Chapter II, and the entertaining way in which these collections foreground elements of “wit” and “duping” in order to amuse their audiences.

\textit{“Tit-for-Tat”: Transactionality of Narrative}

Notions of transaction and trade are at the heart of the frame tale tradition itself because the exchange of multiple and diverse story-telling events provides a premise for the genre’s very structure. As mentioned, the narrative exchange becomes competitive at times, when the alternating story-tellers attempt to “one-up” each other with their wit and their narrative abilities.

\textsuperscript{17} The second half of this Chapter will explore further details related to fabliau and audience, and Chapter II will discuss further background information on the fabliau genre in general and the history of its study.

\textsuperscript{18} See Chapter II for a survey of related literature supporting this stance.
The importance of deception and wit, in conjunction with the ideas of transaction, forms the basis for the mode of “wit-for-guilt” substitution humor that I explore in Chapters II and III.

The competitive nature of these literary transactions is particularly prominent in the *Decameron* and Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, more so than in the *Libro de buen amor*, however it is undoubtedly a common thread among all three. In the fabliau episodes that I explore in Chapter II, for example, the humorous overlap between ideas of transaction and substitution becomes intertwined with ideas of poetic justice when characters are rendered either “dopers” or “duped” at the end of the tales in question. The humor in these fabliaux hinges on the substitution of wit for guilt as the subject of the audience attention more so than it depends on themes of retribution, however the theme of “tit-for-tat” is a comic transaction that defines much of the humor shared across the collections.

*Extradiegetic Narrators Who Refuse to Stay in the Outer Frame*

All three collections have an extradiegetic narrator who identifies himself as the author figure of the work, and all three of these external author-narrators at times insert themselves into the diegesis. As will be discussed in depth in Chapter III, Boccaccio, Chaucer, and the

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19 Geoffrey Chaucer, as the Pilgrim character, jumps into the interior stories of *The Canterbury Tales* in order to act as the narrator of two of the tales housed within the outer frame (*The Tale of Thopas* and *The Tale of Melibee*). The Archpriest enters the narrative action as the pseudo-autobiographical “hero” of many of the internal episodes as well as assumes the character role of “Don Melón” in the Endrina episode. Boccaccio, despite his constant interjections as the extradiegetic narrator, does not cross the line into the diegesis quite as explicitly as the
Archpriest of Hita all interject tongue-in-cheek defenses of their own good intentions in light of the erotic or otherwise scandalous nature of their works’ content. My analysis in Chapter III will establish how these defenses serve to create humorous tension by advertising the tantalizing nature of the stories while also showcasing the external narrators’ wit. Comic moments such as these also serve to heighten the incongruity between frame and tale, shifting the burden of interpretive responsibility to the audience. The outer frames of these collections—in the case of Libro de buen amor and the Decameron especially—clearly posit the texts as intermediary agents and didactic models that will serve to provide good and/or bad examples for behavior.  

Such rhetorical tactics are additional ways in which the texts force accountability for meaning onto their audiences in humorous ways.

Readers and Interpretation in the Funhouse of Metalinguistic Consciousness

Commenting on The Canterbury Tales and the Decameron specifically, Paul Ruggiers affirms that that the comic effects of these works are generated because the audience temporarily “surrender[s] to lower faculties” and forgets the “serious affairs of life” (ctd Heffernan, Comedy 20). While explanations such as this one are certainly enlightening, they do not acknowledge the Archpriest, however at times his own internal character narrators refer back to him, enhancing the audience’s attention to the layers of narrative authority created through the framed narrative.

20 In his Proem to the Decameron, Boccaccio promises his lady readers entertainment and conduct models all in the same breath: “[. . . ] potranno cognoscere quello che sia da fuggire e che sia similmente da seguitare: le quali cose senza passamento di noia non credo che possano intervenire.” (Proemio 14)
complexity and sophistication of many of the modes of humor that I observe in *The Canterbury Tales*, the *Decameron*, and the *Libro de buen amor*. Many of the comic moments that I analyze in this study, in order to function as such, require the audience’s engagement in a markedly “brainy” or “heady” way, regardless of other lower bodily regions that might be involved as subject matter.  

For example, my Chapter IV on “hermeneutical humor” will explore how these texts’ commentaries on their own interpretation contribute to a special kind of comic effect. Understanding how such interpretive conundrums can be comic is essential to studying the role of humor in these three frame collections. When a text simultaneously invites and avoids interpretation, it results in a sort of comic maelstrom that would have delighted the hermeneutically-inclined reader by heightening his awareness of his own interpretive strategies and his appreciation for the text that manages to mock them. My research aims to explain in greater detail just who this certain kind of medieval reader might have been, and why I believe that all three of these texts may in fact be inscribing similar readership through their uses of “hermeneutical humor.” Though observations and conjectures such as these, my analysis will demonstrate how studying humor may in fact be one of the best ways to arrive at a better understanding of inscribed audience, especially in the case of medieval works for which lack of available or extant records makes identification of historical readership understandably difficult.

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21 Here I am referring to the cerebral nature of certain comic moments in these collections, instances in which humorous effect is closely linked to the engagement of the intellect (most specifically, in interpretive puzzles). I will explain these modes of humor in more detail in Chapters III and IV.
If I told you that I had read it, I should deceive you. It is a very big volume, written in prose and for the multitude . . . What I did was to run through your book, like a traveller who, while hastening forward, looks about him here and there, without pausing . . .

These famous remarks, expressed by Petrarch in a letter to Boccaccio, provide one glimpse into the ways in which literature was consumed in the fourteenth-century. The “very big volume” in question is of course the Decameron, and Petrarch’s letter goes on to praise the work and its author for the particularly “delight[ful]” closing tale about Griselda. Apparently, Petrarch enjoyed this episode so thoroughly that he translated it to Latin in the hopes that “others, who were unacquainted with [the vernacular Italian] tongue, might be pleased with so charming a story.”

Petrarch’s account indicates that he enjoyed the book on his own, apparently in silence and in private, and that he proceeded linearly with his reading while paying more attention to certain parts and less to others.

22 The Griselda tale and its adaptations by both Petrarch and Chaucer will be discussed in greater detail below.

23 Also of note in this quote from Petrarch is his commentary on the idea of the “reading road,” a common trope for understanding reading as a journey much like that along a road. This idea will be revisited in my last chapter on “Hermeneutical Humor.”
Although we have in Petrarch one historical reader telling us *how he read*, it would be erroneous to assume that all the earliest audiences of frame collections such as the *Decameron*, the *Libro de buen amor* and *The Canterbury Tales* enjoyed the texts through the same solitary and scholarly reading practices described by Petrarch. For example, although Petrarch implies that his own initial reading of the *Decameron* took place in a scholarly setting of solitude and silence, his letter to Boccaccio also provides clear examples of instances in which he and others engaged in group-reading practices and oral story-swapping. Praising Boccaccio’s novella, Petrarch writes,

> I was seized with the desire to learn [the Griselda tale] by heart, so that I might have the pleasure of recalling it for my own benefit and of relating it to my friends in conversation. When an opportunity for telling it offered itself shortly after, I found that my auditors were delighted.

Scholarship on medieval literacy has treated such moments of reception—moments of listening rather than reading, of community sessions rather than lone readers—with increasing attention as an important and even dominant trend in medieval literary consumption.²⁴

The challenges involved in discussing the “readership” of these three works are immense and immensely problematic. They are also unavoidable: one cannot or should not begin to talk

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²⁴ See Paul Zumthur; Brian Stock; Albrehct Classen (*The Book and the Magic of Reading in the Middle Ages*); and Chinca, Young and Green (*Orality and Literacy in the Middle Ages: Essays on a Conjunction and Its Consequences in Honour of D.H. Green*).
about humor without also talking about audience. As Jeremy Lawrance has pointed out, “We sometimes forget that a writer works with a living, contemporary audience in view [and unless] he chooses to provide his readers with footnotes, the writer must be bound by his audience’s sense of tradition” (220). Six centuries prior to Lawrance’s observation, Petrarch expressed a similar thought when he linked his remarks about the comic and “loose” style of the *Decameron* to his hypothesis that Boccaccio must have been targeting a certain sort of public:

> If the humor is a little too free at times, this may be excused in view of the age at which you wrote, the style and language which you imply, and the frivolity of the subjects, and of the *persons* who are likely to read such tales. It is important to know for whom we are writing, and a difference in the characters of one’s listeners justifies a difference in style.\(^{25}\)

Petrarch’s observation that a writer’s imaginings of his audience affect the style and even the content of his writing is an important one. However, his inference that the *Decameron’s* inclusion of crude content and “free humor” necessarily inscribes an unrefined “frivol[ous]” audience may be slightly misguided. My analysis will demonstrate how even the most flippant humor in the *Decameron* (as well as in the two other collections) often functions as or in conjunction with complex comic modes that target fairly sophisticated audiences. For starters, \(^{25}\)

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\(^{25}\) It is worth noting that Petrarch never clarifies to whom he is referring when he mentions these “persons” in the citation above (my emphasis). The only other readers or audience members that at he references (directly or indirectly) in his letter include himself and his literary circle of friends.
we can consider that Petrarch does not seem to recognize the comical irony of his own assessment: his conclusion that the Decameron’s “frivolity” must target an unrefined audience is included in the same correspondence in which he also confesses to Boccaccio that he has enjoyed the novelle so much that he has shared it with his friends and adapted versions of its stories. Frivolous Petrarch.

Beyond my aim of discussing the probable historical and intended audience of these texts, I also hope to illustrate how studying humor, specifically, may in fact be one of the more useful approaches to contemplating inscribed audience in medieval texts in general. As Paul Ricoeur has observed, the universal problem with signification in poetic discourse is that such discourse derives its meaning in a multidirectional way. Written discourse is especially problematic because a physical text replaces the speaker’s presence and authority with a material message. According to Ricoeur, there is a “text-reader dialectic” that must function in order for poetic language to mean, and in that dialectic the author is the “encoder” and the “craftsman,” while the “conventions of writing” are akin to the rules of his “craft” and the reader of course is the “decoder” of that poetic language (Valdés 5-9). It follows that if we can identify a comic moment as comic, we can begin to analyze the “text-reader dialectic” through which the writer is has “encoded” in anticipation of a reader capable of “decoding.” By Ricoeur’s terms, then, the

26 “Discourse refers back to its speaker at the same time that it refers to the world” (Interpretation Theory 22, ctd in Valdés 6). Thus, “The convergence of the author’s configuration of the text and the reader’s refiguration is the dynamic merger that makes possible the net gain of new meaning in metaphorical writing” (Valdés 7).
aim of my study centers on the examination of the “conventions of writing” through and upon which the “text-reader dialectic” has been created for the comic moments in these collections.

Of course, the scarcity of personal accounts (such as Petrarch’s, above) from fourteenth-century audiences is only one factor that limits my ability to fully comprehend, imagine and analyze the moments of these collections’ original reception among late medieval textual communities.27 Another obvious hurdle would be the six centuries of change that separate contemporary audience expectations and reading practices from the ways in which original, historical audiences enjoyed the collections. Medieval historian Brian Stock suggested that all a medieval community needed to acquire “literateness”28 was one reader, around whom an entire “textual community” could develop through reading-aloud. Multitudes could cultivate an appreciation for and familiarity with written works, and such “literacy” did not necessarily imply being able to read and write. In order to study the humor of the *Libro de buen amor*, the *Decameron*, and *The Canterbury Tales*, a researcher needs to wrestle with the undeniable hurdle posed by such questions of alterity: the gap that exists between the researcher’s contemporary mindset and the mindset of the audience members of the Middle Ages.

The *Libro de buen amor*, the *Decameron*, and *The Canterbury Tales* never lend themselves to generalizations about historical readership. They inscribe multiple kinds of readers, and their variety of modes and moments of humor is further testimony to the diverse

27 See Stock “Listening for the Text.”

28 In this context we can understand Stock’s use of the concept of literacy as familiarity with the most important stories of the time.
kinds of inscribed audiences. And yet, in order to best analyze modes of humor, I must imagine historical readers and such imaginings must be historically grounded. It is a curious bind because any assumptions I make about the audience are difficult to substantiate and yet entirely indispensable in my attempt produce grounded analysis of humor in the context of the original reception of these texts. Any researcher who wishes to address this bind must sift through as much information as possible in order to make educated conjectures about inscribed audience.

Although the challenge of talking about the readership of these collections is a large one, a survey of extant scholarship on the problem of audience in these works is not as extensive a task as one might think. Studies that have focused on audience are remarkably few in comparison to the plethora of overall scholarly attention to these works. In the case of the Decameron there is a respectable amount of available information about early owners of manuscript editions. In the case of The Canterbury Tales such information is scarce; and as far as the Libro de buen amor is concerned, information about historical audience is mostly nonexistent.

29 It is important to point out that I am not using the terms “inscribed reader/audience” and “historical reader/audience” interchangeably. “Historical readers” or “historical audience” refers to those people who actually read or listened to the book at the time of its original circulation. In most cases it is impossible to verify information about historical readers. Inscribed readers or audiences are those readers or audience members to whom a text directs itself. In other words, the text itself gives us clues about the sort of person that an author has imagined as his reader. More often than not, though certainly not always, historical readers or audiences resemble the inscribed readers or audience of a text.
The earliest manuscript copies of the *Decameron* are from the mercantile circles in Florence and appear to have been elaborated by non-professional scribes upon requests from members of Florentine bourgeois, among whom the text was an instant “best-seller” (in the fourteenth-century sense). Evidence of its popularity includes multiple correspondences between Florentine merchants requesting copies of the manuscripts. For example, Francesco Buondelmonti’s 1360 letter to Giovanni Acciaiuoli (Archbishop elect of Patras) gives the impression that there existed a sort of “trafficking” of *Decameron* manuscripts, with eager readers excitedly arranging to have copies brought to them and/or circulated to friends (Branca 197). Branca’s study also identifies other early readers who were undoubtedly of the upper middle-class Florentine society that “promptly disseminated through its thousand channels those works for which its men showed preference” (198). The *Decameron* enjoyed an international readership as well. Based on surviving manuscript translations in Castilian and Catalan, Boccaccio’s collection was disseminated in Spain as early as the 1430’s or 1440’s, though it is certainly possible, if not probable, that translations circulated prior to that date as well. Records of printed editions from Seville indicate that it had widespread popularity before it was placed on the Index of the Inquisition in 1559 (Bayliss 134-135).  

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30 The existence of multiple imitations of the *Decameron* in Spain indicates “that Spanish writers and readers found the Italian tradition compelling and worthy of imitation.” (Bayliss 135) Bayliss makes a strong case for the probable influence of the *Decameron* on the novella tradition in Early Modern Spain, although, as he points out, “The distinction between translation or appropriation and imitation is not always clear.” (135)
Even fairly abundant records on manuscript purchase and circulation cannot provide conclusive evidence about moments of reception. Were these texts read more in public or in private? In long sittings or short spurts? By men or women? Courtly readers or bourgeois? Did those who found the texts the most humorous enjoy them alone in silence or listen to them read aloud in a group?

In some cases, we can also consider what the author figures themselves state about their intended audiences in order to make conjectures about who those readers might have been. Ironically, however, there may also be reason to doubt the accuracy of the authors’ own affirmations about who will be consuming their writings. This is the case in particular with the Decameron, especially with regard to the gender of the inscribed readers. For example, in a correspondence with Boccaccio, Petrarch announces that his Latin translation of Boccaccio’s Griselda tale is also intended for a female readership, this time as didactic material. However, Petrarch’s letter to Boccaccio does not mention his having given his translation to a single woman reader, rather, he recounts instances in which he presented it to male readers (notably, to an unnamed male friend from Padua and his respective [male] acquaintances, and subsequently to another friend from Verona). Clearly we can also consider the fact that he is sending it to

31 “My object in thus re-writing your tale was not to induce the women of our time to imitate the patience of this wife . . . but to lead my readers to emulate the example of feminine constancy and to submit themselves to God with the same courage as did this woman to her husband.”

32 Humor’s role (and absence) in the reworkings of the Decameron’s Griselda story is a topic ripe for further academic exploration, especially since Petrarch and Chaucer each retell
Boccaccio as evidence that his statement about intended female readership does not seem to line up with its distribution to exclusively male audiences. Nowhere does Petrarch mention the reactions of any female readers despite his claim that women are his desired audience.

Likewise, in his *Proem* Boccaccio announces a dedication to women readers, and specifically, to idle women who are stuck at home and hoping for a temporary escape from the overprotective attitudes of those guarding them:

Adunque, acciò che in parte per me s'amendi il peccato della
fortuna . . . in soccorso e rifugio di quelle che amano, per ciò che
all'altrè è assai l'ago e 'l fuso e l'arcolaio, intendo di raccontare cento
novella. . . (113)

Boccaccio’s tale with a different twist. In all versions of the tale, Griselda’s husband tests her wifely virtue through a series of biblically-inspired trials (among other tests, she must willingly put her own children to death in order to prove her constancy as an obedient wife). Her character is presented as suffering heroine and model for all women. When Dioneo narrates the Griselda story in the *Decameron*, his joking asides about the hyperbolic trials of the heroine and the difficulties of married life provide a humorous tone. Petrarch’s retelling in Latin, on the other hand, denudes the story of all comic undertones and renders it a serious piece of conduct literature, announcing that all women should strive to live with as much constancy toward God as Griselda showed toward her husband. Chaucer’s version of this story, presented as “The Clerk’s Tale,” borrows most heavily from Petrarch’s Latin version in its didactic prescriptions and sobriety, though the Clerk’s inclusion of a short song at the end lightens the tone.
Wherefore, in some measure to compensate the injustice of Fortune
. . . I, for the succour and diversion of [those ladies who do love],
for others may find sufficient solace in the needle and the spindle
and the reel, do intend to recount one hundred Novels . . . (113)

With these and other comments in his Proem Boccaccio inserts his text directly and playfully
into the fourteenth-century debates of his day about women’s behavior with regard to literacy
and sexuality. However, we have ample reason to assume that Boccaccio certainly had a male
readership in mind as well. Thus, the writer’s own remarks are as problematic as they are
valuable in a quest to imagine his historical audience.

Although Buondelmonti’s letter mentions his wife’s awareness of the manuscript, other
correspondence from the initial years after the Decameron’s publication indicates that despite the
dedication to women readers announced in the work, even Boccaccio himself at times opposed
the idea of women reading his novelle. In his 1372 letter to Mainardo Cavalcanti, Boccaccio not
only expresses his anticipation that the Decameron will have male readership, he also makes
comments directly discouraging women’s readings of the text. Specifically, he urges Cavalcanti
not to allow the ladies of his household to read the Decameron:

I truly do not praise your permitting the illustrious ladies of your household to
read my trifles, indeed, on the contrary I request your word that you will not do
so. You are aware of how many matters therein are less than decent . . . and how
many goad to wicked acts even the most ironclad souls; and even if these matters
cannot draw illustrious women to impure acts, and especially those whose brows
are graced with holy modesty, nevertheless they might quietly insinuate tempting
ardor and at times they can make the spirit immodest, tainted and inflamed with the obscene corruption of lust, which positively should not be allowed to happen.

(Epist. 22 19-20, English translation by Serafini-Sauli)

His subtle remark that text can be dangerous even for the most well-protected souls and well-bred women (“...etiam si sint ferrea pectora, a quibus etsi non ad incestuosum actum illustres impellantur femine...”) necessarily implies that it would surely be dangerous for women of less illustrious caste, which in turn suggests that the author imagined the existence of a wider audience. Also of note is the fact that Boccaccio is not concerned that ladies will “overhear” the tales but that they will read them, (“Sane quod inclitas mulieres tuas domesticas nugas meas legere permiseris”), thus inferring the expectation that the Decameron’s earliest audiences, male and female, would have enjoyed the text in the context of private readings.

As noted by Serafini-Sauli, the thirteenth and fourteenth century saw a marked increase in the number of treatises about reading habits in general (men’s and women’s), including conduct literature and prescribed best practices. Although most treatises on women’s reading habits focused on women of nobility or women religious, many were also directed at women of all classes (Serafini-Sauli 31). These treatises on conduct (called libri di costume in Italian), were written by clergy and laymen alike, and the increasing inclusion of all classes in their scope indicates the growing readership of the period and the rise in the trends of solitary reading practices among those diverse social groups. Although clearly the Decameron must have been enjoyed in group-settings and read aloud, the growing anxiety surrounding the practice of private reading (and its politically and erotically subversive potential) correlates with the likelihood that Boccaccio imagined his audience as including many lone, silent readers, both male and female.
In discussing Chaucer’s historical audiences and the related debates about the context of their literary consumption, perhaps the best place to begin is with the famous and frequently reproduced frontispiece of MS 61 of *Troilus and Criseyde*. This image, illuminated in an early fifteenth-century manuscript, pictures Chaucer as a “court-poet.”

The scene depicted in this illumination has shaped the ways in which scholars and readers throughout the centuries have come to imagine Chaucer’s historical audience and the moments of reception that took place among the original textual communities that enjoyed his writings.

The historical authenticity of the scene—in which the audience members are men and women of nobility, the mode of reception is that of listening to the poet himself reading aloud from a manuscript, and the setting is an intimate courtly gathering—is difficult to deny. Surely such courtly readings of Chaucer’s writings could have and did occur. However the more intricate debate is with regard to what other types and moments of reception characterized the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century enjoyment of Chaucer’s poetry, particularly *The Canterbury Tales*. To what extent can the *Troilus* frontispiece can serve as the quintessential characterization of the typical moments of reception for Chaucer’s work? Derek Pearsall refers to the impact of this illumination as “the frontispiece theory,” acknowledging that the very existence of the image has not only “colour[ed] assumptions about the nature of Chaucer’s audience,” but, more specifically, that it has perpetuated the inaccurate idea that all of Chaucer’s writings were

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33 For more details about the discussions surrounding this frontispiece, see Pearsall (69), Williams (“The *Troilus and Criseyde* Frontispiece Again”) and Griffin (“Introduction”).
consumed in similarly courtly contexts (68). The *Troilus* frontispiece is one isolated representation, among many potential others, of the ways and settings in which Chaucer’s writing was enjoyed by fourteenth and fifteenth-century audiences. As Pearsall points out, “There is no reason to deny that the picture is intended to be associated with the text, nor that it is intended to create the impression of a real occasion” (69). However, ultimately, the frontispiece’s design, creation, and inclusion with the manuscript tell us little about the actual context of the text’s consumption and more about “the judgment of the manuscript’s editor, publisher, or buyer that that such a picture would be stylish and appropriate” (Pearsall 69).

There is ample consensus that both *The Canterbury Tales* and the *Decameron* were not strictly for an elite class of audience members. These texts would have appealed to educated or courtly readers perhaps just as much as they did in the more popularist spheres. Based on manuscript ownership records, the *Decameron*’s first fans were bankers and merchants. Chaucer’s main readers appear to have been educated members of the metropolitan population: household officials, career diplomats, civil servants, and administrators who were attached to the

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34 “There is no evidence to prove that Chaucer did not give command performances at court, nor that the *Troilus* frontispiece is not a partial record of the memory of such a performance. Such evidence is not, in the nature of things, likely to be forthcoming: all I have argued for is the difficulty of using the frontispiece as evidence for what has often been treated as an obvious deduction.” (72)
court and government.\textsuperscript{35} The \textit{Canterbury Tales} clearly must have appealed to a wider audience the Chaucer’s more courtly narrative of \textit{Troilus and Criseyde}, however, as my Chapter III will demonstrate, the intertextual humor in many tales inscribes readers who are remarkably well read. Moreover, and as my Chapter IV will prove, the comic’s reliance on a reader’s prior awareness of source texts (from Scripture, to Augustine, to Boethius, Cicero, etc.), is a quality consistent across all three collections, thus leading me to believe that such comic moments inscribe similarly learned audiences.

The traditional views of the \textit{Libro de buen amor}’s historical reception affirmed that, despite the evident academic, liturgical and literary prowess of the text’s author, the work itself was intended as more popular entertainment for an unlettered audience. These nineteenth and early twentieth-century critics viewed various elements of the \textit{Libro}’s form and stylistic elements as more akin to the \textit{mester de juglaría} than to its conventionally scholarly counterpart, the \textit{mester de clerecía}, leading them to assume that the work must have appealed to a street crowd listening to a live recitation than to a scholar sitting alone in his chambers.\textsuperscript{36} In 1984, Jeremy Lawrance

\textsuperscript{35} Among Chaucer’s known historical audience there is a small conglomerate of men (including Usk, Gower, Strode, Clifford, and others) who are commonly considered to constitute a “key circle” of readers. This circle is sometimes referred to as the “familiar group.” See John Scattergood; Carol Falvo Heffernan (“Introduction,” \textit{Comedy in Chaucer and Boccaccio}); and Pearsall (73-4).

\textsuperscript{36} The division between “mester de clerecía” and “mester de juglaría” is currently considered to be an old-fashioned distinction. Traditionally, the \textit{mester de clerecía} was associated with
was the first Hispanist to address the challenge of identifying the *Libro*’s “readers” in an in-depth and audience-focused study. Reacting against traditional “popularist” assumptions, Lawrance argues that the audience of the *Libro* was “as educated and literate as its author” (222), and he disputes the notion that oral elements or scandalous subject matter necessarily implied illiterate or less-learned listeners. Lawrance’s article laments contemporary scholarship’s lack of awareness of just how and why certain contradictions present in the *Libro* would have been amusing to its original intended readers. Curiously enough, he cites more examples of humor than of any other theme or characteristic in order to prove his points about the *learned* nature of the audience specifically.

The humor of the *Libro de buen amor*, the *Decameron*, and *The Canterbury Tales* is capable of delighting a wide range of audiences in different ways, and each for different reasons, however my analyses in this study suggest that only a learned audience would be equipped to enjoy the full spectrum of the work’s humor. Furthermore, quick-witted, and well-read audience religious and scholarly themes, and the *mester de juglaría* with works that take up popular themes in the minstrel’s meter. However, the idea that the two styles coexisted in many texts has become an increasing consensus, rendering the finer points of their distinctions as moot issues of critical classification.

37 This trajectory of scholarship—the shift from a traditional consensus that a text was destined for lower-class audiences to a more recent agreement that historical and intended audiences were in fact of the educated and often clerical sphere—mirrors that of the French fabliaux. The history of fabliaux scholarship is reviewed in more depth in Chapter II.
members comprise the public that would have most appreciated the range of comic modes that I am observing in this study across all of the collections. There are good reasons why my research into the inscribed and ideal audience of these works has led me to imagine the bookish reader that I describe. First of all, as mentioned, many of the comic moments I analyze derive their humor from intertextual references. The sources of those references include everything from standard grammar school exercises, to translation philosophies of the day, to the legal stipulations of fourteenth-century cannon law, to Ovid and Cicero. The fact that an audience would need to be familiar with sources such as these in order to fully appreciate certain puns, parodies, or other comic asides in these collections suggests an ideal reader who read a lot, and who read fairly sophisticated things. I do not mean to imply that other less sophisticated audiences did not enjoy these works and their humor, I am merely pointing out that the fact that these authors included intertextual humor of this nature indicates the likelihood that they imagined someone capable of appreciating it.

Evidence that readers understood and appreciated the intertextual parodies (especially those referring to Scripture) can be found in the margins of manuscripts. For example, several copies of fragments containing “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” include notes by scribes that confirm their familiarity with the original Biblical passages that the Wife of Bath parodies. It is far more
likely that their margin notes confirm their appreciation of the intertextual humor rather than their desire to correct Alison’s twist on Scripture.\textsuperscript{38}

One key argument against my claims that these works inscribe bookish readers is the prevalence of orality in the medieval tradition, however, it is important to understand that “oral” and “learned” are not necessarily opposed categories in this context. Scholars such as Paul Zumthor and Mary Carruthers have proven that, in our quest to understand the literary tradition of the Middle Ages we cannot ignore oral and memorial culture in favor of written texts. In the discussion of the original reception of these three fourteenth-century works, notions of oral versus written transmission are also important to acknowledge—especially since, as frame tale collections, they all narratively depict public story-telling events. Each of these works was certainly read aloud as well as in private. However, it is vital to recognize that the textual presence of elements of orality or the probable hypothesis of frequent oral transmission do not imply that the audiences who listened to these texts rather than read them were uneducated, uncultured or “illiterate.” As Lawrance has affirmed in the in context of the \textit{Libro de buen amor}’s historical audience, specifically:

\begin{quote}
Oral performance remained the norm in Spain throughout the Golden Age and did not necessarily imply illiteracy on the part of the audience, nor is an
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{38} Theresa Tinkle has done fascinating research on the scribal comments on the Wife of Bath’s Tale. See her articles “The Wife of Bath’s Marginal Authority” and “Contested Authority: Jerome and the Wife of Bath.”
illiterate society—or rather an illiterate subgroup in a literate society, for European culture has been literate since the Roman Empire—necessarily uncultured. (“Audience” 222)\(^\text{39}\)

In light of the variety of intertextualities they exhibit, elements of orality in these works may actually be further support for the extent of sophistication of the intended listeners. After all, for audiences of today or of yesteryear, if one must possess a keen awareness of intertextual sources in order to enjoy a joke about them in written form, then even faster wits are needed to catch that same intertextual pun by ear.\(^\text{40}\)

Cases where humor and orality are inseparably intertwined in the *Libro* include passages such as the parody of the Canonical Hours (374-87) and the episode where Don Ximio judges the lawsuit of the fox and the wolf (321-71), discussed in Chapter III. These episodes include plays on words that can best be appreciated aurally but that could only be understood by listeners familiar with such learned subjects as liturgical Latin and the jargon of the legal profession. Questions of aural reception aside, humor that hinges on such prior knowledge all but confirms

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\(^{39}\) The function and significance of orality in and to the *Libro* is something that Jeremy Lawrance has argued quite seamlessly both in his article “The Audience of the *Libro de buen amor*” and in his study “From Script to Print” which appears in *A Companion to the Libro de Buen Amor*.

\(^{40}\) Although, scholars such as Stock might add that medieval audiences were much better than contemporary ones at appreciating texts aurally.
that the Archpriest’s target audience must have included clerics and similar circles of bookish individuals.⁴¹

Louise Haywood’s research on the Archpriest’s prologue provides convincing evidence that the audience inscribed in this segment of the Libro is a scholarly, clerical readership. The Archpriest’s prose sermon draws on a wide range of discourses, from the Ovidian love utilitas to Augustinian exegesis.⁴² Haywood considers that such discourse situates the work’s author as “fully cognizant of and able to reconcile competing theological and natural philosophical discourses about the nature of mankind, the soul, the effect of the Fall, and man’s psychological and physical disposition” (21).⁴³ Since an understanding of these concepts is necessary to appreciate comic modes such as the hermeneutical humor explained in Chapter IV and the narrators’ “wit-for-guilt” humor analyzed in Chapter III, it is logical to assume that the Archpriest expected his audience to be familiar with these sorts of discourses.

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⁴¹ Lawrance puts it best: “Juan Ruiz’s allusions to medieval learning are not remains of undigested reading dressed up for an unlettered audience but skillful literary artifices which exploit the doctrina he shares with his listeners, a small group of courtly or clerical companions or patrons.” (“Audience” 222-223)

⁴² Both the Libro and the Decameron are considered to be variations on (or inspired by) Ovid’s Ars Amatoria. See Robert Hollander’s “The Proem of the Decameron: Boccaccio between Ovid and Dante” for a discussion on the Decameron’s borrowing from Ovid in particular.

⁴³ See Chapter III for more in-depth analysis of the Archpriests prologue, its argued classification as a “sermon,” and other background context.
These texts were clearly enjoyed by diverse audiences in diverse contexts. We can find evidence of moments that inscribe a lone, scholarly reader when we look to the intertextual references, or, at times, to the margins. We can detect moments that inscribe a listening crowd in the oral elements across all collections. The strong presence of orality need not undermine my suggestion that much of the humor is bookish in nature. Bookish readers have ears, too. Nor does the presence of fabliaux (full as they may be of farts and frolicking farm girls) necessarily contradict my suggestion that refined or learned readers comprise the ideal audience for the comic moments that I explore in these collections.

**LENSES OF HUMOR**

When I first began this study, I assumed that upon conducting an exhaustive review of humor theories I was bound to encounter a suitable lens or combination of lenses through which to illuminate the comic elements across these collections. However, my extensive examination of humor theories in fact only helped me to arrive at the realization that there is no such theory or group of theories. Even if a specific theoretical explanation might explain the comic mechanisms of one isolated joke or comic moment in one collection, all the synthesizing conclusions that I have seen so far tend to be more reductive than the theories they try to unite. 44 Although we can

44 Theorist Joyce Hertzler echoes this notion of the senselessness of attempting to pinpoint or even simply to narrow-in on the definition of the comic, offering instead a “definition” in the form of a lengthy, open-ended list of reasons why humans might respond with laughter across a broad range of circumstances: “Human beings tend to respond with laughter when they are confronted with the incongruous, the contradictory, the inharmonious, the unfitting, the
attempt to explain the mechanisms through which something is, was, or could be funny, there is no theory that can lay bare the comic, no truly sufficient or omniapplicable explanation for humor. In fact, my explorations have led me to believe that “theory” in general may be altogether an inadequate tool for studying humor in these texts, or perhaps even in all literary texts. Among the humor theories that I have examined to date, none has proven useful at a truly “theoretical” level because most explain humor either as a phenomenon derived from one kind of underlying impulse, or as a phenomenon that produces one kind of overarching effect. Many are enlightening, but none has proven to be applicable in a comprehensive way in the context of my research.

Although I have elected not to adhere to any particular lens for humor in this project, I will nonetheless offer a short overview of the theories that I have examined, and discuss the extent and instances in which they have proven enlightening to my analysis of fourteenth-century frame tale humor. Most of the Western thinkers who have attempted to explain the comic have approached it according to one of three main veins of thought: superiority, tension-relief, and inappropriate, the imperfect or crude; the accidental, the disorderly, or unusual; the unexpected, unaccustomed, or unconventional; the startling, the mischievous, the awkward; the ironical, the ludicrous, the ridiculous, or absurd; the pretentious, inflated, humbug, or masquerading; the eccentric or queer; the clever and exceptional; the exaggerated, the miscarried, or mishappenened; the logically incoherent or implausible; the irrational, the nonsensical, the stupid or idiotic; the monstrous, the indecent, the deformed, the deviate, the grotesque.” See Hertzler’s Laughter: A Socio-scientific Analysis.
Theories that view humor as a social signal of dominance or inferiority are often referred to as “superiority theories.” These approaches to humor conceive of laughter in a socio-communicative way, as a mechanism through which we “make fun of” or “poke fun at” others or ourselves, typically on account of stupidity or misfortune. They can be traced back to fifth-century Greece and Plato’s argument that a person’s laughter served to signal his superiority over others. Aristotle also theorized in a similar vein that laughter was linked to the exposure of some sort of ugly quality, and that laughter, by its very nature, involved some degree of malice toward the person being ridiculed.

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45 One particularly comprehensive resource that traces humor theories across various disciplines and ages is J.C. Simon’s *Why We Laugh*. Simon breaks-down the shortcomings of each one of these theory groups and proposes that the best common denominator we can establish in all cases of laughter is that it is an expression of mutual vulnerability. Simon’s approach is decidedly biological in focus (appropriately, as he is a biologist), analyzing voiced social laughter rather than simply humor provoked by texts, however his study useful for any researcher grappling with the vast variety of available theoretical frameworks on humor.

46 It is also noteworthy that Plato, Aristotle and Socrates considered laughter (as they understood it) to be something which civilized men use sparingly.

47 Aristotle’s theories on laughter also included the stipulation that any *truly ugly* or *evil* qualities could not become the subject of laughter in the same way that mildly or moderately ugly things could.
Theories that fall into a second category called “tension relief theories” view the comic from a more psychological (rather than socio-communicative) perspective, suggesting that humor serves to purge our imbalances. The idea that certain behaviors could “purge” human beings in mental and bodily ways of course can be traced back to medieval medical conceptions of the “humors,” however this vein of laughter theory was most notably developed by modern theorists such as Thomas Holmes and Sigmund Freud.\footnote{In *Jokes and the Unconscious*, Freud proposes that jokes are a pleasurable way to discharge psychic energies such as sexual tension, anxiety or anger. According to this assumption, the verbal expression of the comic functions as a “release valve” of sorts, positing humor as a force that must have a specific direction, a movement toward a target or away from a source or container.} Often tension-relief approaches to humor overlap with conceptualizations linked to superiority theory, however their focus on the psychological and/or the release of negative energies distinguishes them from other approaches that are more socio-communicative in nature. Views of humor such as Freud’s provide a rather reductive lens through which to view the humor of these three fourteenth-century texts because they perpetuate a conception of humor as a force that is determined and defined only through its opposition to other elements, rather than as a composite expression on its own terms.\footnote{Perhaps the most prominently or commonly-referred to twentieth-century theory on humor, Freud’s model views “jokes” as a separate category from other forms of non-verbal humor. Among the three major categories of humor theories (as described on the pages that follow), this approach falls into the “tension relief” category.}
The third group of humor theories, and the one that has received the most critical attention in twenty-first century is that of “incongruity theory.” Incongruity theories hinge on the notion that all instances of laughter are also instances in which something is perceived as unexpected, odd or out of place (as opposed to superiority theory’s suggestion that humor must be linked to the idea of laughing at someone’s—be it another’s or one’s own—misfortunes or stupidity). Cicero was perhaps the earliest recorded thinker to characterize humor in this light when he noted that laughter is stimulated by a “deceiving [of] expectation” (De Oratore, Book II, LXX). Both Kant and Schopenhauer also theorize the comic in a similar light, each one acknowledging in his own way that humor always has to do with the expected running up against the unexpected.

Of the three major categories of humor theories, incongruity theory is the most relevant to my observation that works such as the Libro de buen amor, the Decameron, and The Canterbury Tales often achieve comic effects through their employment of intertextual references, commentaries on or invocations of sourcetexts that would have been familiar to their audiences. However, although incongruity theory serves my analysis of one brand of humor

50 However, overall, Cicero’s thoughts on humor and laughter have more in common with superiority theories than with incongruity theories.

51 The works in question for Kant and Schopenhauer are Critique of Pure Reason and The World As Will and Representation, respectively, however I encountered their quotes and discussion in Bergler’s Laughter and the Sense of Humor.

52 I elaborate this idea in my second chapter on hermeneutical humor.
(for example, the hermeneutical humor described in Chapter IV of this study), it does not always offer a sufficient lens through which to understand the “wit for guilt” substitution humor that I observe at diverse narrative levels in Chapters II and III.

In a review of relevant theoretical approaches to approaching humor in medieval texts, one cannot exclude commentary on Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque. Although it has elements in common with various “tension relief” and “superiority” theories, Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque does not fall squarely in any of the three major categories outlined above. Bakhtin argued that the work of sixteenth-century French author François Rabelais’s exemplified “carnivalesque humor,” a kind of laughter that he viewed as exemplary of pre-modern expressions of the comic: universal, profoundly ambivalent, and always a product of an intimate connection to the culture of the folk and the public market place. Bakhtin’s theories about the “wholeness” of this late medieval carnival humor have more than several generally accepted shortcomings. They romanticize models of medieval laughter as a unifying forces among social classes, and oversimplify an analysis of humor’s relationship to what Bakhtin calls “the material body principle,” or the idea that imagery associated with the lower stratum of the body (the genitals and sexual acts, digestion and defecation) produces carnival humor.

53 Bakhtin’s approach to humor in sixteenth-century literature cannot be divorced from the socio-political context in which he lived and wrote. A Russian formalist, philosher and literary critic, Bakhtin completed his study on Rabelais in the 1930’s while living under the Stalinist dictatorship. For more general context on Bakhtin, see Michael Holquist’s “Prologue” to Rabelais and His World.
Despite those shortcomings, Bakhtin’s approach to *Rabelais* exemplifies some methodological principles that I believe are useful to any study of medieval comic texts. First of all, Bakhtin recognizes that the comic in medieval texts can often be a fundamentally *different* humor—not only in its relationship to the body as a site for discourse but also in regard to its “direction” (or lack there of) among its initiators and participants. Bakhtin’s identification of medieval humor’s characteristically profound “ambiguity” and its “universality,” while they are dangerously broad (and at times wholly inaccurate) generalizations, are not entirely irrelevant to the comic modes that I explore and the approaches that I believe best through which to view them. In investigating the kinds of humor that I identify in my chapters (basic substitution humor within the framed stories, “wit for guilt” substitution humor at the level of characters and external or extradiegetic narrators, and hermeneutical humor at all diegetic levels), often we encounter a comic gesture that is at once directed at everyone and at no one. Starting from the assumption that such gestures are “multidirectional” rather than “unidirectional,” as Bakhtin would encourage, is a small but important component of the best practices through which to approach the comic in these frame collections.

The comparative study of humor across these texts may always and necessarily defy the application of theoretical lenses. Yes, some of the ideas about humor outlined above have proved more relevant than others to my analyses, but no one theory or group of lenses comprises the theoretical toolbox with which to study the comic modes that I isolate in this study. Although I have elected to summarize numerous approaches to humor in this theoretical overview—including superiority theories, tension-relief theories, incongruity theories and others—my analysis of individual comic modes in the chapters that follow does not adhere strictly to any one
particular theoretical approach to the comic. As my chapters demonstrate, the modes of humor in the *Libro de buen amor*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and the *Decameron* have a lot of things in common, and that includes their defiance of standard theoretical approaches. These collections’ comic moments play a complex role in their ever-commented webs of expression, parody, lessons and entertainment.

The specific modes of humor that I identify and compare in the following three chapters suggest that, more often than not, these collections found their best and most enthusiastic fan-base in the form of a snickering group of clerics or schoolboys. They likely read silently and privately just as much as they enjoyed texts aloud as a group. The kind of reader *best* positioned to enjoy *all* of the humor of these collections must have been a member of a quick-witted, intelligent and well-read textual community.

In conclusion, studying the nature of comic moments in fourteenth-century texts defies typical scholarly excavation methods in multiple ways, as the roles of humor and their interrelationships in the three texts analyzed in my project implicate an incredibly vast amount of extant scholarship as well as an intricate challenge with regard to the incorporation of theoretical and methodological lenses. I have addressed those challenges in this study by isolating very specific common commonplaces in each of my chapters and applying multidisciplinary methods. With each mode that I identify and describe, I approach the comic not as an isolated phenomenon, but rather at its intersection with other elements: intertextuality, hermeneutics, didacticism, and parody. Despite the challenges of this comparative project, the *Libro de buen amor*, the *Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales* *beg* to be studied together. These frame collections inform one another in more ways than one scholar can imagine. My research offers
one example of their fruitful simultaneous study, and the exploration of their humor in a comparative context merits much continued scholarly attention.
CHAPTER II.

WORD FOR WORD, WIT FOR GUILT: THE COMIC POWER OF SUBSTITUTION IN “PITAS PAYAS,” “THE SHIPMAN’S TALE,” AND DECAMERON IX, 6

“I will tell you a story about a man who forgot a woman, if you see the joke, tell me a better one.” (“Del que olvydo la muger te dire la fazaña, / sy vieres que es burla dyma otra tan mañana,” 474ab). Thus begins the fabliau entitled “Enxienplo de lo que conteció a don Pitas Payas, pintor de Bretaña,” or “The Tale of Pitas Payas,” a self-proclaimed exemplum appearing in stanzas 474-485 of the Libro de buen amor. The humor in this tale hinges on the hilarity that ensues when one thing unexpectedly changes places with another: the comic power of substitutions. My key interest in the substitution humor present in fabliau episodes such as “Pitas Payas,” Chaucer’s “The Shipman’s Tale,” and Boccaccio’s Decameron IX, 6, centers on the role of wit, and on wit’s relationship to the complicated presentation of humor in the frame collections of which these fabliaux are a part, the Libro de buen amor, the Decameron, and The Canterbury Tales.

Substitution humor is an ideal place to begin my project of tracing the relationships between these three canonical works and their shared meditation on meaning. Additionally, the notions of transaction that are underlined by the substitution humor in the three fabliaux analyzed bring the acknowledged commonality of “narration as exchange” to the fore, further enriching the side-by-side study of these collections. As I have identified in the preceding chapter, the

54 All Spanish citations from the Libro de buen amor are from Gybbon Monypenny’s edition, and English translations, unless otherwise stated, are from Elizabeth Drayson MacDonald’s edition.
three frame collections in my study are also united by their sustained reflections on the nature of signification and its problematics, a meditation on meaning that permeates their uses of humor in more ways than one. Their fabliaux are especially ripe for comparative analysis. R. Howard Bloch has affirmed that the heart of the comic in the fabliau tradition has far less to do with the fabliaux’s notoriously literal, base or lewd content and more to do with their playful poetics. The “scandal” of the fabliau genre, according to Bloch, is its meditation on its own creation, as the medieval poets who composed fabliaux possessed an acute awareness of language’s own inadequacy, and the nature of the fabliau’s comic function is closely tied to the fabuleor’s desire to probe that awareness.

No study of humor in these three frame collections would be complete without a look at their fabliaux. However, such an investigation implicates an enormous corpus of scholarship on the particular tales in question as well as the Old French Fabliaux tradition with which they have been connected. In the present chapter, I examine the function of substitution-related humor in

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55 “The fabliaux deal more directly than any other medieval genre not only with the conditions of the poet [. . .] but with the art of poetry at the end of the Middle Ages . . . [Their] unity lies less in a single origin, thematics, intention, or form, than in the sustained reflection upon literary language writ so large across these rhymed comic tales whose subject, mimetic realism notwithstanding, is the nature of poetry itself.” (19)

56 Bloch’s last chapter “The Fabliaux, Fetishism, and the Joke,” is also particularly relevant to my study and offers further insights as to the connections between fabliaux thematics the ideas of lack, substitution and “foreshortening” that form the basis of modern psychoanalysis. (101-128)
three fabliau episodes, one from each of the frame collections in my study. I isolate a common mode of humor that I call “wit-for-guilt substitution,” in which a focus on the wit of a character or characters replaces a focus on their alleged guilt in the face of a contentious act. My analysis positions the phenomenon of substitution at the heart of the humor that occurs in the *Libro de buen amor*, the *Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales*. The substitution exchanges that mark the pranks of the characters are echoed in the level of the narrative structure of the collection itself. The plotlines of these fabliaux utilize a progression of comic substitutions (beginning with the physical and literal swap and building toward the figurative double-statement) in order to probe—and enjoy—the problems of signification that are ultimately the subject matter under examination in each of these frame collections.

Numerous scholars have attempted to isolate the fabliau genre’s characteristic recipe for humor. Thomas Cooke argues that the key to the humor of the fabliaux lies in their comic climax, which, as he explains, “consists of two elements: it comes as a surprise, and yet it has been carefully prepared for in such a way that when it comes, it is seen as artistically fitting and appropriate” (13). What, precisely, it is about these comic climaxes that makes them “artistically fitting” perhaps is the more difficult question, and I hope to propose one possible answer in the context of these three fourteenth-century frame collections through my identification of the mode of “wit-for-guilt” humor. In the case of each framed fabliau in my study, wit-for-guilt

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57 As Keith Busby’s suggests, we really should not—and in effect we cannot—talk “about the fabliaux,” but we can instead talk about reading them, because “the very attempts to draw generalizations …about all 150 fabliaux have effectively meant that scholars have been unable to
substitution is a key characteristic of the comic punch line, a climax toward which various preceding elements of substitution-related humor build. Substitutions are what constitute the devious behavior itself and/or the incrimination that exposes it; and subsequently, the potential punishment or dishonor of the guilty party is explained away by means of a joke that forestalls all reprisals.

Substitution humor in the fabliaux abounds. Wordplay, double-meanings, disguises and bawdy euphemisms are perhaps the most memorable among the multiple comic moments derived from substitution. In “Pitas Payas,” “The Shipman’s Tale,” and *Decameron* IX, 6, the

see the trees for the wood” (x). In other words, studying fabliau humor should be a project that appreciates differences between texts rather then perpetuates the reductive dangers that genre grouping inevitably imposes. I aim to follow this advice.

58 We have characters swapping places, or attempting to: the licentious priest who disguises himself as nursemaid healer (*La Saineresse*, NRCF 4:36); the wife who pretends to be a mistress (*Le Meunier d’Arleux*, NRCF 9:110); the suspicious husband who poses as his wife’s lover (*La Borgoise d’Orliens*, NRCF 3:19). Also, of course, there are various punch lines that derive their humorous nature from the substitution of referents: intercourse explained as a necessary bloodletting ritual (*La Saineresse*, NRCF 4:36) or “putting the devil back in hell” (*Decameron* III, 6); the newly wed who mistook a dormouse for a vagina and apologizes to his bride for letting hers “escape” (*La Sorisete des estopes*, NRCF 4:66); and innumerous innocent explanations or euphemisms that are substituted for the truth about immoral behavior (*Le Pliçon*, NRCF 10:116; *Le Prestre qui abrevete*, NRCF 8:98; and many, many others).
very foundation of comic function appears to be none other than that of the swap, the switch, the replacement. According to my reading of these three fabliaux, the salacious or criminal actions, along with a subsequent shift attention away from them, set the stage for a special kind of comic climax in which a focus on wit takes the place of a focus on guilt. The “click”\(^59\) that characterizes such comic climaxes is one in which clarity and confusion are simultaneously made possible through the sequence of substitutions, and the “wit-for-guilt” mode mimics and extends the substitution-related play that is prevalent at other narrative-levels of these episodes.

Background knowledge regarding the genre of the Old French Fabliaux is indispensible to any study of humor in the *Libro de buen amor*, the *Decameron*, and *The Canterbury Tales*. First and foremost, it is important to recognize that what defines the fabliau tradition is hardly a fixed or uncontroversial matter.\(^60\) Bédier’s early definition of the genre appears in almost every piece of fabliau scholarship currently in print: “Les fabliaux son des contes à rire en vers” (“Fabliaux are stories in verse that make one laugh”). Perhaps this definition’s nonspecificity is

\(^59\) My reference to the comic climax as a “click” is borrowed from Alcuin Blamires’s “Philosophical Sleaze? The ‘strok of thought’ in the Miller’s Tale and Chaucerian Fabliaux.” (628)

\(^60\) The word *fabliau* itself is a diminutive of the French for “fable.” The body of works that are commonly considered “the cannon” of the Old French Fabliaux include roughly 150 tales dating from the late twelfth to the early fourteenth century, all of which are housed in forty-three manuscripts that date from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Per Nykrog’s list is one that has generally been accepted as the cannon. (Cooke 11)
precisely what has caused it to endure. Although no one attribute of the genre has emerged as a truly defining characteristic, there are several general elements considered to be hallmarks of the tradition, such as lewd content, brevity, wordplay and the importance of the comic climax.

Few scholars would debate that the Libro’s “Tale of Pitas Payas,” Chaucer’s “Shipman’s Tale,” and Boccaccio’s Decameron IX, 6, are members of the fabliau genre. However, to say that the Archpriest, or Boccaccio, or Chaucer “wrote fabliaux” is, in a sense, not correct—they retold stories that they knew, and we now call those stories “fabliaux.”61 Fabliau scholarship on Decameron and The Canterbury Tales is abundant. Roughly thirty percent of the Decameron’s one hundred tales are fabliaux,62 and of Chaucer’s twenty-one completed Canterbury Tales,

61 The fabliaux’s formalized study as a “genre” has only existed since the end of the nineteenth-century, thanks to French literary scholars. The tales today labeled as “fabliaux” were told and recorded across Europe and Asia during the later Middle Ages. Isolated examples of use of the term “fabliau” appear in some medieval French manuscripts but the term was used loosely at best, as most of the manuscripts that house “fabliaux” do not call them such. For further background see Honeycutt and Cooke (15); Dane (287-288; 291); Nykrog (61); and Heffernan. (“Chaucer’s ‘Miller’s Tale’ and ‘Reeve’s Tale,’ Boccaccio’s “Decameron,” and the French Fabliaux” 312-315)

62 Boccaccio wrote his novelle in prose and not in verse, thus further exemplifying the problems of pinpointing what it is that makes a fabliau a fabliau. Mazzotta believes that certain “Boccaccian fabliaux” have more in common with Ovidian modalities than they do with the Old French Fabliaux. (175-78)
several are consistently considered fabliaux and studied as such. Studies that address the fabliaux in the *Libro de buen amor* are less plentiful. Very few episodes of the *Libro de buen amor* have been identified and studied as fabliaux, however, the Archpriest of Hita clearly found inspiration and source material in the fabliau tradition.

Like twenty-five percent of the total known Old French Fabliaux, “Pitas Payas,” “The Shipman’s Tale,” and *Decameron* IX, 6 are stories about adultery: the audience is invited to

63 “The Reeve’s Tale” and “The Miller’s Tale” are the most undisputed examples of Chaucer’s fabliaux. Others include “The Shipman’s Tale,” the unfinished “Cook’s Tale,” and “The Merchant’s Tale,” and also sometimes “The Summoner’s Tale” and “The Friar’s Tale.” Many studies on the Chaucerian fabliaux adopt the stance that they are somehow “improved/enriched” versions of the Old French models, a critical project whose agenda has generated many comparative investigations with rather closed-ended approaches, and few studies truly interested in understanding modes of humor across European frame collections. See Bedlier, Blamires, Heffernan, Dane, Pearcy and Cooke.

64 The two most commonly acknowledged fabliaux episodes include “Pitas Payas,” and the comic exemplum that precedes it, “Ensienplo de los dos perezosos” (457-467), as well as occasionally “Enssienplo del garçón que quería casar con tres mugeres” (189-197). Irma Césped has highlighted that “los fabliaux son una de las fuentes más socorridas por Juan Ruiz” (“the fabliaux are among Juan Ruiz’s most-utilized sources” 35; my translation). For further discussion of “Pitas Payas” in the context of the Old French tradition, see Moffat, Lacarra, Geary, McGrady and Zahareas.
laugh at the circumstances surrounding a lustful affair. Unraveling the role and function of humor, and, in particular, the significance of wit, in medieval comic literature can prove quite complicated in the context of morally and legally charged issues such as adultery. A good number of fabliau scholars argue that the genre itself serves to undermine courtly love models and/or destabilize didactic exemplars for marital behavior through tales of adultery, while others have argued equally well that the fabliaux serve to reinforce traditional moral values by ridiculing those who violate the standards. Whether or not fabliaux in my study functioned to discourage or encourage adultery is not a question I am directly concerned with. According to my reading of these three fabliaux, criminal acts such as adultery, and the subsequent shift of attention away from them, set the stage for a comic climax in which any possible focus on guilt can be replaced with a focus on wit. Notions of characters’ “culpability v. innocence” are not only left unresolved in these tales, their resolution is necessarily rendered more or less inconsequential in the moment of the punch line, when one character’s cunning deception

For example, Sidney Berger and Norris Lacy believe that the fabliaux serve to reinforce societal values such as proper marital relationships precisely by showing us what not to do. Others argue that the fabliaux do not truly challenge the institution of marriage because in most tales of adultery the marriages themselves remain intact (See Cooke’s The Old French and Chaucerian Fabliaux). In accordance with Lacy’s stance, Elizabeth Poe suggests that the fabliaux serve to discourage adulterous behavior precisely through their ridicule of the characters depicted in tails of adultery (“The Old and the Feckless”). Jurgen Beyer considers that fabliau genre renounces moral and didactic obligations (“The Morality of the Amoral”).

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becomes the focus of admiration and source of humor. Wit-for-guilt substitution is an important recipe for humor in these three fourteenth-century frame collections, and each fabliau I will discuss displays a marked progression of substitution-related humor that builds towards a comic climax in which wit takes the place of guilt as the desired subject of audience attention.

"THE TALE OF PITAS PAYAS"

The “Enxienplo de lo que conteció a don Pitas Payas pintor de Bretaña” (474-484) or “The Tale of Pitas Payas,” is story of a painter and his pretty, witty young wife. “Pitas Payas” is one of few commonly-acknowledged fabliau episodes in the Libro de buen amor, and follows another fabliau tale, “Ensienplo de los perezosos” (457-467). The allegorical character of Don

66 Menendez Pelayo described “Pitas Payas” as a “fabliaux sumamente desvergonzadísimo” (“a supremely shameless fabliaux,” ctd Lacarra, no pag, my translation), and was perhaps the first critic to explicitly label the tale as part of the fabliau genre, a classification that would continue in later scholarship (See also: Zahareas [“Art”), Geary, and Moffat). The 1790 edition of the Libro excluded the tale for “razones morales” (“moral reasons”), presumably on account of its scandalous nature and theme of adultery. (ctd Lacarra, no pag, my translation)

67 Although these two segments of the Libro are generally referred to as fabliaux, no study has explicitly linked them to any French models. The earliest extant versions of the “Pitas Payas” tale are all from the fourteenth century. They include the Archpriest’s own exemplum, an anonymous German version, and an Italian novella by Sercambi. The fact that these three versions appeared in diverse places over a relatively short period could indicate the circulation of
Amor narrates these short and saucy exempla to the Archpriest during their dramatized discussion about how to be successful in love, an exchange that includes three tales total, each with its own kernel of amorous wisdom to impart.68

According to the Libro’s version of the tale, Pitas Payas, the newly-wed painter from Brittany, paints a tiny lamb on his wife’s stomach before he leaves for a long trip, telling her that it is to keep her safe from “all other folly”: “Pintol so el onbligo un pequeño cordero” (477a); “por que seades guardada de toda altra locura” (476c). He stays away a long time, two full years (477c). Naturally—in the world of fabliaux at least—, the wife takes a lover to “fill her husband’s place” (“tomó un entendedor e pobló la posada”; 478c), during which activity the painting of the lamb gets rubbed off. When the wife hears news of her husband’s return, she instructs her lover to repaint he lamb in its original likeness and location (“dixo le que le pintase commo podiese mejor, en aquel logar mesmo un cordero menor”; 479c). However, what the lover draws, allegedly as a result of his “grand priessa” (“great haste,” 480a), is not a little lamb

68 The sequence of advice offered includes three straightforward instructions—don’t be lazy, don’t abandon your woman, and don’t be a drunkard (stanzas 457-473, 474-484/489, and 528-543, respectively)—and “Pitas Payas” is presented as an example of the second adage about the importance of being vigilant of one’s wife.
but a full grown ram, complete with giant horns: “conplido de cabeça, con todo su apero” (480b).69

When the husband sees the ram with its “armas de prestar” (483b), he correctly suspects his wife’s infidelity and demands an explanation.70 Gazing down at the painting of the horned beast on her abdomen, she explains to her husband matter-of-factly that since he had stayed away a very long time indeed, naturally he should have expected that the little lamb would grow-up: “¿En dos anos petid corder non se fazer carner? / Vos veniéssedes tenprano e trobariades corder.”71 Had he really wanted to see his little lamb as he had painted it, he should have returned sooner.

In “Pitas Payas,” we can deduce that the role of this wifely wit need not necessarily involve duping the husband into truly believing in his spouse’s faithfulness. Although she gets caught, the wife in this tale still gets the last word and proves her superior cunning. The narrator reminds us that she is, as all women, “sotil e mal sabida” (484b).72

69 “endowed with a splendid head and pair of horns.” (480b)

70 Although MacDonald translates “armas de prestar” as “excellent horns,” it also carries the superlative connotation that the horns were so large that there were “horns to spare.”

71 “Doesn’t a little lamb grow into a ram in two years? / If you had come back sooner you would have found the lamb.” (484cd)

72 “Commo en este fecho es sienpre la muger, / sotil e mal sabida…” (“In these matters a woman is always cunning and subtle…”). (484ab)
The phenomenon of substitution functions in diverse ways and at various narrative levels to facilitate the comic climax of the “Pitas Payas” episode. Most obviously, we have the substitution humor related to the switching of the images on the wife’s abdomen. The horned ram that takes the place of the little lamb is, of course, comic beyond its mere essence as a substitution: it is at once a literal and a figural representation of the cuckolding on which the action of the fabliau/exemplum is centered. In this case, “Pitas Payas” employs substitution humor to give comic expression to the well-loved medieval mode of allegory, turning allegorical signification on its head by transforming the figurative into the literal. Howard Helsinger observes a similar process in the context of several Old French French fabliaux: “Allegory turned inside out effectively ceases to be allegory” in the sense that “what was hidden becomes manifest, what was figurative becomes literal, and in the fabliaux that eversion or inversion becomes a source of humor” (94). Fableors can “respect the moral while mocking the method” in this fashion, since “the essence of allegory is not silence, but cunning, not the covert, but the double statement” (93).

What is at once fascinating and hilarious about the humor surrounding the lamb/ram images in Pitas Payas is that the substitution of the images that drives the comic climax aligns perfectly with the replacement of the figural with the literal. We can consider then that in “Pitas Payas,” a husband paints a little lamb—a symbolic representation of innocence and vulnerability—on an emblematically intimate part of his wife’s body in order to “guard” her chastity and faithfulness. However, that symbolic gesture of painting the lamb, along with the image’s intended function as a figurative protection, are recast as rather literal signifiers when the fact and circumstances of the lamb’s disappearance aligns all-too-precisely with the erasure
of the wife’s fidelity. Subsequently, the horned ram painted by the lover in turn becomes the hard evidence for the adulterous act rather than a mere allegorical stand-in for it. The substitution of the images ceases to be a purely figural representation because it is an unequivocal expression of Pitas Payas’s cuckolding: the erasure of the lamb occurs as a direct result of the adulterous act itself rather than a simple emblematic eradication of her fidelity; and the ram’s image is literally and figuratively the mark of another man’s access to her body. In this fashion, the same comic mode of the allegorical “double-statement” aligns with and enhances the substitution-related humor surrounding the lamb and ram images in “Pitas Payas.”

The notion that fableors can “respect the moral while mocking the method” deserves further attention in the context of “Pitas Payas,” especially in light of the fact that the announced moral message (which appears in the stanzas that close the tale) follows rather than precedes the cunning double statement that constitutes its comic climax. In this moralitas, the narrator Don Amor frames his “Enxienplo de lo que conteció a don Pitas Payas” as an educational tale that will help his listener in his future pursuits of amorous success. The episode concludes with Don Amor’s appeal to his audience (the Archpriest) not to fall into the trap of Pitas Payas:

Por ende te castiga, non dexes lo que pides;
non seas Pitas Pajas, para otro non errides;
con dezires fermosos la muger conbides;
Clearly then, “The Tale of Pitas Payas” does have a given moral, and that moral is not unsupported by the anecdote that precedes it—in fact, it proves the Ovidian lesson that Don Amor offers.

Critics who have argued in favor of the importance of didactic messages to the function of “Pitas Payas,” as well as to “The Shipman’s Tale,” have focused on closing morals such as the one above, concluding that these episodes are concerned with emphasizing themes of consequence by offering negative examples from which to learn—tales of “what not to do.” (See also: McGrady, Bedlier, Geary, Finlayson “Chaucer’s ‘Shipman’s Tale’”). In the context of “Pitas Payas,” various scholars have pointed to Don Amor’s instructions in the above quoted stanza as indicative of the episode’s concern for blaming the husband for causing his wife’s adultery (McGrady, Lacarra, Geary). Others link Pitas’s “just desserts” to gender-focused readings of humor. For example, Harriet Goldberg labels the sexual humor in episodes like “Pitas Payas” an example of the male reaction to female superiority, concluding that “we laugh at the discomfort [presumably of the cuckolded husband] and at the emotionally aggressive feelings which are expressed in jest” (82). Although Goldberg’s reading is enlightening, her

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73 “So I advise you, don’t leave what you desire, / Don’t be like Pitas Payas, don’t arouse her for another. / Appeal to her with flattering words, as soon as / She gives you her promise, take care not to forget her.”

74 “The Shipman’s Tale”’s “moral” will be further discussed in my comparative analyses at the end of this chapter.
stance is undercut by the fact that no narrative attention whatsoever is given to the husband’s discomfort; in fact, his reaction to the wife’s retort is not even mentioned.75

The notion that the story’s principle function is to serve as a didactic warning for husbands, or that its humor is derived from the husband’s discomfort, are both questionable when we consider that the majority of the narrative is dedicated to preparing the audience for the entertainment value of the wife’s witty alibi. The comic climax of the wife’s retort essentially requires a suspension of focus on the treachery of the cuckolding itself, thus complicating the argument that the husband’s misfortune (and/or related lesson-learned) are supposed to be the key points of the story. When the focus of the tale shifts to the exaltation of the wife’s witty explanation—a climax toward which all eleven previous stanzas have been building—issues such as the extent of her guilt or the amount of her husband’s misfortune become rather moot points. Enjoyment of the wife’s cunning retort and the “wit-for-guilt” substitution humor of the climax hinges on the audience’s ability to shift their focus to the cleverness of the double-statement, which replaces the adultery itself as the center of audience attention. In conjunction with the substitution of the images, the wife’s cunning cover-up is the most memorable element of the tale. It is the climax toward which the rest of the narrative builds, and without which the essence of the episode unravels completely.

75 Geary on the other hand believes that “Ruiz betrays [the typical misogynist accusations against women] by casting blame on the husband in his conclusion” (255) and affirms his reading that the ending of the episode renders the husband, Pitas Payas, “the receiver of poetic justice” in the episode (247), a question I will return to in my comparative conclusions to this chapter.
CHAUCEL’S “THE SHIPMAN’S TALE” 76

Scholars have dubbed “The Shipman’s Tale” a story of “the lover’s gift regained,” “the cheater-cheated” and “the biter bit.” 77 Substitution is at the heart of the tale in more ways than one. In this Chaucerian fabliau, a cunning young monk cuckolds a rich merchant and outsmarts his beautiful wife. The great wit of the monk lies not only in his swap of one thing for another and the subsequent explanation, but rather in his ability to make a single thing (in this case, a monetary sum) function in different ways to his own advantage and others’ bereavement. Nonetheless, the modes of substitution-related humor, and the “wit-for-guilt” moment of the comic climax, parallel the functions of humor observed in “Pitas Payas.”

“Daum John,” or Sir John, the monk, is a frequent visitor to the home of the merchant and gains the merchant’s confidence by informing him that they may be cousins, a comment that appears to be invented by Sir John for his own benefit. 78 From his conversations with the merchant’s wife, the monk learns that she is unhappy in her marriage because her husband, despite his abundant wealth, will not give her the money she has asked for to buy new clothes. Swearing Sir John to secrecy, the wife pleads with him to give her one hundred francs (“And if myn housbonde eek it mighte espye, / I nere but lost; and therefore I yow preye, / Lene me this

76 It is possible, if not likely, that Chaucer originally meant for the Wife of Bath to narrate this fabliau. For a summary of the critical debate on this matter, see Dane (298-299).

77 See Finlayson. (“Chaucer’s ‘Shipman’s Tale’, Boccaccio, and the ‘Civilizing’ of Fabliau”)

78 See Abraham.
somme, or ellis moot I deye. / Duam John, I seye, lene me thise hundred frankes,” 184-186). Revealing his desire for her with a passionate kiss, the monk agrees to get her the money she has requested. Several hours later, he visits the merchant to ask for a loan in that same amount, alleging that he needs one hundred francs to purchase some livestock. The merchant readily lends the sum, and soon thereafter departs for a business trip to Bruges. His absence sets the stage for the classic fabliau love triangle to ensue. The monk presents the wife with the one hundred francs she has asked for and they spend the night lovemaking (“In myrthe al nyght a bisy lyf they lede,” 318).

After the merchant returns, he pays a friendly visit to the monk to see how “his cosyn” is doing. The monk receives him warmly, thanks him again for the generous loan, and informs him that he already repaid the one hundred francs and left them with the merchant’s wife. The merchant, in turn, scolds his wife for not informing him that the monk had paid the loan back and inquires after the money. Realizing that she has been outsmarted by the monk, the wife apologizes to her husband, admitting that she went behind his back and spent the money clothes shopping. The merchant forgives her on the condition that she be more frugal in the future (“ne

79 “Yet if my husband were to find out / I were as good as lost – ah, don’t deny! Lend me this little sum or I shall die. / Sir John, I say, lend me these hundred francs!” (Coghill)

80 “For certain beestes that I moste beye” (271). Coghill has adapted this verse as “I have to buy some cattle.”

81 The monk confides in the wife that he is not, in fact, the merchant’s cousin. For a discussion of the wordplay related to the use of “cosyn” in this tale, see Abraham.
be namoore so large” 430) and she promises to repay him in the bedroom to compensate for her wrongdoings.

In “The Shipman’s Tale” the wit of the characters is one of the first qualities mentioned. The opening lines of the tale stress the presumed intelligence and wisdom of the merchant: “A marchant whilom dwelled at Seint-Denys, / That rich was, for which men helde hym wys” (1-2, emphasis added). Knowing how the tale ends, one can detect a touch of dramatic irony considering that the merchant not only gets duped but remains entirely unaware that he has been outsmarted and cuckolded, unlike his wife, who is equally duped but in the end realizes that she has been played. This initial mention of the merchant’s “wys[dom]” conditions the audience to further enjoy how the tables turn, thus enhancing attention to wit in the context of substitution humor.

The fact that the monk manages to be forthcoming about such an impressive amount of information without incriminating himself is another detail that contributes to the audience’s admiration for his cunning, and hence enhances the enjoyment of the “wit-for-guilt” comic climax in which such deceptiveness is celebrated. The monk promises the wife only that he will get her the hundred francs that she has asked for and deliver them to her while her husband is

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82 Coghill’s Modern English translation of these opening lines is: “There was a merchant in St Denys once / Who being rich was held to be no dunce.”

68
away, a promise he delivers true to his word. Likewise, the monk manages to be remarkably forthcoming with the merchant too, at least in regard to the literal truth-value of his explanations. He admits to his merchant benefactor that he paid his wife a visit during his absence and gave her the amount of money that he owed the merchant himself—these facts are all true. In fact, the only outright lies that Sir John tells during the course of the entire episode are when he indicates to the merchant that he intends to use the hundred francs to purchase livestock, and also, of course, about being the merchant’s cousin. We are invited to admire Sir John’s prank not strictly in relation to the naughty nature of the acts committed at others’ expense, but also on account of his guileful skill in executing those deceptions without so much as breaking his word to anyone!

Beyond its comic variations on the “wit-for-guilt” mode, the substitution-related humor of “The Shipman’s Tale” is developed hand-in-hand with the mercantile theme. At the most basic level, money is substitution; and in this tale it buys—and hence “becomes”—illicit sex, new clothes, and bedroom favors between spouses. The monetary substitution humor of “The

83 “Now trewely, myn owene lady deere, I have,’ quod he, ‘on yow so greet a routhe / That I yow swere, and plighte yow my trouthe, / That whan youre housbonde is to Flaundres fare, / I wol brynge yow an hundred frankes.’” (199-201)

84 The interrelated themes of commercial exchange, substitution humor and fabliau scandal are common denominators shared by “The Shipman’s Tale” and its Boccaccian analogues, Decameron VIII 1 and 2, and the adaptation on money-lending in these analogues has prompted scholars such as Carol Falvo Heffernan, John Finlayson and Giuseppe Mazzotta to analyze their unique recipe for entertainment value.
Shipman’s Tale” is further enhanced by the fact that it is the same currency (the husband’s one hundred francs) that fills these multiple roles. The exchange and transformation of the money even follows a cycle of sorts, in the end coming full circle when it is returned to the merchant in the currency of sexual debt, with interest to be repaid by his wife. The one hundred francs that the wife requests of the monk as an amorous gift become the loan requested of the merchant, money that is subsequently presented to the wife as a gift in exchange for the anticipated physical gratitude that she bestows on Sir John. The monk’s scheme rebrands this same money as a loan repaid when the wife tells her husband that she has spent his one hundred francs on new clothes—which, hilariously, she has. The fact that it is the same exact quantity of money (not to mention that it is presumably the same physical currency that changes hands) supports the notion that the humor of this particular comic climax is linked to the tit-for-tat substitution as opposed to merely the notions of trickery and adultery alone.

The issue of who gets punished and who does not is a topic of much critical attention in studies of “The Shipman’s Tale” and its two analogues in the Decameron, VIII, 1 and VIII, 2. In comparison to its two Boccaccian analogues, in “The Shipman’s Tale” the distribution of retribution seems more loosely defined, if not open-ended, a scenario that supports my argument that questions of guilt or innocence, while present, are designed to take the backseat in this mode of substitution humor.85 The humor of this tale’s comic climax derives most directly from the audience’s appreciation for Sir John’s conniving trick rather than from the retribution of just

85 Helen Cooper goes so far as to suggest that “The Shipman’s Tale,” is “the only one” of Chaucer’s fabliaux “to be totally amoral.” (163)
desserts among other characters. Despite the fact that the monk’s cunning feat caused some degree of injury to others, it is not his generation of their misfortune but his superior wit that provides the recipe for humor prevalent in this tale and the other two fabliaux in the present study. More specifically, it is the clear invitation to focus on his guile in place of his culpability that illustrates how “wit-for-guilt” substitution functions at the heart of this episode.

**DECAMERON IX, 6**

Notions of transaction and trade are at very heart of the frame tale tradition itself, as the exchange of multiple and diverse story-telling events provides a premise for the genre’s very structure. At times, the exchange between the intradiegetic narrators of each of these three frame collections even becomes competitive, when the alternating story-tellers attempt to “one-up” one another with their wit and their narrative abilities. The competitive nature of these literary transactions is particularly apparent in Boccacio’s *Decameron*, as well as in Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, more so than in the *Libro*, but it is undoubtedly a common thread among all three.

*Decameron* IX, 6 is a tale that leaves little to want: it has adultery, young love, premeditated deceit as well as spontaneous trickery, a farcical sequence involving cradle tricks and “musical beds,” and a relatively happy ending. The narrator, Panfilo, announces that the pretext for the story is to demonstrate “how a good woman’s presence of mind averted a serious

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86 *Decameron* IX, 6 is an analogue to Chaucer’s “Reeve’s Tale.” A comparative discussion of the different versions of this lively story is beyond the scope of my present study. For a survey of the scholarship on their sources and relationships, see Beidler.
scandal” (“per ciò che in essa vedrete un subito avvedimento d'una buona donna avere un grande scandalo tolto via,” 003). As in “The Shipman’s Tale,” the audience is subtly preconditioned to direct its attention to a character’s cunning and anticipate how it will play out in the course of the episode.

As the novella begins, a lovestruck and determined Florentine gentleman named Pinuccio contrives to consummate his love for a country girl, Niccolosa. With his friend Adriano as an accomplice, Pinuccio pretends to be passing through Niccolosa’s village of Mugnone on his way back to Florence from a long journey. The two not-so-weary travelers take advantage of Niccolosa’s father’s hospitality and request lodging at her family’s cottage, a humble dwelling that is home to Niccolosa, her father, her beautiful mother, and her younger sibling, who is still an infant. After the group retires for the night, the sole bedroom in the house, which has just three beds and a cradle, becomes the backdrop for the rest of the farcical sequence in the novella.

As the evening begins, Adriano and Pinuccio share one of the three beds, the second bed is Niccolosa’s, and in the third sleep Niccolosa’s parents, with the infant’s cradle at the bedside. When all are asleep, Pinuccio quietly creeps into bed with Niccolosa, who gladly receives him, and they proceed to enjoy themselves according to the young man’s plan.87 Meanwhile, Niccolosa’s mother is awakened when the housecat knocks something over, and just as she leaves her bed to see what has fallen, Adriano also coincidentally gets up to relieve himself. As

87 “pianamente levatosi se n’andò al letticello dove la giovane amata da lui si giaceva, e miselesi a giacere allato: dalla quale, ancora che paurosamente il facesse, fu lietamente raccolto, e con essolei di quel piacere che piú disideravano prendendo si stette.” (013)
he stumbles to and from the lavatory, Adriano inadvertently repositions the cradle next to his
own bed. When the wife returns she instinctively makes for her own bed until she notices the
cradle is next to the other bed. Laughing to herself, “I was just about to step into the bed where
my guests are sleeping!” (“. . . che io me n'andava dirittamente nel letto degli osti miei,” 016),
the wife climbs into the bed next to the cradle, presuming her husband is the other occupant. A
startled Adriano is quick to make the most of the situation.88

One bed over, Pinuccio has tired himself out and he leaves his beloved Niccolosa to head
back to the original bed he shared with Adriano, however, disoriented by the bed-swapping that
has already occurred, he has some trouble figuring out where to go. Logically, he chooses the
only bedstead that has only one occupant and no adjacent cradle. Eager to boast to the person he
believes to be Adriano, Pinuccio ends up whispering of his conquests directly in Niccolosa’s
father’s ear:

‘Ben ti dico che mai sì dolce cosa non fu come è la Niccolosa! Al corpo di Dio,
io ho avuto con lei il maggior diletto che mai uomo avesse con femina.’ (018)
‘I swear to you there was never anything so delicious as Niccolosa! By the body
of God, no man ever had so much pleasure with any woman as I have been having
with her.’

88 “. . . in quello letto al quale ella era allato insieme con Adriano si coricò, credendosi col
marito coricare. Adriano, che ancora radormentato non era, sentendo questo la ricevette e bene e
lietamente, e senza fare altramenti motto da una volta in su caricò l'orza con gran piacer della
donna.” (017)
Hearing this, the host becomes enraged and vows to avenge the insult of Pinuccio’s dreadful act (“la tua è stata una gran villanía…io te ne pagherò,” 020). Overhearing the bickering across the room, Niccolosa’s mother comments to her bed partner (whom she still believes is her husband), “Heavens! Just listen to the way those guests of ours are arguing with one another!” (“Ohimè! odi gli osti nostri che hanno non so che parole insieme,” 022). It is not until she hears an unfamiliar voice reply to her that the wife realizes she has in fact been in bed with the guest herself, and that she has cuckolded her spouse. In rapid response to this realization, the wife jumps out of Adriano’s bed, slides the cradle back to its original spot, hops into the adjacent bed with Niccolosa, and calls out to her husband, “[Pinuccio]’s telling a pack of lies! He hasn’t been anywhere near Niccolosa, for I’ve been lying beside her myself the whole time!” With equally fast thinking, Adriano plays along, chastising Pinuccio for sleepwalking and inventing wild stories. Should the tale have ended here, we would have the classic “wit-for-guilt” case scenario in which the wife’s cunning cover-up for adulterous behavior becomes the center of the audience’s attention and admiration. However, there is one more comic switch ahead in this tale,

89 “Egli mente bene per la gola, ché con la Niccolosa non è egli giaciuto: ché io mi ci coricai io in quel punto che io non ho mai poscia potuto dormiré.” (026)

90 “Pinuccio, io te l'ho detto cento volte … ché questo tuo vizio del levarti in sogno e di dire le favole che tu sogni per vere ti daranno una volta la mala ventura!” (027)

(“How many times do I have to tell you, Pinuccio … You’ll land yourself in serious trouble one of these days, with this habit of walking in your sleep, and claiming to have actually done the fantastic things you dream about!”)
as the final punch line provides an extra level of laughter with regard to whose wit has serviced whom.

Believing the joint explanations of Adriano and his wife, the Host ushers Pinuccio back to his own bed, after shaking him to “wake him up.”91 In the morning, the group laughs together about Pinuccio’s sleep walking fantasies—surely figments of his dreams—before sending the pair of Florentines on their merry way. The narrator, Panfilo, assures his audience that Niccolosa and Pinuccio found other ways to continue their romance without either of her parents ever knowing what actually happened on that fateful evening. The fabliau ends with a final punch line from the narrator, Panfilo: “E poi appresso, trovati altri modi, Pinuccio con la Niccolosa si ritrovò, la quale alla madre affermava lui fermamente aver sognato . . . per la qual cosa la donna, ricordandosi dell’abbracciar d’ Adriano, sola seco diceva d’aver vegghiato,” (033). Panfilo informs us that the witty wife, despite all her cunning at concealing her own romp with Adriano, in fact had had no idea she had provided the cover-up for her daughter’s rendezvous as well: she continued to believe that she herself must have been the only one awake on the night in question!

We need not wait for a wit-for-guilt punch line in order to begin to enjoy the substitution-related play that occurs in Decameron IX, 6. Pinuccio and Adriano exploit several substitution-related strategies in order to arrive at their destination of Niccolosa’s cottage. They carefully plot the direction of their entrance into the village in order to make it look as though they have not departed from Florence but are in fact returning to Florence from Romagna (“di Firenze uscirono, e presa una lor volta, sopra il pian di Mugnon cavalcando pervennero…” 008). They

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91 “‘Pinuccio, destati; tornati al letto tuo.’” (028)
stuff their saddlebags with straw (“piene di paglia” 008) in place of actual supplies to give further impression of their long trip.

Also, of course, the scene of the changing and exchanging of the beds constitutes the most substantial part of the novella (013-030 of only 33 total sections), and its farcical humor directly derives from the physical swapping of places, a substitution at the most basic level. The substitution of one bed partner for another occurs multiple times in the course of the episode, however the only premeditated switch is that of Pinuccio’s visit to Niccolosa’s bed. The other swaps and exchanges—the repositioning of the cradle, Adriano’s escapade with Niccolosa’s mother, Pinuccio’s surprise visit to the Host’s bed—occur as a series of impromptu scandals or confusions, which are only “resolved” in turn through yet another string of substitutions: the wife’s final switch into her daughter’s bed provides the foundation for the fabricated alibis which explain away the true events of the evening, substituting fibs for truth.

Although the “musical beds” routine and the other substitution-related strategies employed by Pinuccio are comical on their own, they are not nearly as humorous without the sequence of “wit-for-guilt” substitutions through which the audience enjoys how these characters conceal the extramarital sex that has taken place. As in “Pitas Payas” and “The Shipman’s Tale,” in Decameron IX, 6 there is an innocent explanation and cunning cover-up substituted for the truth about an adulterous situation, and this excuse is enunciated by the guilty party and offered directly to the cuckold. Also, as in “The Shipman’s Tale,” those praised in the beginning for their smarts are the same characters that end up duped by the episode’s close. In the “The Shipman’s Tale” of course this is the “wys” merchant, whose wit is praised in the opening lines but who ends up unknowingly facilitating (and funding) his wife’s affair. In Decameron IX, 6, Panfilo
initially announces that his tale will show “how a good woman’s piece of mind” saves the day (“un subito avvedimento d’una buona donna avere un grande scandalo tolto via,” 003), which we can presume refers to the wife’s quick-witted alibi that simultaneously exonerates multiple parties. However, despite successfully covering up her own infidelity, the wife remains entirely ignorant of her daughter’s affair and her guests’ trickery, which adds an ironic twist to the narrator’s initial praise for female guile.\footnote{As referenced on the previous page, Panfilo announces that he will tell a tale of “how a good woman’s presence of mind averted a serious scandal.” (“un subito avvedimento d’una buona donna avere un grande scandalo tolto via,” 003)}}

\textbf{COMPARATIVE ANALYSES AND CONCLUSIONS}

In each of the examined fabliau from these collections, the exaggeration of one character’s stupidity contributes to the perception of the “duper’s” relative wit. More importantly, and in all three, the undeniable hyperbole of idiocy or naïveté of the duped character(s) supports a reading of these framed fabliaux in which an audience’s acceptance of the substitution in question—suspending or dismissing focus on alleged culpability for an act of deception in favor of a focus on the cleverness of the deceiver—is the most essential element of the comic climax. The importance of this “wit-for-guilt” sequence to the comic climax becomes increasingly evident when we examine the omnipresence of other narrative elements that function to promote it.

The exaggerated obviousness of the incriminations that take place in these three episodes in fact only serves to enhance the focus on cunning that is fundamental to the wit-for-guilt
substitutions driving the comic climaxes. Like the wife in “Pitas Payas,” the adulterous characters in *Decameron* IX, 6 not only get caught but they do so as the result of a give-away that is laughably obvious. The painting of a ram on Pitas Payas’s wife’s abdomen is a less-than-subtle indication of her infidelity; and Pinuccio exposes all guilty parties when he whispers details of his sinful behavior directly into the ear of the one person from whom such concerted efforts had been made to conceal it. The obviousness of the incriminations themselves serve to further enhance the showcasing of wit and its comic substitution for guilt, the swap that is fundamental to the humor in these fabliaux. Likewise, although the monk in “The Shipman’s Tale” does not get caught, the extent of his disclosure to the merchant (openly admitting that he paid back the loan to the wife during the merchant’s absence, not to mention using the merchant’s own money to fund his affair) serves the same function of heightening the audience’s awareness of how unabashedly he risked exposure and, in turn, their admiration for his crafty evasion of consequences. In other words, if it takes respectable smarts to do something criminal and avoid exposure or penalty, then it takes truly exceptional guile to flirt with detection and punishment, and yet still manage to get away with things—or, at the very least, get the last laugh. In all three episodes, the exaggeration of the level of incrimination that these characters risk (or suffer) only serves in turn to enhance the humorous effect when wit replaces guilt as the object of audience attention and source of laughter.

Another potent, humor-generating element that goes hand in hand with the substitution humor we see in all three of these episodes is repetition. In effect, and by definition, a substitution is not a substitution without an element of repetition. The recognizability of the repeated action, coupled with that action’s slight alteration through substitution, are what
produce the comic effect in the substitution-driven humor that I identify in “Pitas Payas,” “The Shipman’s Tale,” and Decameron IX, 6.

Henri Bergson has theorized repetition’s relationship to humor as follows:

It is not a question of a word or phrase that a character repeats, but rather of a situation, that is to say, a combination of circumstances that return repeatedly . . .

Each repetition of a mildly humorous situation conditions the reader so that a point is reached when a new occurrence provokes real laughter. (84)

In the substitution-related humor explored in this chapter, the “repetition” in question occurs when one event, item or idea reappears at a later point in a new and incongruous context, or as its own inversion. In Decameron IX, 6, for example, it is the switching of bed partners and generation of excuses regarding those exchanges. In “The Shipman’s Tale” it is the promise and delivery of one hundred francs that repeats in different scenarios and diversely (mis)understood transactions. In “Pitas Payas” the recurrence consists of two situations in which a man paints an image of an animal on a woman’s abdomen after bedding her.

When we attempt to imagine what comic value would be lost for these fabliaux without certain key repetitions, we can more readily observe how repetition contributes to (and constitutes) much of the substitution-related humor in the episodes analyzed. For example, if we were to remove substitution-related repetition from the “Pitas Payas” episode, such as the act of painting on the wife or of the kind of animal that is painted, then the fabliau would lose the essence of its comic climax. For good measure, let us imagine that Pitas returns to find the lamb he painted is gone and his wife offers a witty explanation: “You were away for two whole years—even lambs aren’t that patient!” Despite retaining some key comic elements (the fabliau
love triangle, the wife’s clever retort), this hypothetical second version does not rival the original in comic climax without the repetition-related substitution surrounding the act of painting on the wife. Repetition is inextricably linked to the substitution humor that drives the hilarity in this fabliau as well as the other two in my study.\textsuperscript{93}

Clearly, certain characters are winners and others are losers in these three fabliaux, and this detail also seems to contribute to their comic effects. Alcuin Blamires discusses the nature of Chaucer’s fabliaux’s “comedy of retribution”: “mysterious forces generate an unexpectedly satisfying outcome” in which “often spontaneous actions within the plot will eventually and suddenly be perceived by readers as belonging to a providential master plan at that point where the plot ‘clicks shut’” (Blamires 628). Certainly substitution-humor’s appearance alongside motifs of retribution appears to be a commonality across all three collections in my study, however to what extent does the “click” in “Pitas Payas,” “The Shipman’s Tale,” and Decameron IX, 6 have to do with retributive justice?

I have found that Mazzotta’s description of the beffa, a motif and comic narrative element he observes in specific days of the Decameron, lends itself rather aptly to my characterization of

\textsuperscript{93} Obviously, the humor is also linked to the cuckolding connotation of the specific animal in question (the ram) but it also undoubtedly derives from the repetition of that particular kind of animal as the painted image, substituting horned adult for baby lamb. What if Pitas had initially painted a little bird or a rose, and \textit{that} image was the one replaced by the ram? Even with the wittiest of explanations from the wife, the comic climax would not be as strong without these elements of repetition at the foundation of substitution humor.
the climactic “click” in these episodes and its potential relationship to retribution. In Italian, beffa refers to a hoax or trick, a practical joke. As Mazzotta explains, a beffa is “a prank by which a schemer is unmasked and repaid in kind” (190)—a definition that underlines the beffa’s dependence on substitution as exchange and as deception. In other words, a beffa is not just any kind of joke or humorous situation, rather, it is especially linked to the idea of “outsmarting,” as well as to the notion of exchanging one thing for another that is expected or due, and to the triumph of wit in a comic situation: “[the beffa] is a paradigm of exchange, the quid pro quo; and as such it mimes both the law of the market [and] the narrative structure of the text . . .” (190).

Directly following the conclusion to “The Shipman’s Tale,” the comments of the Host highlight the didactic elements of the fabliau and remind us why we should be wary of men like the monk:

‘God yeve the monk a thousand last quade yeer!
A ha! Felawes, beth ware of swich a jape!
The monk putte in the mannes hood an epe,
And in his wyves eek, by Seint Austyn!
Draweth no monkes moore unto youre in…’ (435-441)94

This message is not mismatched with the plotline of the story, since we see that Sir John takes advantage of both the wife and the merchant, characters that we can consider to be at the

94 “‘A load of lousy luck upon that monk! / Hey, fellows, watch your step for such a jape! He took the merchant’s hood and put an ape / Inside, by St. Augustine, and what’s more / Into his wife’s hood too! / Well, shut your door / Against all monks!’”
receiving end their own personalized form of “poetic justice.” Curiously, though, if we remove Sir John’s treachery from the tale, we also arguably remove all of its humorous elements. The conclusion to the tale itself does not accentuate the husband’s humiliation or play-up the wife’s despair: the wife gets her shopping spree and is forgiven by her husband, the monk gets his way with the wife without getting caught, the Merchant gets repaid in bed for the money his wife spent on clothing. Clearly then, the comic climax has more to do with the cunning of the monk as it does with any “fair punishment” received by the wife (for her adultery) or the Merchant (for his stupidity or stinginess). This fabliau’s focus on the humorous and entertaining nature of the monk’s trickery is of much greater importance to its comic climax than any themes of retribution that are present.

In *Decameron* IX, 6 there is no closing moral, but there is an opening reference to the story as an illustration of how a woman’s cunning saves the day. Whether this affirmation is intentionally tongue-in-cheek or merely a *non sequitur*, its lack of perfect alignment with the *novella* is plain to observe. The cunning heroine in question, Niccolosa’s mother, remains ignorant of her daughter’s exploits with Pinuccio, having herself unintentionally facilitated their cover-up. The wit-for-guilt mode of humor in “The Shipman’s Tale” requires admiration for the same character that the didactic message instructs us to avoid; and the same wit-for-guilt mode in *Decameron* IX, 6 requires us to laugh at the character that is initially announced as the cunning
heroine. These sorts of incongruities may well have enhanced entertainment value for medieval audiences rather than detracted from any comic effect or didactic messages.  

One curious common denominator that unites “wit-for-guilt” substitutions and possible themes of poetic justice in these three fabliau episodes is that each phenomenon exists at a privileged level in the narrative action, as an “inside joke” of sorts between narrator and audience. In each of the fabliaux I have analyzed there is at least one duped character who remains unaware of the full truth for which the witty alibi has been substituted; and, if we do consider that poetic justice is dealt, it is that same character who remains unaware of it. For example, until the very end of “The Shipman’s Tale,” the audience and the monk are the only ones who understand the full nature of the transactions that have taken place with the merchant’s 100 francs, and are thus able to anticipate any elements of retributive “justice” that may characterize the conclusion of the tale. Likewise, in “Pitas Payas,” whether the husband has understood the euphemistic metaphor of the comic climax seems to be a moot point, as his reaction to the wife’s explanation is not referenced at all. Seen in this light, the wit-for-guilt substitutions are part of a humorous exchange between narrator and audience, a “wink,” of sorts, and the poetic justice of these fabliaux can function in the same way.

Searching to align themes of poetic justice, humor and the announced moral messages of fabliaux such as these three tales is, at times, an impossible task and has been acknowledged as

95 See Catherine Brown’s Chapter “Sed diversa non adversa,” as well as my Chapter IV from this study, “From Beginning to End and the Roads in Between: Hermeneutical Humor in the Libro de buen amor and ‘The Nun’s Priest’s Tale.’”
such by various scholars of the fabliau genre. For example, Keith Busby observes the disconnect between the culminating punch line of the fabliaux “Cele qui se fist foutre sur la fosse de son mari” and its subsequent closing moral, and wonders whether the narrator’s misogynist message at the story’s conclusion could be functioning more as a “convenient closural device” than as anything else. Certainly the nature of the comic climaxes in “Pitas Payas,” “The Shipman’s Tale,” and Decameron IX, 6 present similar incongruities when considered alongside the announced morals or messages in the tales. Before we read too deeply into the specified morals or possible poetic justice of these three fabliaux, we should consider the relationship of those elements to the all-important comic climax.

Lack of character development (or space for it) is a characteristic feature of the fabliaux, and such economy in plotline and character detail is also thought to contribute to the comic power of the genre. In her comparisons of the fabliau tradition to the courtly romance, Elizabeth Poe concludes that the recipe for fabliau humor hinges on the audience’s inability to identify with the characters or take them seriously:

*Whereas courtly love models will often romanticize adulterous lovers by detailing the emotional progression of their relationship or the justifications behind their affair, fabliaux lack this level of detail in character- and plot- development, [resulting in] narrative focused on action and comic climax, with little to no room for or interest in developing audience’s sympathies for any characters. (132)*

As far as questions of poetic justice are concerned, it is difficult to argue that a certain character gets his or her “deserved” punishment (or merited prize) when the tales themselves focus audience attention on the wit of the duper as opposed to the consequences of the crime in
question or the character development of those it effects. None of our dupers in these three episodes are cast in a markedly positive or negative light, and the poor chumps that they outsmart are neither victimized nor criticized in any apparent way. According to my reading, the comic climaxes of all three of these episodes are driven by wit-for-guilt substitution rather than by satisfaction derived from themes of retribution or identification with characters.

To be clear, a focus on poetic justice need not necessarily undermine or detract from “wit for guilt” substitution humor as a general rule, although in many cases the one complicates the other considerably. As Mazzotta identifies, a beffa can serve on the one hand as a vehicle of poetic or “retributive” justice (a value often assigned to it by the narrator), or on the other hand as a way in which one character asserts his superior wit (192). Although Mazzotta distinguishes these two functions as fundamentally unique, they are not mutually exclusive.

In the most basic terms, we can consider that narratives of poetic justice are concerned with who gets punished and why that punishment is fitting. At the risk of stressing the obvious, I consider that one does not need to be funny to tell a tale of poetic justice. And yet the three framed fabliaux that I have analyzed in this chapter are, perhaps above all else, hilariously entertaining. To place too prominent a focus on poetic justice or any related “moralizing” messages as the defining features of these comic climaxes is to misunderstand them.

My investigations place the phenomenon of substitution at the heart of the humor of these framed fabliau episodes from the Libro de buen amor, the Decameron, and The Canterbury Tales. Substitution-related humor drives and defines the comic functionality of the tales’

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96 In Mazzotta’s words, “a means by which a hierarchy of intelligence is asserted” (192).
narrative action as well as their wit-for-guilt punch lines. According to Cooke, the force that drives the comic climax of the fabliaux is the link that is established between “some sort of surprise . . . and the preparation for that surprise,” and the narrative preconditions its audience to receive the comic climax with satisfaction and enjoyment (109). The preceding analyses have shed some light on the nature of that “surprise” in “Pitas Payas,” “The Shipman’s Tale” and Decameron IX, 6, thus tracing the mode of “wit-for-guilt” substitution humor that I have identified across all three of these fourteenth-century frame collections and its presence in their contained fabliaux. In my next chapter, I will explain how this breed of “wit-for-guilt” substitution humor extends to the extrodiegetic level of the external narrators and author-figures for these collections: Chaucer, Boccaccio, and the Archpriest of Hita, Juan Ruiz.
CHAPTER III.
WIT-FOR-GUILT SUBSTITUTIONS AND THE EXTRADIEGETIC NARRATORS:
THE COMICAL ART OF THE SELF-FASHIONED MOCK TRIAL

In the well-studied prose prologue to the Libro de buen amor the Archpriest makes clear that he knows his book walks a fine line between Sinning 101 and Salvation: The Manual. He swears to us that, although the Libro will expose us to the ways of loco amor, “God knows” that his book is not intended to teach us to sin: “dios sabe que la mi jntención non fue de lo fazer por dar manera de pecar.” By calling attention to the need to defend his work’s good intentions, he is explicitly acknowledging—as well as heightening our interest in—the “naughty/nice” nature of its content. He offers his personal advice against “loco amor” while also simultaneously highlighting the fact that it is really only human to sin. The Archpriest informs his audience that they have come to the right place in the off chance that they do want to learn the ways of loco amor (hypothetically, of course): “[ . . . ] en pero por que es vmanal cosa pecar, si algunos, lo que non los conssejo, quisieren vsar del loco amor, aquí fallaran algunas maneras para ello.”\textsuperscript{97}

As discussed in the previous chapter, double-meanings provide potential for humor at a very fundamental level of substitution-related play, and in this way these three texts tap into the very nature of metaphor and language in their comic interrogations of meaning. The three extradiegetic narrators also incorporate such comic use of polysemy into their self-fashioned

\textsuperscript{97}“However, because it is only human to sin, if some people want to indulge in the excesses of worldly love, which I do not advise, they will find various ways to do so described here.”
mock trials. One of the more memorable examples to be explored in this chapter is a segment from Boccaccio’s *Conclusione*, in which he puts himself on trial for his word choices and then craftily answers to this accusation by emphasizing his use of “onesti vocabuli” (003-004):

Saranno per avventura alcune di voi che diranno che io abbia nello scriver queste novelle troppa licenza usata [. . .] La qual cosa io nego, per ciò che niuna sí *disonesta* n'è, che, con *onesti vocaboli* dicendola, si disdica a alcuno: il che qui mi pare assai convenevolmente bene aver fatto. (Conclusione 003-004, my emphasis).

Perchance there will be those among you who say that by writing these tales I have exercised too much liberty… A thing which I deny, for no story is so *unvirtuous* that it would be impossible to tell using *truthful words*; and I can fairly say I’ve done that much. (my translation)\(^8\)

After making a point to comment on these accusations (charges that he has alleged against himself, essentially) he delights in showing us how he can free himself from blame. He denies these alleged accusations that he took too much liberty (“troppa licenza”) or used too little discretion in his writing on the grounds that, since he elected to employ the “right” words (“onesti vocabuli”) to tell the stories, there is not a single tale that must necessarily be understood as “wrong” and cannot be read as virtuous. It is important to note that the adjectives *onesto* and its opposite *disonesto* are tricky, and of course chosen for that reason: at once we

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\(^8\) In the context of section 003, Boccaccio’s apostrophe is directed at those who might accuse him of writing inappropriate stories that endanger the female readers to whom he dedicates the book.
could be talking about what is true, what is fair, what is correct, what is virtuous, or what is chaste (and their respective opposites where disonesto is implied). Interestingly enough, despite the earthy content of most of the novelle in the Decameron, it is true that there are extremely few instances where narrators employ any actual “parollacce” (“bad words”) or low language.99

Rhetorical fanfares such as these tongue-in-cheek explanations of good intentions constitute a mode of humor that I have dubbed the “self-fashioned mock trial,” a terminology that I will explain in greater detail below. The current chapter demonstrates how these intentionally wily self-defenses are present across all three of the fourteenth-century frame collections in my study, and how they function comically in each. The textual instances that will be my primary focus in this analysis include Archpriest’s prose sermon, Boccaccio’s Introduction to Day IV and his Conclusione, and Chaucer’s prologue to “The Miller’s Tale.” In all of these episodes, the external narrators of the collections include an apostrophe to their audiences to explain their moral intentions, and each defense takes on a highly self-aware, guileful nature. When these extradiegetic narrators invoke the comic mode of the “self-fashioned mock trial,” they intentionally highlight their potential culpability for the lewd content of their works, only to then divert the audience’s attention away from the extent of their guilt and toward the extent of their cleverness in avoiding blame. Wit replaces guilt as the desired subject of audience attention, and a feigned nod toward an examination of conscience quickly proves to be

99 These include very few instances, and only “mild scatology” at that. For further discussion on Boccaccio’s use of “parolacce,” see Rebhorn. (lxviii-lxx)
an amusingly display of self-fashioned defense rhetoric—a source laughter and entertainment for fourteenth-century audiences and for us today.

**AUTHOR-NARRATORS TAKE THE STAND: “MOCK TRIAL” EPISODES TO BE EXPLORED ACROSS THREE COLLECTIONS**

Although I will reserve the more in-depth comparative analysis for the later portion of this chapter, it is useful to highlight the passages that I refer to as comic “mock trials” briefly here at the outset of my discussion. As mentioned, the section of focus in the *Libro de buen amor* is its prose prologue—a ninety-seven line segment composed in the form of a sermon and found only in the fifteenth-century Salamanca manuscript—in which the author-narrator explains that his book offers abundant information about carnal love, but that his intentions are only “good” ones. In Chaucer’s prologue to “The Miller’s Tale,” the author’s voice interjects to warn the audience that the Miller is about to tell a rather raunchy story and to explain that, since he as author has no power to censure the Miller’s narration, those who prefer not to hear such filth should skip the tale and choose another. In the *Decameron* there are two sections that I will treat as “self-fashioned mock trials.” The first appears in the Introduction to Day IV, in which Boccaccio makes a lengthy apostrophe to his lady readers addressing and defending himself against a number of hypothetical accusations. The second appears in the *Conclusione*, when Boccaccio returns to his tongue-in-cheek examination of conscience, and goes great lengths to

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100 The prose prologue’s classification as a sermon has attracted significant critical attention and debate; which I will discuss it later on in this chapter.
further insult anyone who would criticize his moral intentions.\footnote{These segments mentioned, from Day IV and the Conclusione, are two of only three instances where Boccaccio addresses his audience directly. The third occurs in the Preface or Proemio.} As is also the case in the “mock trial” segments of the Libro and The Canterbury Tales, Boccaccio’s mention of any potential accusations against him as author seem to service his own show of wit in self-defense rather than actually address any real debates about authorial innocence and good intentions.

The proclivity for the theme of “wit” and of “out-witting” is certainly not unique to the fourteenth-century frame tale tradition or even to medieval comic literature in general. Rather, it is a favorite \textit{topos} across many different genres and centuries, from wisdom literature and biblical allegory to beast fables and fabliaux. Undeniably, however, the thematic importance of “wit” is a hallmark of these three collections and their contained stories.

The previous chapter demonstrated how an emphasis on wit figures prominently in the comic modes of fabliaux episodes across all three frame collections. More specifically, the chapter proved how the substitution of wit for guilt constituted the shift of audience attention necessary to the comic climax of each of the examined tales. It should not be surprising, then, that a certain reverence for wit—its comic power, its multiple variations,\footnote{Wayne Rebhorn comments on “intelligence” as one of the three main themes of the Decameron, stating that it is “really a shorthand term for all the many different words Boccaccio uses in Italian to identify a range of mental attributes; from reason, prudence, and sound judgment through good sense, sagacity and resourcefulness, down to ingenuity, cleverness, and trickery.” (xliv)} and its relationship to
guilt—also characterizes the humor present at the extradiegetic level of the *Libro de buen amor*, the *Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales*. The “self-fashioned mock trial” mode of humor that I identify in this Chapter occurs in the commentary of the author/narrators involves a delight in crime and cunning that is similar to the “wit-for-guilt” substitution humor previously observed at the level of the characters in the fabliau episodes analyzed in Chapter II (Chaucer’s “The Shipman’s Tale,” *Decameron* IX, 6 and the *Libro*’s “Tale of Pitas Payas”). In all cases, comic effect is enhanced by the understanding that someone did something naughty and got away with it, and the successful aversion of blame is essential to the sequence that generates the humor.¹⁰³

Although they exhibit some general similarities to the “wit-for-guilt” humor present in the framed fabliaux episodes, the segments that I am presently analyzing as comic “mock trials” exemplify a fundamentally different breed of humor—and a different level of “wit-for-guilt” substitution. In the case of the fabliau episodes discussed in the previous chapter, the alleged “guilt” in question pertains to a character in the narrative, and it is presumably on account of adulterous behavior, financial scandal and various forms of deceit committed for the duper’s own

¹⁰³ As Rebhorn has observed in the case of the *Decameron*, “From the very first day . . . intelligence manifests itself in the ability to speak well, in eloquence, and in a general way with witty words. More important, intelligence enables people to create compelling fictions, to make up stories, that persuade others to do their bidding.” According to Rebhorn, Day VI celebrates “an ideal Florence made up of witty, clever citizens, whose intelligence is manifested in their *motti*—that is, their witty quips and clever repartee.” (*Introduction* xlv; li)
benefit. In the case of the “wit-for-guilt” humor of the extradiegetic mock trial, on the other hand, the alleged guilt that our three author-narrator figures are skirting is associated with the salacious nature of the narrated material itself. Furthermore, the humorous effect (the reason and way in which the focus on wit is funny) of the comic mode that I call “self-fashioned mock trial” is not akin to that of a punch line or comic climax as was the case with the “wit-for-guilt” humor of the fabliaux. Rather, the mock trial mode of humor builds as a sense of ironic intrigue, or even of complicity, in which the extradiegetic narrator inscribes his audiences as both admirer and coconspirator. In each case, the narrator’s intentional broadcasting of his own potential guilt for the lewd content of his writings functions to heighten audience interest in that content. Furthermore, the narrator’s display of sharp wits in avoiding the (self-suggested) hypothetical blame serves as a source of added amusement. In other words, if the nature of “wit-for-guilt” substitution humor in the fabliaux can be likened to the slap, the click, or the climactic punch line, then the nature of the “wit-for-guilt” substitution humor in these extradiegetic mock trials can be likened to slow and knowing smirk, a wink from narrator to audience.

Certainly a narrator is not always to be identified with his or her author. Understanding the relationship between the texts in question and the narrator-author figures to which I am referring can at times be a complex task, further complicated by the polyvocal nature of the frame tale genre, in which both internal and external narrative voices interweave storytelling events into a framed context. In the present chapter, I focus on those outside or external narrative voices, voices that identify themselves as the “authors” of the collections. Here it is also important to clarify, however, that when I reference these three author-narrators by name—“Boccaccio,” “Chaucer,” or “the Archpriest of Hita, Juan Ruiz”—I am not referring to the
historio-biographic figures so much as the personas that they necessarily assume and construct as part of the “author function” in the fictional context of their narratives.\textsuperscript{104}

As members of the frame tale genre, the \textit{Libro de buen amor}, \textit{Decameron}, and \textit{The Canterbury Tales} have internal “character-narrators” who identify themselves as the tellers of the contained stories (Chaucer’s Shipman, for example, or Boccaccio’s Panfilo, or the allegorical character of Don Amor in the \textit{Libro}), as well as external or “extradiegetic” narrators responsible for setting-the-stage for the outer level of fiction in which the smaller narrative events take place. In the case of these three texts specifically, the extradiegetic narrators identify themselves as the author figures for the collections (Boccaccio, Chaucer, the Archpriest of Hita).

The frame tale genre is unique because of the necessary interdependence between the outside or organizing “frame,” and the individual narrative events that take place within its context (and/or at times, within one another). Whether they are tightly chained or loosely intertwined, the diverse narrative levels of a frame tale collection are codependent in meaning and context, thus creating manifold levels of narrator/audience interaction, and numerous challenges for literary analysis. Although many individual tales told could arguably stand on their own as narrative events, in most cases their meaning derives from and depends on their

\textsuperscript{104} See Foucault, “What is an author?”: “It would be just as wrong to equate the author with the real writer as to equate him with the fictitious speaker; the author function is carried out and operates in the scission itself, in this division and this distance [ . . . ] all discourses endowed with the author function do possess this plurality of self.” (112)
context within the outer-frame, as well as on their relationships to one another. When analyzing frame tale narratives, it is important to acknowledge the distinctions and intrinsic narrative tensions that exist between the frame itself (the external or “extradiegetic” narrative) and the enclosed tales (the contained stories or intradiegetic narratives).

Irwin refers to the external or overarching narrative voice as “author” in the case of works like *The Canterbury Tales* and the *Decameron*. However, Irwin also highlights the

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105 Irwin classifies the outer frame as the weaker or more dependent of the narrative levels, however she also acknowledges that any individual frame tale, despite its ability to “stand alone” as a narrative, will never have the same connotation on its own that it has when it appears within its frame context: “Despite its power over its contents, however, the frame tale alone is rather weak. It derives its meaning largely from what it contains and thus does not stand independently from the tales enclosed within it. Conversely, however, an interpolated tale can stand alone or appear in a different frame, albeit with a different connotation.” (28)

106 The three fourteenth-century texts in my study are written works that inscribe oral storytelling practices—a unique characterization in that they can be thought of as “bridg[ing] the gap” between the two narrative traditions. (Irwin 27)

107 “In the more literary frame tales—*The Canterbury Tales, Decameron, Heptameron*—the authors take great pains to create actual characters whose personalities differentiate them from one another. Chaucer, Boccaccio, and Marguerite also try to give their narrators distinct identities as narrators so that we cannot, for example, imagine the Wife of Bath telling the Pardoner’s Tale” (43).
differences between the narrative dynamics of Chaucer’s and Boccaccio’s frame collections. Specifically, she notes that the “looser structure” of *The Canterbury Tales* makes the distinctions among individual narrators more readily perceivable for modern audiences than the *Decameron*’s narrators. In the *Decameron* “the structural repetition and the sheer quantity of stories rob each tale and narrator of some individuality” (44).

We can conceive of the different narrative levels of the frame tale genre as layered divisions that occur when the frame narrator interjects during or between the interpolated tales, such as when the narrator of *The Arabian Nights* announces the arrival of dawn that ends Shahrazad’s storytelling. And yet, as Irwin has observed, in collections such as *The Canterbury Tales*, the *Decameron*, and the *Libro de buen amor*, the “very regularity” of these interruptions “belies [the] assumption” that they are mere intrusions to the literary flow (39-40). As far as these collections are concerned, the “interruptions” between diegetic levels are perhaps best characterized as pillars of the frame phenomenon itself.

Gerard Genette’s terminology is useful for discussing and analyzing narrative levels such as those created within the frame tale genre. Unsurprisingly, he uses the *Arabian Nights* as his quintessential example of the genre, and references it as starting point for explaining his theories about the nature of narrative levels. In *Fiction and Diction*, Genette strives to develop a more pragmatic way of talking about the multiple utterances that make up a fictional narrative. He coins the term “extradiegetic narrative,” which he defines as “a first-degree narrative produced by a narrator-author who is not herself . . . included in a narrative in which she would be a

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character” (33-34). All first-person narrators, even auto-biographical ones, are performing speech acts when they narrate just as much as when their characters speak in the context of the story. Heterodiegetic narrative (narrative with multiple narrators) is, logically, more complex than homodiegetic narrative (narrated in the first-person). According to Genette, homodiegetic narrators are themselves fictional, so the speech acts they perform as narrators “are as fictionally serious” as those of the other characters in the narrative and/or the speech acts they themselves perform as characters within the context of the story that they narrate (33). However, the most complex of narrative illocution are found in in extradiegetic narrative, in which there are not only multiple narrative voices but also multiple levels of illocution taking place (33-34). Whether we consider the extradiegetic narrators of these three collections as characters themselves or as

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108 “The words exchanged among the characters of a novel are clearly serious speech acts carried out within the fictional universe of that novel […] Except for the fictionality of their context, the speech acts of fictional characters, whether the fiction is dramatic or narrative, are authentic acts, fully endowed with the locutionary characteristics of such acts, with their ‘point’ and their illocutionary force, and with their potential perlocutionary effects, indented or not. The acts that are problematic, the ones whose status still remains to be defined, if possible, are the speech acts that constitute that context, that is, the narrative discourse itself: that of the author.” (33, my emphasis)
narrator-author figures (or both), their interjections are still illocutionary acts in the same fashion as the words of the internal narrators and their characters.\textsuperscript{109}

All three of the author figures in question have complex identities in relationship with their texts and their audiences, however the authorial voice behind the \textit{Libro de buen amor} is in many ways the most problematic author/narrator identity of the three.\textsuperscript{110} \textit{Libro} scholars cannot even agree on how best to refer to him.\textsuperscript{111} Some mention potential variations of spelling for

\textsuperscript{109} Although I prefer Genette’s terminology and conception of diegesis, certainly there exist other terms to refer to the narrative phenomena that Genette calls “diegetic” and “extradiegetic.” For example, rather than refer to diverse “levels” of narrative, Rebhorn describes this layering as the existence of multiple “frames” within a “macrotext.” He states that the \textit{Decameron} “has two frames,” because he considers that the outer frame, or “main frame” is that of the ten narrators and the world they inhabit, and that that frame is contained within a second external frame—which he calls the “macrotext”—in which the author Boccaccio interacts with his readers. (xxxiv)

\textsuperscript{110} Literary criticism about the \textit{Decameron} often equates the biographical writer Giovanni Boccaccio with the extradiegetic narrative voice of the texts. In Chaucer’s case, the narrator persona in \textit{The Canterbury Tales} is sometimes referred to as “Chaucer the Pilgrim,” to clarify his identity as separate from Chaucer the biographical writer. Several studies focus on the problematics of conflating the narrator/author identities (See, for example, Ben Kimpel).

\textsuperscript{111} Louise Haywood’s careful phrasing in her initial description of this author/narrator figure is indicative of the level of critical attention expected when one wishes to reference the mastermind
“Juan Ruiz.”

Given that such a typical name would have been overwhelmingly common, it is easy to entertain the idea that it might be just an invented pseudonym, perhaps even a joke itself. Others believe that this writer’s name may well have been “Juan Ruiz” however that he was not an Archpriest. The likelihood that the name “Juan Ruiz” was used merely as a ploy to conceal behind the *Libro*: “a first-person narrator, identified with the author, who lays claim to the title of Archpriest of Hita…” (9).

112 Scholars such as Henry A. Kelly have scoured the archival records from surrounding regions in during the fourteenth century, finding multitudes of clerics named “Juan Ruiz” but no clear evidence of an Archpriest whose dates coincide with the *Libro*’s manuscript records for the *Libro* (See Kelly’s “A Juan Ruiz Directory for 1380-1382” and “Juan Ruiz and Archpriests: Novel Reports”). The appendix to Kelly’s *Canon Law and the Archpriest of Hita* offers a list of names for those men named “Juan Rodríguez” who were in the papal registers between 1302 and 1343. Anthony Zaharheas has done extensive research on the historical records for variations of “Juan Ruiz,” such as “Joan Roiz” or “Ruyz,” etc. (See Zahareas, *Itinerario*, 27). As a result of such open-ended debate about this particular author’s identity, the hypothesis that multiple writers contributed to the *Libro de buen amor* has never been disproven. See also, De Looze (*Pseudo-autobiography* 56).

113 De Looze sums it up rather well when he remarks, “The author [of the *Libro*] seems to be discovered and then lost again with each new article on the subject in the journal *La corónica*: for each essay that argues for his historical existence, there is one that argues against.” (*Pseudo-autobiography* 45)
the original author’s identity cannot be proved or disproved, however it certainly complicates the value of searching for a historical author by that name.

The dearth of biographical information about the mysterious “Juan Ruiz, Archpriest of Hita” is even more conspicuous when we compare it to the plethora of available information about the lives and works of Chaucer and Boccaccio. Those who wish to learn more about Chaucer’s biography can sift through over five hundred contemporary documents that reference him—thanks in part to his work as a civil servant. Likewise, Boccaccio’s historical identity is firmly established through city records as well as copious preserved correspondence. In other words, whereas Boccaccio and Chaucer scholars are left to debate much finer details, Libro scholars face questions as large as the author’s true name and identify (and, for some, his existence). Libro scholars spent the better part of the twentieth century trying in vain to prove or disprove theories about the identity of this writer. In stanzas 19bcd and 575ab of the G and S manuscripts, the author of the Libro calls himself Juan Ruiz, Archpriest of Hita. More recent Libro scholars have accepted and embraced the fact that we will likely never know the identity of the individual (or individuals) behind this book of “good love,” however this has not stopped us

114 Martin and Crow’s Chaucer Life Records organizes this information.

115 While Libro scholars grapple with the larger questions surrounding Juan Ruiz’s existence and identity, Chaucer and Boccaccio scholars are able to dedicate pages of pondering to biographical details that seem trivial in comparison . . . such as which route Boccaccio may have taken to arrive in Naples in 1327, and whether or not it took him slightly more or slightly less than fifteen days. (Branca, Boccaccio: The Man and His Works 16)
from identifying his probable sources or reading interests, debating his intentions, or hypothesizing about the original reception of his textual creation.  

Adding to the mystery surrounding its author, the Libro itself tends to defy classifications (such as genre, origins, uses, and inscribed readership) in ways that The Canterbury Tales and Decameron do not. De Looze raises a most resonant point about the mysterious narrator persona and his book of good love when he asks: “How can we afford a stable identity to a character who constructs his life story as massive fictionalization and who categorizes all interpretation as misinterpretation (even when communication seemingly takes place?)” (Pseudo-autobiography 46).

Any study that aims to identify and analyze humor should concern itself, to some extent, with the presentation of inscribed authorial intentions. My claim that these medieval frame-tale collections are comically invoking elements of “mock trial” should probably implicate, at some level, evidence of intent to parody. As a matter of conceptual necessity, some might suggest that the comic trend that I describe as a narrator’s “wit-for-guilt substitution,” or a comic “mock trial,” should require an element of “deceptive [and/or] deliberate misrepresentation”—words I have borrowed from Harry Frankfurt’s definition of the invariable features of “humbug” and “bullshit” (6-7, my emphasis). “Bullshit,” says Frankfurt, depends in part on the “perpetrator’s state of mind”(7)—a characterization that I believe also applies equally well to the comic mode

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117 The Libro provides such excellent grounds study the “self” and “truth” and how they are constructed, not despite of the fact that we know next to nothing about the author, but perhaps precisely for that reason. (See De Looze Pseudo-autobiography 43-45)
of narrator “wit-for-guilt” present in these three texts. However, herein lies an important problem that I cannot ignore but that I also cannot resolve. If the presence or absence of humor is dependent on a “perpetrator’s state of mind,” then obviously my aim to identify it is not fully realizable.

How do we begin to talk about the humor of these texts in any definitive way since we have only no means of confirming their authors’ mindsets or their original reception? Although we can never know the state of mind of our authors, the texts themselves present us with forceful author figures. Certainly, we can look at the way they inscribe themselves as narrator personas in their textual interjections. Despite the vast differences in the amount of information we have about each of these historical writers—writers who assume narrator/authorial personas at the extradietic level of their works—in each case I am focusing on their words themselves, rather than any biographical information about the writers’ intentions. The commonalities between the uses of humor in these works are suggested, if not evidenced, by the texts themselves. A careful look at the texts themselves will demonstrate that these writers, whoever they were, possessed a strikingly similar sense of humor.

“HUMBUG,” “MOCK TRIAL” AND “SELF-FASHIONING”

Calling these wily, tongue-in-cheek defenses of good intentions “self-fashioned mock trials” is fitting for several reasons. They are mock trials because they are simulating charges for the sake of devising their defense, rather than responding to any real accusations. By underlining their good intentions, the narrator-authors direct audience attention to imagined accusations that come from outside of the text. The “mock trials” center on a dramatized anticipation of
judgment\textsuperscript{118} and a further-dramatized demonstration of concern for avoiding it. Boccaccio, Chaucer and the Archpriest go through the motions of “defense” not so much for the sake of demonstrating actual innocence but for the sake of showcasing their cunning as author-narrators and of amusing their audience. Thus, the accused is also the accuser, \textit{self-fashioning} his own trial. As the charges in question are not “real,” each narrator-author’s defense of his respective innocence has little importance and the main attraction is really the display of his rhetorical talent in face of hypothetical blame—a blame created or referenced solely for the purpose of demonstrating how skillfully that author figure can avoid it.

An additional reason that I choose to employ the term “self-fashioned mock trial” to refer to these segments is simply that no other words I have encountered accurately capture their characteristically tongue-in-cheek nature or their comic meditation on questions of wit and guilt. The segments I analyze in this chapter have been called other things, of course—for example, “‘apologies’” or “‘warnings,’” and—in the \textit{Libro’s} case—a “parodic sermon.” Such terms are problematic either because they either fail to acknowledge the segments’ comically self-conscious nature; or because they seek to define them based on what they are \textit{not} rather than what they are, reducing them to a burlesque of some other serious illocutionary act rather than actually describing them.\textsuperscript{119}

\textsuperscript{118} I.e. judgment from readers, listeners, and, in Boccaccio’s case, mysterious other outside parties as well.

\textsuperscript{119} The challenge of defining “parody” itself is hardly a cut-and-dry matter. The Introduction to this study discusses my understanding and working definition of “parody.”
A handful of comparativists have observed the striking similarities between Chaucer’s interjection in the Prologue to “The Miller’s Tale” and Boccaccio’s extradiegetic comments, and many have contended that such commonalities suggest Boccaccio’s probable influence on Chaucer.\textsuperscript{120} Peter Bedlier’s study calls refers to the episodes that I have called self-fashioned mock trials as Chaucer’s and Boccaccio’s “authorial ‘apologies’” for [their] ribald tales.”\textsuperscript{121} Carol Falvo Heffernan’s recent work remarks that Boccaccio’s introduction to Day IV and Chaucer’s commentary prior to “The Miller’s Tale” are “disingenuous apologies.”\textsuperscript{122} But what are these so-called “‘apologies’”? Placing the word in quotes, as Bedlier does, certainly draws attention to the slippery task of describing these apostrophes, but calling them “apologies” to the reader doesn’t quite fit; and calling them “warnings” for readers doesn’t work either.

\textsuperscript{120} Of course, there are also a large number of traditional Chaucer scholars who claim that Boccaccio must have been influenced by \textit{The Canterbury Tales} rather than vice versa. Such speculation is beyond the scope of my study.

\textsuperscript{121} Peter Bedlier calls attention to passages in Boccaccio’s \textit{Conclusione} as well as the Introduction to Day IV in order to support his arguments that Chaucer must have known Boccaccio’s \textit{Decameron} (“Just Say Yes: Chaucer Knew the Decameron” 33).

\textsuperscript{122} Beyond the exploration of these excerpts in the context of Boccaccio’s probable influence on Chaucer, Heffernan’s study also acknowledges that these selections are comic. However, she does not dedicate attention to an analysis of that humor. (See Heffernan, “Chaucer’s ‘Miller’s Tale’ and ‘Reeve’s Tale,’ Boccaccio’s “Decameron,” and the French Fabliaux.”)
One of the most obvious reasons to think of these passages as *humorous* and *self-fashioned* mock trials (rather than earnest defenses that are unintentionally funny) is the fact that the author-narrators’ concern for comic bravado often completely overshadows any actual contrition.\textsuperscript{123} In Boccaccio’s case especially, the audience is invited to focus on and enjoy his wit rather than worry about classifying or judging his intentions as “wholesome” or “improper.”\textsuperscript{124} Labeling these passages as “authorial apologies,” “confessions of the authors” or “warnings to the reader,”\textsuperscript{125} are classifications that fall short because they do not account for the comic and ironic undertones of these apostrophes to the audience. Furthermore, the analysis of these pseudo-“apologetic” assertions and the way in which audiences may have received them deserves scholarly attention well beyond the mere question of who influenced whom! Here we have an example of three canonical authors, writing in different languages for different audiences: the fact that they employ such similar comic trends offers a starting point for studying

\textsuperscript{123} I use the term “comic bravado” here to indicate a kind of humor that can carry a characteristically swaggering—at times even pretentious—tone; and “contrition” refers to genuine repentance for sins. This comic bravado as mock-contrition functions to heighten humor even further when the author-narrator shifts responsibility away from himself by passing it along to those who interpret his work.

\textsuperscript{124} “Niuna corrotta menteintese mai sanamente parola. . .” (*Conclusione* 011)

\textsuperscript{125} See, for example, Bedlier and Heffernan’s comments on the prologue to “The Miller’s Tale” and Boccaccio’s *Conclusione.*
why and how fourteenth-century Europe enjoyed humor in traditional and literary narratives.

**HISTORICAL PRECEDENT FOR MOCK TRIAL HUMOR**

Since I have elected to name this comic trend “mock trial” (rather than “mock apology,” or “mock confession”), the question of whether or not these three authors had any direct experience with the rhetorical norms for legal proceedings is relevant to my analysis. Neither Chaucer nor Boccaccio was a stranger to notions of law and defense strategy—biographical information about both of these two canonical writers demonstrates that each had some semblance of direct experience with judicial protocol. Boccaccio studied canon law for six years at the Studio Napoletano. Although he did not complete his degree to become a lawyer, doubtless he was more than familiar with the art and practice of crafting a defense. The fact that Chaucer had formal legal training is also a known certainty, although some controversy exists about the exact details of where and when. Certainly he would have had to be well versed in

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126 Hornsby’s *Chaucer and the Law* offers a comprehensive study of Chaucer’s knowledge of legal matters and how it crops up in his fiction, as well as a survey of known details and hypotheses about Chaucer’s legal training.

127 Many consider that Chaucer studied law in the Inner Temple, but Hornsby challenges this possibility (See Hornsby’s “Chapter 1” of *Chaucer and the Law*). Bolens argues that the *The Tale of Beryn* (a fifteenth-century continuation of the Canterbury Tales), is intrinsically linked the “social professional milieu” late medieval cultural activities of law students. (See “Narrative Use and the Practice of Fiction in *The Book of Sindibad* and *The Tale of Beryn*”)
many related subjects in order to serve as a diplomat and member of Edward III’s court. There is also evidence that he had special familiarity with the language of accusation and criminal defense, specifically.

In the case of the Libro de buen amor, of course there is no way to verify biographical information about the author’s legal experiences. However, careful analysis of the text itself suggests a writer who possessed a command for canon law and a surprisingly extensive familiarity with the legal strategies employed in criminal trials. Henry Ansgar Kelly and Stephen Kirby have elaborated convincing and historically-grounded studies that suggest that the writer behind the Libro was more than well-acquainted with the fourteenth-century legal norms: he commanded thorough knowledge of the rhetoric typical of criminal court proceedings and possessed impressive familiarity with canon law.

The only place in the Libro in which the Archpriest himself makes any explicit reference about his own level of legal preparation is in stanzas 1135-1136:

128 Records indicate that Chaucer was accused of “raptus” (which could mean “rape” or “abduction”) by a woman named Cecilia Chaumpaigne in the year 1380, charges that were later dropped. Notwithstanding abundant speculation about this mysterious note in Chaucer’s biography, there is no consensus on the exact details of the criminal offense, accusations or surrounding situation.

129 Hornsby’s fourth chapter, "Chaucer and Medieval English Criminal Law and Criminal Procedure," discusses Chaucer’s knowledge of norms for the rhetoric of defense and accusation.
Escolar só mucho rrudo, nin maestro nin doctor:
aprendí e sé poco para ser demostrador;
aquesto que yo dijere, entendet lo vós mejor;
so la vuestra enmienda pongo el mi error.
En el santo Decreto ay grand disputación
    si se faze penitencia por la sola contrición [ . . . ] (1135-1136)\textsuperscript{130}

It is unlikely that we can take this comment about the Archpriest’s meager legal knowledge at
face value. First of all, the medieval trope of *humilitas*—narrators’ asides of exaggerated
humility or false modesty—would have been an expected commonplace for fourteenth-century
writers. Secondly, several specific episodes in the *Libro* (along with numerous other scattered
legal references) suggest beyond a reasonable doubt that its writer possessed experience in
criminal defense proceedings. In fact, if we are to assume that the *Libro*’s author *was* actually
was an Archpriest in the diesis of Toledo, it is logical that he would be quite familiar with canon
law, as he would have been called on to preside over various criminal cases in rural court

\textsuperscript{130} I am a simple scholar, neither master nor doctor, / I learnt and know little to be a teacher. / 
You may understand what I have to say better than I do – / So I offer my errors for your
correction. / In the holy Decretal there is great dispute / Over whether penance is done by
contrition alone [. . .]
systems. Moreover, the multiple legal sources referenced in the *Libro* present sound evidence of “Juan Ruiz’s” command of canon law.131

Perhaps the most obvious example of how the content of the *Libro* confirms the Archpriest’s legal expertise is the episode of Don Ximio (stanzas 321-71), a beast fable in which a monkey judge conducts a trial between a fox and a wolf.132 The episode of Don Ximio is based on an old Aesopic fable *Lupus et vulpis, judice simio*, however, the *Libro*’s version expands on and alters the story in ways that only a writer familiar with fourteenth-century Spanish judicial procedures could have done. In the Archpriest’s version of this episode, the characters in Don Ximio’s courtroom make “consistent and invariably accurate allusions” to criminal doctrines that are specific to Alfonso X’s thirteenth-century legal codes, *Las Siete Partidas*—such as “forensic

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131 See Kelly. By tracing the *Libro*’s various allusions to canon law, Kelly’s study also offers good reason to reconsider the proposed dates of its composition. On account of its citation of an Italian work by Johannes Andreae, Kelly proposes that the *Libro* could not have been composed in 1330 (the date generally agreed upon for the earliest dated manuscript), but must have been written significantly after that time.

132 As it appears in the *Libro*, this episode is announced as “The Tale of the Lawsuit between the Wolf and the Vixen Heard before Sir Monkey” (“Aquí fabla del pleito quel lobo e la rrapossa que ovieron ante don ximio alcalde de bugía”).
declamation”—details which suggest that an author with impressive command of legal doctrine and its related rhetorical techniques (Kirby ii).\textsuperscript{133}

In this scene, Wolf summons Fox to court after witnessing her theft of a rooster. Both the defendant and the plaintiff, as well as their respective attorneys, Greyhound and Sheepdog, demonstrate keen awareness of the defense strategies that were historically most popular in fourteenth-century criminal court proceeding. For example, Ms. Fox’s defense attorney Sheepdog invalidates the accusations against his client by imposing a legal “esençion” on the plaintiff, a defense strategy used in criminal cases.\textsuperscript{134} Exceptiones were a widely-used and relatively successful category of defense strategies in fourteenth-century criminal trials—they consist of making technical objections to some element of the charges themselves rather than arguments in direct response to the accusation (Carraway 169). In the case tried by Don Ximio,

\textsuperscript{133} Kirby’s appendices compile medieval Spanish notary documents and transcriptions of trials that support the authenticity of the proceedings as they occur in Don Ximio’s courtroom. As he concludes, “This unwaivering concern with the law, manifested in some clear alterations of his source materials [. . .]” strongly suggest that he had legal training.

\textsuperscript{134} Within the defense strategy of exempciones there are many subcategories of defense, such as the “mala fama” of the accuser or witness, invalidation of the reliability of the witness. (169-174)
Sheepdog effectively invalidates Mr. Wolf’s accusations against his client, Ms. Fox, by exposing Mr. Wolf’s own criminal record.¹³⁵

Further evidence of the Archpriest’s awareness of specific legal defense tactics includes Ms. Fox’s unsuccessful petitions that the judge issue a “reconvección,” a motion that would have sent both her accuser Mr. Wolf and his attorney Greyhound to death without trial. Finally, the most detailed demonstration of legal know-how in the Don Ximio episode is when the monkey judge gives his ruling in the form of a prolonged explanation of all the legal statutes and procedural rules that he ultimately uses to determine the just pardon of both Mr. Wolf and Ms. Fox. In conclusion, and with very little room for doubt, the procedure and organization of this fictional trial not only correlates with all of the standards proscribed by canonists but also reflects a few local technicalities specific to Toledo.¹³⁶

Fourteenth-century Europe saw a marked rise in the endorsement and employment of inquisitio procedures, a transition that brought many changes to criminal trials in all territories under canon law. The related shifts in theory and practice of medieval criminal jurisprudence that characterized this era of transition might explain why themes of defense and accusation were so ripe for attention and comic interrogation during the decades when these frame collections

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¹³⁵ In Carraway’s study specifically, exceptiones were the defense strategy of choice in many as forty-percent of all criminal cases, and defendants who had legal representation tended to employ them the exceptiones tactics much more than those who did not. (169)

¹³⁶ Using details such as these, Kelly argues very cogently that that the author of the Libro must have actually been an Archpriest from that diocese.
became popular. *Inquisitio*, a procedure that “followed the spirit of scholastic disputation” (Carraway ii), marked a shift from its predecessor (*accusatio*) in multiple ways—most of which brought ideas of self-defense to the foreground of the criminal legal system. Since the new rules allowed the accused much greater liberty to strategically defend himself, they also inherently encouraged the development and refinement of such defense strategies. From the defendant’s (or defense attorney’s) perspective, the most widely-used tactics included: attacks on the charges themselves, defenses based on lack of intentionality, exposing a plaintiff’s own criminal past, and exploiting the ambiguity in the language of the charges. As I will demonstrate, all of the aforementioned strategies are comically refashioned by the author-narrators of these frame collections on multiple occasions. Defense strategies associated with the rise of *inquisitio* also promoted the pursuit of “loop holes” in the written law (e.g. exposing faults or imprecisions in the words used to bring forth the charges, or arguing against that language’s applicability to

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137 The rise of *inquisitio*, which replaced *accusatio* as a prescribed legal practice for many criminal proceedings, was a major trend in the new canon law procedures formulated by Pope Innocent III. It spread throughout the fourteenth century in both secular and ecclesiastical contexts. The procedure of *inquisitio* directed increased attention to the rights of the accused, protecting defendants by generating more abundant channels through which they could defend themselves and their reasonings. See Carraway’s Introduction for more specific information about the increasing use of *inquisitio* in criminal court proceedings during the fourteenth century.
the defendant’s alleged crime), a tactic that is quite obviously echoed in Boccaccio’s and the Archpriest’s mock trials, specifically.\textsuperscript{138}

It is not difficult to observe the correlation between these sorts of defense strategies and the “mock trial” segments elaborated by the extradiegetic narrators of the *Decameron*, the *Libro de buen amor* and *The Canterbury Tales*. These comic tendencies suggest a common appreciation for a type of humor that hinges not only on notions of wit and guilt, but also on the subjective nature of *inquisitio* and *defensio*. The comparative analysis and conclusions below will elaborate on the different strategies of mock defense that I detect across the three frame collections.

**COMPARATIVE ANALYSES & CONCLUSIONS**

Placing the humorous, “mock trial” segments from these three collections side-by-side brings several common comic trends to the fore. According to my reading of these texts, their

\textsuperscript{138} Under the emerging model of *inquisitio* “arguments for guilt were formulated and scrutinized, and legal exceptions and defense arguments provided counterpoints to the assertions made by the prosecution [. . .] Defendants strategized, often successfully, to limit the damage of conviction or to avoid it altogether” (Carraway ii). Part of what makes Carraway’s study on *inquisitio* unique among scholarly investigations is that she does not place it “against the foil of earlier procedures [for criminal law]” nor does she define it as part of an “evolutionary chain of legal theory”, rather she frames her discussion of inquisitional procedure in relationship to the models of scholastic disputation: “Disputative questions were in use in the great law schools of Italy by the twelfth century as a pedagogical technique and as a literary device.” (23)
commonalities manifest themselves most clearly in three major categories of ironic and entertaining self-defense strategies: (i) the narrators’ deferment of responsibility to their own fictional frame creations—for example, by blaming the internal character narrators for the racy content of their own stories, and/or stressing their own objective distance as writers who are merely recounting actual events as they took place; (ii) shifting the burden of responsibility to their audience, emphasizing their free-will as readers and interpreters; (iii) capitalizing on language’s innate ambiguity to deflect any potential accusations about the virtue of their intentions as authors. I will discuss these three main “defenses” in detail and as well as highlight several other favorite strategies fashioned by these three extradiegetic narrators as part of their humorous mock trials.

THE FICTIONAL FRAME AS CAMOUFLAGE

Chaucer, like Boccaccio and the Archpriest, underlines his potential culpability for what he writes, and he does so, it seems, merely so that he may then entertain his audience with his self-defense against such charges. Commenting on the churlish nature of the forthcoming Miller’s Tale, he stresses his own inability to stop the Miller from proceeding or to refine his story-telling habits:

What sholde I moore seyn, but this Millere
He nolde his wordes for no man forbere,
But tolde his cherles tale in his manere . . .

139 “What can I add? The Miller had begun, / He would not hold his peace for anyone, / But told his churl’s tale his own way, I fear . . .”
Chaucer reminds his audience that the Miller (as a character and as a narrator) is far from godly, and that his forthcoming story promises rival the most scandalous tales of the collection. Although my focus in this chapter is not on the plot and content of “The Miller’s Tale” but on Chaucer’s interjections in its Prologue, the issue of the Miller’s social status and the related expectations for his decorum as a narrator is a topic of great scholarly interest in The Canterbury Tales as well as many of Chaucer’s other writings. The Miller, a peasant, is expected to tell a countrified story that is rough around the edges, rather than a lofty or learned tale with noble meanings. The irony is that “The Miller’s Tale” turns out to be quite complex and sophisticated in its own right (in addition to delivering on its expected slapstick humor and uncouth content).

In this display of mock trial humor at the start of “The Miller’s Tale,” the external narrator plays on the social expectations for the Miller as a story-teller when he reiterates warnings about the churlish nature of the forthcoming tale. In their restatement of the obvious, such warnings reinforce Chaucer’s comic defense of his own good intentions as the extradiegetic narrator:

The millere is a cherl; ye knowe wel this.
So was the Reve eek and othere mo,
And harlotrie they tolden bothe two.
Avyseth yow, and put me out of blame;\textsuperscript{140}

For the above named reasons, Chaucer beseeches his readers to not hold him as author responsible for recounting the Miller’s Tale. He is merely a witness retelling what he has heard:

\textsuperscript{140} The equivalent to these lines do not appear in the Cogsworth modern English translation.
For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye
Of yvel entente, but for I moot reherse
Hir tales alle, be they better or werse,
Or elles falsen som of my mateere.\textsuperscript{141}

Chaucer wields a witty self-defense based on his need to be faithful to his fictional frame ("but for I moot reherse / Hir tales alle, be they better or werse, / Or ells falsen som of my mateere") and he also defers any blame for raunchy content to a character of his own creation, the Miller. As in the other cases of mock trial humor, Chaucer’s tongue-in-cheek deflection seems more to more to heighten reader interest than to advance any actual defense of the author/narrator. It is a humorous display of mock trial cunning.

These and several other aspects in what I have identified as Chaucer’s “mock trial” humor at the start of “The Miller’s Tale” bear an uncanny resemblance to some of Boccaccio’s comic self-defenses in his \textit{Conclusione}, as well as in his Introduction to Day IV. Just as Chaucer makes excuses on behalf of, or because of, the Miller, Boccaccio also toys with the narrator/character versus narrator/author divide to coyly free himself from responsibility or

\textsuperscript{141} “And so I beg of all who are refined / For God’s love not to think me ill-inclined / Or evil in my purpose. I rehearse / Their tales as told, for better or for worse, / For else I should be false to what occurred […] ”
charges of guilt. Both narrators/authors default to their intradiegetic narrators—characters of their own creation—as part of their entertaining self-defense strategy.

In response to hypothetical accusations regarding the scandal of is tales, Boccaccio retorts with an artful combination of two arguments, both equally tongue-in-cheek: the first is his binding commitment to transmit the events of his (fictional) frame as accurately as possible, and the second is his powerlessness over his own (fictional) narrators and their lack of story-telling prowess: “ma io non pote’ né doveva scrivere se non le raccontate, e per ciò esse che le dissero le dovevan dir belle, e io l’avrei scritte belle. . .” (“I could only transcribe the stories as they were actually told, which means that if the ladies who told them had told them better, I should have written them better”) (016-017). In his Introduction to Day IV he also makes an apostrophe to accusers who claim that his accounts of the stories are not consistent with the facts:

Quegli che queste cose così non essere state dicono, avre molto caro che essi recassero gli originali, li quali, se a quell che io scrivo discordanti fossero, giusta direi la loro riprensione e d’amendar me stesso m’ingegnerei… (039)

As for those of you who say these stories never happened the way I have narrated them, I would appreciate it if they would produce the original versions, and if the

142 “La difesa boccaciana è stata ripetutamente studiata perché essa contiene una chiave di lettura del libro o per lo meno suggerisce alcune indicazioni di lettura valide specialmente per le novella di argomento erotico-osceno. Gli argomenti presentati nell’introduzione alla quarta giornata sono sembrati i più persuasive perché Boccaccio fa appello alla forza della natura e dell’istinto. . .” (Cherchi 13)
latter proved to be different from what I have written, then I would grant that this
criticism is just and would do everything in my power to mend my ways.¹⁴³

The trial-like tone of Boccaccio’s commentary—mentioning proof and hard evidence in
an apostrophe that inscribes an audience of accusers—contributes to its comicality. The audience
of course knows that there are no actual accusations against Boccaccio, much less “original
versions” or “real life accounts” of the Decameron’s stories. In fact, perhaps the most cunning
and hilarious aspect of this particular defense argument lies in its total side-stepping of the
original and most basic “charge” against which (and upon which) Boccaccio began crafting his
defense: his knowing dissemination of crude fiction. Boccaccio self-fashions these accusations
about the “truth-value” of his novelle just so that he may offer a witty and entertainingly
effective defense against them.¹⁴⁴

According to Carraway’s study on fourteenth-century criminal court proceedings,
successful defendants “often address[ed] their defense to elements of the accusation and not to
the facts of the case” (180).¹⁴⁵ If such strategies were effective in court, certainly they are also

¹⁴³ Rebhorn’s translation.

¹⁴⁴ He brings home this self-defense by slinging some mud at any accusers who would challenge
the authenticity of his stories, commenting that his accusers are “prompted more by spitefulness
than common sense.”

¹⁴⁵ “Defendants responded to allegations in the criminal court with a number of strategies, from
confession to simple denials to complex technical defenses. Defendants also presented
successfully humorous in these segments from Boccaccio and Chaucer’s fiction. In both segments highlighted above, the mock trial argument is that the words themselves or the truth itself has authority over the teller, and the author figures keenly fashion their internal character-narrators as independent beings over whom they have no power. Such “ironic distance” presumably adds to the audience’s enjoyment of the narrator’s wit.

The correlations and contrasts between Boccaccio and Chaucer’s strategies here are fascinating. Both draw attention to their lack of control over characters who are their own fictional creations, their narrators, and both displace their own responsibility by stressing the fact that the audience has been “warned” in one way or another. Whereas Chaucer underlines the presumed social expectations for the characters based on their class and their traits as announced in the General Prologue (eg. he reminds us that we should already know the Miller is a “cherl”), Boccaccio stresses the fact that he has the duty to report his brigata’s stories as they were told. Additionally, as will be explained in greater detail below, Boccaccio stresses that he has done his duty to warn the reader through his own provision of an introductory plot summary for each story that his characters tell: “tutte nelle fronte portan segno quello che esse dentro dal loro seno sascoso tengono” (“each story bears a sign on its brow of that which it keeps hidden,” Conclusione 019). Moreover, both Boccaccio and Chaucer employ the tactic of reminding the

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alternative versions of events, sometimes flatly denying involvement, but more often addressing their defense to the elements of the accusation and not to the facts of the case.” (Carraway180)

146 Boccaccio’s use of such introductory headings will be explained in greater detail in the following two pages.
audience that no one is forcing their literary consumption, they may skip tales or choose other novelle. The approaches used by Boccaccio and Chaucer to highlight potential guilt only for the sake of playfully displacing it may not be exactly identical, but their similarities as a comic trend of tongue-and-check self-defense are too striking to ignore.¹⁴⁷

CAVEAT LECTOR

As mentioned, in the “mock trial” humor present in these three collections, the author figures draw concerted attention to the scandalous nature of their texts and to their own potential culpability for the inclusion of such content. However, in all cases, they appear to bring the topic of guilt to the table merely so that they may disprove the grounds for such blame, either by devaluing its applicability in the first place, or by shifting such blame away from themselves as extradiegetic narrators and toward other parties, most commonly, their own audiences. Each author-narrator pushes responsibility to readers in a slightly different way. Beyond a mere call for active readership, these instances are comic invitations to admire the cunning of the narrators in the aversion of hypothetical blame, and, according to my reading, all instances of this “mock trial” strategy are intentionally humorous rather than earnestly apologetic.

¹⁴⁷ Beidler comments on these same similarities in his study about Boccaccio’s probable influence on Chaucer: “My point here is not that the parallels prove that Chaucer must have known the Decameron, though nothing quite like them is known to exist before Boccaccio and Chaucer used such ‘apologies.’ It is, rather, that if indeed Chaucer had read the Decameron passage, he might well have recalled some years later the Boccaccian ‘apology’ for offensive tales. . .” (33-34)
Chaucer’s witty words of self-preservation at the start of “The Miller’s Tale” offer a delightful variation on this comic defense strategy of shifting responsibility to the readers. In the same breathe as he whets our appetite for the Miller’s tale in the above-mentioned prologue, Chaucer sneaks in the suggestion that we can skip the tale and go to another if we’d like to avoid hearing something scandalous (“whoso list it nat yheere, / Turne over the leef and chese another tale” 3176-7). Furthermore, just before the tale begins he reminds the audience yet again that they are proceeding at their own risk and his hands are clean: “Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys. The millere is a cherl; yet knew wel this” (3181-2). This interpolation to the audience members who would like to forgo “The Miller’s Tale” hardly seems earnest: after such a tantalizing introduction, is difficult to imagine that anyone would opt to “chese another tale,” in the fourteenth century or today.

Boccaccio also makes a humorous disclaimer to advise readers that they should proceed at their own risk. As author, he cannot and should not be held responsible for the “filth” for which he has just successfully enticed them:

Tuttavia che va tra queste leggendo, lasci star quelle che pungono, e quelle che dilettano legga: elle, per non ignannare alcuna persona tutte nella fronte portan segnato quello che esse dentro dal loro seno nascoso tengono. (019)

Still, whoever reads through these stories can skip over those that give offense and read only those that promise delight, for lest anyone should be deceived, each story bears a sign on its brow of that which it keeps hidden within its bosom.\footnote{Rebhorn’s translation.}
The remark about readers’ ability to “lasci star quelle che pungono, e quelle che dilettanto legga”—to “skip” or “leave be” any offensive stories in favor of other more pleasing ones—resembles Chaucer’s comments at the start of “The Miller’s Tale” almost verbatim.149

In both cases, the reminder to the audience functions to heighten entertainment value—first, by underlining the naughty nature of the stories narrated, and then, by giving the audience a good show of “mock trial” humor.

Boccaccio also points out the great favor he has done in anticipation of audience concerns to be forewarned of salacious content: facilitating their own use of discretion by placing a “segnato” at the start of each tale, the “rubric” description of the story that appears at the start of each novella. Boccaccio’s self-defense argument regarding the rubrics is comically fashioned and also—entertainingly—quite effective! It is difficulty to argue with his suggestion that rubrics at the start of each story could help a prudish reader avoid provocative content. Although there are some rubrics whose ambiguous wording casts lewd material in an deceptively innocuous light, truth be told many others just “tell it like it is.” For example, the rubric for the second novella of Day III plainly announces the sex and violence that will take place in the narrated episode.150

149 Boccaccio does not elaborate in his Conclusione about which stories in particular might be most offensive.

150 The rubric reads: “Un pallafrenier giace con la moglie d’ Agilulf re, di che Agilulf tacitamente s’accorge; truovalo e tondelo; il tonduto tutti gli altri tonde, e cosí campa della mala ventura” (“A groom lies with the wife of King Agilulf, who learns the fact, keeps his own counsel, finds out...
Notwithstanding the degree or accuracy of these rubrics’ “disclosure,” Boccaccio’s mention of them in his above-cited defense seems rather tongue-in-cheek. Given that the use of the rubrics was a commonplace in late medieval manuscripts, Boccaccio’s cunning claim to have employed them specifically for this purpose is part of humorous invocation of mock trial defense. In both Chaucer and Boccaccio’s cases, the reminders to audiences that they are proceeding at their own discretion reinforces the comic “mock trial” humor and directs further attention to the slippery nature of the author-narrator role in relationship to audience.

Perhaps the most important way in which these author figures exonerate themselves in their self-staged mock trials is through their repeated commentary on the nature of the interpretive act itself, another tactic for shifting the responsibility for narrative naughtiness away from the tellers and toward the readership. For example, the Archpriest cunningly redirects responsibility for the meaning of his work to his audience by informing them that they will glean “good” and valuable lessons if they interpret correctly, or, alternately, unearth sinful tips if they read with sinful intentions. Boccaccio also stages an entertaining self-defense by stressing his audience’s freedom to interpret. As Boccaccio states in his Conclusione, no readers have the right to hold him responsible just because they chose to interpret the tales as dirty: “Le quali, chenti che elle si sieno, e nuocere e giovar possono, sí come possono tutte l’alte cosse, avendo riguardo allo ascoltatore” (008) (“Like everything else, these stories, such as they are, may be harmful or helpful, depending upon the listener”).

the groom and shears him. The shorn shears all his fellows, and so comes safe out of the scrape.”) (III, 2, 001)
Among all three of these author-narrator personas, Boccaccio’s use of the “self-fashioned mock trial” mode of humor is by far the least subtle. In addition to stressing the interpretive pliability of his novelle, he fashions his imagined critics vividly in order to stage aggressive and persuasive arguments against them. As he continues his defense arguments in the Conclusione, he turns the blame on his hypothetical accusers. He calls them hypocrites and “precious[s] prude[s]” (“spigolistra donna”); and suggests that they must be the sort of people who weigh words more than deeds and care more about seeming good than being good (“più le parole pessan che fatti e più d’apparer s’ingegnan che d’esser buone”).\footnote{I will return to comment on this particular segment of Boccaccio’s epilogue below in my discussion of its overlap with the Libro as well as the Romance of the Rose.}

The Libro’s stanza 67 offers a rhymed lesson on the open-ended nature of literary meaning: “En general a todos fabla la escriptura:/ los cuerdos con buen sesso entenderán la cordura:/ los mançebos livianos guarden se de locura;/ escoja lo mejor el de buena ventura” (67). In other words, as the Archpriest explains, the written word will always speak differently to different audiences: the brighter readers will grasp that which lesser minds will find more difficult, and “may the best man choose the best meaning.”\footnote{This is my paraphrasing of 67d.} Along those same lines, stanza 70 reminds us that the Libro is like a musical instrument which—with no fault to its maker—will make a pleasing sound when it is played well, and a bad one when it is played poorly: “De todos instrumentos yo, libro, só pariente:/ bien o mal, qual puntares, tal te dirá ciertamente./ Qual tú decir quisieres, ý faz punto, ý, ten te:/ si me puntar sopieres, sienpre me avrás en miente.” The
fact that the Archpriest sets the stage for his framed collection of stories and poetry by
commenting on the burden of interpretation—and on the reader’s own role in in the
determination of “bad” versus “good” meanings—is an important part of his subtly humorous
self-defense as well as a skillful “teaser” enticing readers to proceed to the pages that follow.153

THE ARCHPRIEST ON TRIAL: PARODIC PREACHING OR SERIOUS SERMON?

The most memorable “mock trial” humor of the Libro de buen amor, is, of course the
Archpriest’s commentary in the opening Prose Prologue. Despite its presence in only one of the
three extant manuscript copies of the Libro, the prologue has been one of the most commented
and debated sections of the work to date. Twentieth-century scholars have accurately identified
the structure and organization of this particular opening excerpt as that of a sermon. However,
the nature and angle of the Libro’s opening “sermon” has been repeatedly contested. One of the
most intriguing and controversial debates about the prologue revolves around the suggestion that
is in fact the parody of a sermon or of the sermon genre.154 The extent to which the Archpriest’s

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153 See Dagenais for a more thorough discussion of these stanzas and their implications for the
imagined reading practices of the Libro’s original audiences. As Dagenais translates them, these
verses read: “There are no bad words unless they are considered to be bad” (G:4r;64b: “non a
mala palabra si non es a mal tenida”) and “versa que bien es dicha / si bien fuse entendida”
(S:6r;64c: “You will see that [my word] is well said if it was well understood.”)

154 One of the earliest and most influential studies dedicated exclusively to this matter is Janet A
Chapman’s “Juan Ruiz’s ‘Learned Sermon,’” in which Chapman demonstrates the Archpriest’s
clear familiarity with ars predicandi by showing how his prose prologue closely follows the
opening commentary resembles a sermon in format, structure and content has since generated a more important discussion about the implications of those parallels. According to my reading, the suggestion that the Archpriest’s opening commentary is a strictly serious prelude is doubtful, but so is the argument that it is merely a mockery of a more learned genre.

One scholar who argues against numerous critical claims that the *Libro de buen amor*’s prologue is a parodic sermon is Louise Haywood.\(^{155}\) According to Haywood’s reading, in the prologue as well as in the humorous *exempla*, Juan Ruiz is merely “working out” the concepts of the Fall of mankind (13). Haywood postulates that, because we as modern readers easily see the “Ovidian utilitas” of the “pursuit of love” as something in contradiction to the invoked cultural context of “sermon,” we mistake the prologue as “parodic,” when in reality it is of another genre entirely (26-28).\(^{156}\) Although the prologue’s resemblance to a sermon is no accident, I would structure for a learned sermon. However—and as noted Haywood and Vasvári’s “Introduction” to *A Companion to the Libro de Buen Amor*—, Chapman does not consider the comic attributes of the prologue in her study. Chapman’s article suggests that there is no reason to consider it “anything other than a serious sermon” (2), a position that has since been contested.

\(^{155}\) The prologue positions the Archpriest (whom she refers to as “Juan Ruiz”) as a preacher or a school lecturer with both authorial wisdom as well as a Fallen nature as a sinner. See especially Haywood’s introduction to *Sex, Scandal and Sermon*.

\(^{156}\) Haywood urges contemporary *Libro* scholar not conflate Ruiz’s “utilitas” (understood utility of the work) with his “intentio” or authorial objective. (27-28).
argue that the text is best understood as some sort of hybrid, as it is neither earnest imitation nor satiric parody.

According to my reading, the prose prologue offers both a comic interrogation of the *Libro’s* intentions as well as a call to didacticism. It would also be a mistake to classify it merely as a joke or mockery of a sacred genre. At the same time, its plea to readers to avoid fixation on the less-than-Godly elements in the pages that follow is not purely earnest. The prose sermon announces many goals for the *Libro* and its readers, and in the context of the rest of the work, those promises seem to be rather tongue-in-cheek: for example, that the Archpriest is writing his masterpiece to save souls, or that he will tell many naughty stories because he wants to help his readers avoid the wrong choices.

Toy with us as he may with his uses of ambiguity and his insistence that his work will lead us along a good or bad path based on how we, the audience, read, the one thing that this extradiegetic narrator *does* seem to take seriously is his art itself and his objective to employ an array of meters and rhetoric worth imitating!¹⁵⁷ “Juan Ruiz” may be making a joke about many things, but reverence for the written word is not one of them. His comment about providing us with worthy artistic example for literary composition seems quite earnest (“e composelo otrosi a dar algunos leción e muestra de metrificar e rrimar e de trobar; ca trobas e notas e rrimas e ditados e versos, que fíz conplidamente, segundo que esta çiençia require”).

¹⁵⁷ As Alan Deyermond has observed, “No encontramos aquí rasgo alguno de humor” in the Archpriest’s sermon/prologue profession that he will show us how rhyme and meter is done (192).
Regardless of which stance we take regarding the sincerity of the Archpriest’s didactic professions, one thing that is indisputable is that the prologue calls our attention to his intentions as well as to the problems of interpretation itself. This prelude does not let us forget that “las palabras sirvun a la intención E non la intención a las palabras.” Regardless of whether the Archpriest’s declarations about his intentions are parodic, we can consider that the main takeaway point—in the middle ages and today—is the repeated instruction to interpret “correctly” and attempt to “find the clearest signs” (“trabaja do fallares las sus señales ciertas”).\(^\text{158}\) Here is just one of countless examples from the Libro in which the Archpriest explicitly references the difficulty of signs and meanings. It is also worth noting that it is one of few places where the Archpriest makes an apostrophe inscribing an audience of critics—“non dirás mal del libro que agora rrefiertas” (68d, my emphasis)—a trope that Boccaccio employs very explicitly in his “mock trial” in the introduction to Day IV and Conclusione. Although the Libro seems to present the most prominent and explicit examination of the theme of correct interpretation, the push to render the audience responsible for the determination of meaning is evident in the mock trial humor across all three frame collections. In all three works, the Decameron, the Libro de buen amor, and The Canterbury Tales, we can observe how this reflection on interpretation serves to

\(^{158}\) This quote is verse b from the Libro’s stanza 68: “Las de buen amor son rrazones encubiertas: trabaja do fallares las sus señales ciertas. / Si la razón entiendes o en el sesso açiertas, non dirás mal del libro que agora rrefiertas.” (“The words of good love are secret words. / Try hard to find the clearest signs. / If you follow the argument and hit on the meaning, / speak no ill of the book you criticize now”).

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enhance readers’ awareness of the complexities of signification, as well as to amuse and entertain them through the narrators’ display of wits.

MALA PALABRA OR ONESTI VOCABULI? SEEKING COVER THROUGH LANGUAGE’S INNATE AMBIGUITIES

The defense strategy of stressing the audience’s interpretive liberty often overlaps with the third “mock trial” strategy I have observed: that of underling language’s innate ambiguity. The author-narrators offer entertaining and witty alibies that capitalize on the comic value of word-play and polysemy as well as comment on the intrinsic complexity of literary interpretation. The comic tone of this particular defense strategy is often rooted in the use of wit and word-play as a means through which to deflect guilt, or, in the subtle reminder that language itself is far from a fixed semiotic system.

A memorable example of this strategy is the excerpt from Boccaccio’s *Conclusione* that I cited at the start of this chapter:

Saranno per avventura alcune di voi che diranno che io abbia nello scriver queste novelle troppa licenza usata [. . .] La qual cosa io nego, per ciò che niuna sí *disonestà* n’è, che, con *onesti vocaboli* dicendola, si disdica a alcuno: il che qui mi pare assai convenevolmente bene aver fatto (Conclusione 003-4, my emphasis).\(^{159}\)

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\(^{159}\) In the context of section 003, Boccaccio’s apostrophe is directed at those who might accuse him of writing inappropriate stories that endanger the female readers to whom he dedicates the book.
Perchance there will be those among you who say that by writing these tales I have exercised too much liberty… A thing which I deny, for no story is so unvirtuous that it would be impossible to tell using truthful words; and I can fairly say I’ve done that much.160

Boccaccio’s incorporation of word play into his mock trial defense provides an explicit example of how these author-narrators use polysemy to their advantage to showcase their wit and displace their guilt. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Boccaccio highlights the accusations against him only to set the stage for the show of wits through which he will free himself from blame and entertain the audience with mock trial humor. He defends his use of “bad” words by insisting that he had to use the “right words” (“onesti vocabuli”), in order to be faithful to the stories themselves as they were originally told by his character narrators. None of his word choices that may seem bad need necessarily be understood as “dirty” or “wrong” (unless of course the reader infuses them with that meaning of his own prerogative).

According to Carraway’s research about the kinds of defenses used at fourteenth-century criminal trials under canon law, many accused criminals adopted the strategy of admitting to act that had brought on the charges, but resting their defense on the “de-criminaliz[ation of their] behavior” itself, insisting that they were not acting with intention to commit a crime (173). These defendants used every tautology and wit they had in order to debunk the applicability of the charges at hand. For example, one defendant enhanced his defense with a litotes, arguing that he

160 My translation and my emphasis. See also my previous note about the clever ambiguities of the word choices “disonesta” and “onesta.”
was not guilty of the charge of speaking “injurious” words to his accuser on the grounds that the exact words as he had expressed them were that the plaintiff was “not a good man.” Thus, it did not follow that he had actually called him “a bad man,” as the charges specified. The parallels between such a defense and the mock trial humor in Boccaccio’s *Conclusione*, or the *Libro’s* insistence that there are no “bad words” just “bad readers” are too striking to ignore.

In their staging of these comic defenses, the author-narrators also combine this particular mock trial strategy with others, layering wordplay with their cries of faithfulness to the fictional frame. For example, Boccaccio entertains a counterargument to his self-defense in this fashion: he speculates that even if we did assume for a second that he knowingly filled his stories with dirty details just for the fun of it (rather than for the virtuous interpretations of those particular details), he could still argue that the “qualità” of the tales themselves required him to tell them in that fashion. He could not have done otherwise without altering them, he says—which clearly would have been wrong.

Ma presuppongano che così sia, ché non intendo di piatir con voi, che mi vincereste, dico, a rispondere perché io abbia ciò fatto, assai ragion vengon pronntissime. Primieramente se alcuna cosa in alcuna n’è, la qualità delle novelle l’hanno richiesta. (004).

But let’s suppose that you are right—since I don’t want to start an argument with you that you would undoubtedly win—I will respond to your question of why I

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161 Interestingly enough, the Italian *qualità* could refer to the “nature” or “quality” of the tales” or, alternately, to their “excellence.”
did what I did, as many reasons readily come to mind. First of all, if there are a few liberties taken in some cases, it’s because the qualità of the tales themselves required it.\textsuperscript{162}

In sections 016-017 he continues along this vein of self-interrogation and defense, “Ma se pur presuppor si volesse che io fossi stato di quelle e lo 'nventore e lo scrittore, che non fui, dico che io non mi vergognerei che tutte belle non fossero per ciò che maestro alcun non si truova, da Dio in fuori, che ogni cosa faccia bene e compiutamente. . .” (“But even if people assumed that I was not just the writer but the inventor of the stories—which I was not—then I would still reply that I am not ashamed if some of them were less than beautiful, because there is no craftsman other than God who has made everything perfect and complete”).\textsuperscript{163} Boccaccio does not close his show of wit without also taking the time to deliberately and meticulously remind us that he has just as much right as any other person to use the words “hole,” “rod,” “mortar,” “pestle,” “sausage” and “mortadella”:

\[E \text{ se forse pure alcuna particella è in quelle, alcuna paroletta piú liberale che forse a spigolistra donna non si conviene, le quali piú le parole pesan che’ fatti e piú d’apparer s’ingegnan che d’esser buene, dico che piú non si dee a me esser disdetto d’averle scritte, che generalmente si disdica agli uomini e alle donne di dir tutto di ‘foro’ e ‘caviglia’ e ‘mortaio’ e ‘pestello’ e ‘salciccia’ e ‘mortadello’, e tuto pien di simigliante cose (005)}\]

\textsuperscript{162} My translation.

\textsuperscript{163} Rebhorn’s translation
And if perhaps there is some tiny expression in [these novelle], some little word, that is freer than might seem appropriate to prudish women who attach more weight to speech than to deeds and make more of an effort to seem good than to be good, then I say that it was no more improper for me to have written them than for men and women generally to go around all day long saying ‘hole’ and ‘rod’ and ‘mortar’ and ‘pestle’ and ‘sausage’ and ‘mortadella’ and lots of other things like that. (Rebhorn’s translation)

The list of words is not necessary to prove his point, but it certainly provides for a good chuckle. If an audience finds this passage funny, the comic effect is closely tied to an understanding that the narrator’s self-defense of his intentions is not entirely in earnest. The readers and listeners are invited to laugh again as Boccaccio celebrates a list of words with double-meanings (in this case, sexual euphemisms), and to admire his cunning as he outwits hypothetical accusations and craftily frees himself from any alleged blame by pointing out language’s innate ambiguity, and, specifically, substitution-related play. This passage also houses a disclaimer about written versus oral communication, which, as Irwin also observes, proves that Boccaccio was “quite

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164 Certainly, polysemy plays an important role in the comic moments of these frame collections beyond—and independent of—this mode of mock trial humor as well, however, its connection to the humorous self-defense strategies used in the segments I have analyzed is an important commonality in the mode of “mock trial” humor.
aware of the differences between the two modes of communicating” because “he argues, albeit ironically here, that the distinction should not be so rigid” (38).\textsuperscript{165}

Capitalizing on polysemy and underlining language’s innate ambiguity is one of the favorite mock trial defense strategies employed by the Archpriest as well. Several of the above cited segments from Boccaccio’s \textit{Conclusione}—in particular, sections 003-005 that mention the “onesti vocabuli”—call to mind the \textit{Libro} stanza that I previously highlighted in which the Archpriest announces that there are no bad words, just bad readers (“non a mala palabra si non es a mal tenida / veras que bien es dicha si bien fuese entendida”).\textsuperscript{166} Both Boccaccio’s argument in defense of his use of obscene language, as well as the \textit{Libro}’s commentary on the true determination of “bad” v. “good” words, are curiously reminiscent of excerpts from the debate between Reason and the Lover at the end of Chapter 4 of \textit{The Romance of the Rose}, where Reason defends the legitimacy of crude expressions by highlighting the fundamental difference

\textsuperscript{165} Irwin’s citation of this same passage takes John’s Payne’s translation from Singleton’s 1982 edition of the \textit{Decameron} (“hole and peg, and mortar and pestle and sausage and \textit{baloney}”), which differs slightly from the translation that I have chosen. (See Irwin 38)

\textsuperscript{166} “No evil word is spoken if it is not thought to be evil / You will see that something is well said if well understood” (64bc). The fact that the \textit{Libro}’s focus on the nature of interpretation forces us to redefine our ways of understanding the reader/text relationship is a challenge that continues to intrigue \textit{Libro} scholars. John Dagenais comments on the above verses from stanza 64, “Such assertions represent for us a door through we cannot or will not go. At best we can hope to close them off as \textit{topical, ironic, or simply insincere}” (Dagenais 7, my emphasis).
between people who fear "words" versus people who fear "things" (7146-7148). It is particularly telling to consider the possible connections between the “mock trial” humor in these texts and the aforementioned section of the *Roman de la Rose* because the Old French masterpiece has been so extensively linked to all three frame collections in my study.¹⁶⁸

In the aforementioned section of the *Roman de la Rose*, the Lover chides Reason for having pronounced the word “testicles,” saying that someone as “wise and fair” as Reason

¹⁶⁷ Luciano Rossi’s study *In luogo di sollazzo* led me to draw this conclusion about the intertextual connection between Boccaccio’s commentary on wordplay in his *Conclusione* and the *Roman de la Rose*. Rossi believes that the Boccaccio borrows directly from Reason’s defense at the end of Book IV to construct his witty self-imputation in the *Conclusione*. (See Rossi 15-17)

¹⁶⁸ All three authors in my study were deeply familiar with the *Roman de la rose*. Common sources and themes crisscross all four works—including but not limited to the Ovidian and Augustinian traditions, and troubadour poetry. With regard to the *Libro de buen amor*, the “affinities between Juan Ruiz’s *Libro* and Jean de Meun’s continuation of the *Rose* have been remarked upon” by so many scholars that, according to De Looze, it is not even worth naming them all (See Chapter 2 of *Pseudo-Autobiography in the Fourteenth-Century*). Chaucer once translated this work to English, a fact that is exemplary of his reputation as “the most French” of the English poets (see Muscatine’s *Geoffrey Chaucer and the French Tradition*). Additionally, the *Roman de la Rose* has been linked to fabliaux episodes of all three these collections (in particular, see Blamires 629-640).
should know better than to call them by their name “without at least glossing the word with some courteous utterance, as a virtuous woman would when speaking of them” (6871-6912). Reason, who seems amused by his accusation, defends her use of the word “testicles” by explaining that there is nothing inherently evil about a mere word, especially one that names one of God’s creations. The Lover argues back that she clearly must be a loose woman because although God made the things themselves he did not make the words, “which are altogether vile.” However, Reason continues to defend her use of the words “that were good and true,” and she mentions women’s habits of calling testicles by other names, “purses, harness, things, torches, pricks” as an example of improper use. This series of words with double-meanings—entertaining to the reader but slightly superfluous to “the point” of the debate between Reason

169 “Fair friend, I may certainly and without harming my reputation name openly and by its proper name anything which is good. Indeed I may safely speak in the correct terms about evil, for I am not ashamed of anything that is not sinful . . . and it is not sinful of me to name, in plain and unglossed language, the noble things that my heavenly father formerly made with his own hands.” (6913)

170 “And if you object on the other hand that the words are ugly and base, I tell you before God who hears me that if, when I gave things the names that you dare find fault with and condemn, I had called testicles relics and relics testicles, then you who thus attack and reproach me would tell me instead that relics was an ugly, base word. ‘Testicles’ is a good name and I like it, and so, in faith, are ‘testes” and ‘penis’; none more beautiful have ever been seen. I made the words and I am certain that I never made anything base . . . ”
and the Lover—may call to mind Boccaccio’s list from his *Conclusione*. \(^{171}\) Reason goes on to lecture the Lover about the danger of interpreting everything literally, stressing the importance of “proper” interpretation as the responsibility of the reader or listener (7123). \(^{172}\)

Reason’s debate with the Lover about the nature of figurative language parallels several of the passages that I have highlighted in the the *Libro de buen amor* and the *Decameron* in which narrators make highly self-conscious reflections regarding the nature of their fiction. My intention in tracing these commonalities with the *Roman* is not to suggest that the work also

\(^{171}\) “. . . I say that it was no more improper for me to have written them than for men and women generally to go around all day long saying ‘hole’ and ‘rod’ and ‘mortar’ and ‘pestle’ and ‘sausage’ and ‘mortadella’ and lots of other things like that.” (Rebhorn’s translation)

\(^{172}\) “Certainly in our schools many things are expressed in figurative language which is fair to hear, and not everything one hears should be taken literally. My words, at least when I spoke of testicles, which I wished to mention briefly, had a different meaning from the one you want to give them, and anyone who understood the text properly would find a meaning in it which would clarify the obscure discourse . . . The truth concealed within would be clear if it were explained . . . You will find there are a great number of the secrets of philosophy in which you will gladly take delight and from which you will also be able to gain great benefit: you will profit from your enjoyment and enjoy what is profitable, for there are most profitable delights in the entertaining fables of the poets who thus covered their thoughts when they clothed the truth in fables. This is how you should approach the matter if you want to understand my words properly.” (Book IV, emphasis my own)
exhibits or reflects the same comic mode of “self-fashioned mock trial” that I observe in the frame collections that are the subject of my study. The above described commentaries about the nature of meaning and interpretation are comic within the extradiegetic “mock trials” of the Decameron and the Libro in ways in which they are not in the context of the Roman de la rose. Whether or not these specific sections from the Roman de la Rose did, at some level, inspire the comic self-interrogations launched by Boccaccio and the Archpriest, may remain a mystery. However, certainly the parallels in these commentaries on wordplay are undeniable, and their presence in the context of the Decameron and the Libro is an example of how the external narrators capitalize on the ambiguity of language in order to enhance the comic effect of their “mock trial” wit.

The shifting attitudes about contumacy (and its role in legal and society contexts) that occurred during the era of these texts’ original composition may further explain their narrators’ imperative to dramatize defenses and hypothesis accusations to validate them, as well as their expectation that an audience would recognize and appreciate a mode of humor that centers on the rhetoric of self-defense. In late fourteenth-century criminal courts, often contumacy itself\(^\text{173}\) was considered “a tacit admission of guilt which merited a conviction just as surely as did a confession” (Carraway 181). In the Decameron’s mock trial segments, Boccaccio even goes so far as to stage an argument in defense of his own need to defend himself—taking the self-fashioning to a whole new level. Of the three “mock trial” narrators, Boccaccio is also undoubtedly the one who constructs the most animated portrayal of hypothetical accusers, as

\(^{173}\) i.e., a defendant’s refusal to acknowledge or address the charges against him
well as the most extensive description of the different kinds of potential accusations against which he stages his pleas:

Per ciò che, se già, non essendo io ancora al terzo della lo mia fatica venuto, essi sono molti e molto presummono, io avviso che avanti che io pervenissi alla fine essi potrebbono in guise esser multiplicati, non avendo prima avuta alcuna repulsa, che con ogni piccolo lor fatica mi metterebbno in fondo. . . (010)

For I have not yet completed a third of my task, and since my critics are already so numerous and presumptuous, I can only suppose that unless they are discredited now, they could multiply so alarmingly before I reached the end that the tiniest effort on their part would be sufficient to demolish me.

Above, Boccaccio exploits the author/audience relationship by fashioning himself and his audience as a sort of “team” whose joint opponent is the group of imaginary critics of his work. Although in some instances he directs his words to his audience at large, often, he makes apostrophes to specific parties, thus inscribing groups of different readers and audience members—most frequently these two main groups include his hypothetical “accusers” (a ruthless and disparaging bunch of scoundrels who are jealous of his success), and to his lady readers (his dedicatees and beloved fan base). He addresses both of these groups seemingly in the same breath as part of his first “mock trial” defense that appears in the Introduction to Day IV:

Sono adunque, discrete donne, stati alcuni* che, queste novellette leggendo, hanno detto che voi mi piacete troppo e che onesta cosa non è che io tanto diletto prenda di piacervi e di consolarvi, e alcuni han detto peggio, di commendarvi, como io fo. (005)
Judicious ladies, there are people* out there who, upon reading these little novelle, have accused me of being altogether too fond of you, and that it is not proper that I take so much delight in pleasing you and consoling you, and what’s worse, some have even criticized the fact that I praise you like I do.\textsuperscript{174}

In the context of their mock trial humor, Boccaccio and the Archpriest have another commonality that should not be overlooked: both admit to (and often proudly broadcast) their love of the ladies. These two narrator-author figures consider their love of women a defining personal trait rather than a peripheral hobby. In Boccaccio’s case, women are the announced dedicatees and privileged audience.\textsuperscript{175} In the Archpriest’s case, they are a confessed life-long obsession, object of pursuit, source of glory and pain.\textsuperscript{176} Interestingly enough, though, neither

\textsuperscript{174} My translation. Note that the masculine plural “alcuni” indicates a group of men (or a mixed gender group) and should not be confused with the second person plural apostrophes to the “judicious ladies,” which are references in the feminine plural that can only implicate women.

\textsuperscript{175} See Chapter I’s section on readership for a more thorough discussion of Boccaccio’s inscribed audiences.

\textsuperscript{176} Although there is no indicated that the Archpriest dedicates or otherwise directs his \textit{Libro} to female readers, there is one seldom-remarked passage in which he makes an apostrophe to women in Stanza 161: “Una tacha le fallo al amor poderoso, / la qual \textit{a vos, dueñas}, yo descubrir non oso; / mas por que non me tengades por dezidor medroso, / es esta: que el amor siempre fabla mentiroso” (“I find one fault in all-powerful love, / which I dare not reveal to you ladies. /
one of them use their love of women as an “excuse” in their diverse and craftily-constructed “apologies” for their use of salacious stories.

In fact, in Boccaccio’s case, he makes a point to highlight his love of women in his list of mock trial “offenses” merely so that he may own up to that particular crime, rather than attempt to avoid blame as he does in all other instances of self-inflicted accusations. “To these charges I openly plead guilty,” says Boccaccio, voluntarily confessing to the accusation that he has gone to entirely too much trouble to please women in his life and work (031).177 Posing a rhetorical question in his own defense, Boccaccio asks how he or any man could possibly be expected to feel otherwise toward the female sex when even a boy who grew up in a cave knew that he had been born to love women.178 Boccaccio’s confession of his excessive love of women is his lone guilty plea in his own mock trial, but in this case his admission of culpability is in the service of his show of wits, further enhancing the “wit-for-guilt” substitution humor on which the mock trial mode capitalizes.

After several subsequent asides to praise the wonders of women and his lady readers, Boccaccio moves on to the charge of his old age. Like the other charges against him, he fashions

But just in case you think I am frightened to speak, / I’ll tell you – love always speaks falsely.”

(My emphasis)

177 “Le quali cose io apertissimamente confesso, cioè che voi mi piacete e che io m’ingegno di piacere a voi.” (031)

178 He is referring to a short tale he has just narrated, about a boy who had been raised in a cave and yet still was able to recognize the beauty and attraction of women when he first saw one.
this count as a sort of “outside” accusation so that he may shrewdly defend himself as the star and champion of the mock trial that he himself has crafted. Against the accusations that he is too old to be so consumed with pleasing women, he employs what Beidler refers to as the “proverbial” “old-man-as-leek” metaphor.\(^{179}\) Boccaccio calls attention again to the “debate” in which he imagines himself participating, he retorts “And but for the fact that I would be transgressing the normal bounds of polite debate, I would invoke the aid of history-books and show they are filled with examples from antiquity of outstanding men, who, in their declining years, strove with might and main to give pleasure to the ladies. If my critics are ignorant of this, let them go and repair the gaps in their knowledge” (034). These last comments ring with tangible and irreverent condescension even as they are unleashed against accusers who are presumably imagined, a final flourish of self-fashioning to drive home his tongue-in-cheek defense.

Like Boccaccio, the Archpriest defends his love of women by stressing that such affinity is only natural, human and innate—a most universal inclination, not a deviation. He speaks of his love of the ladies on numerous occasions in the Libro de buen amor, as his amorous exploits are essentially the pretext of his whole pseudo-autobiographical work. According to his stanza 71, the desire “to mate with an attractive female” is a universal and natural law, as vital as the need for food and water. He even furnishes an endorsement from Aristotle to validate this point:

\(^{179}\) Beidler comments on the similarities between the Chaucer’s Reeve’s caveat prior to “The Reeve’s Tale” and Boccaccio’s comments prologue in the introduction to Day IV, pointing out that both use the “old-man-as-leek metaphor” in shockingly similar contexts (“Just Say Yes” 34).
Commo dize Aristótiles, cosa es verdadera:
el mundo por dos cosas trabaja: la primera,
por aver mantenencia; la otra cosa era
por aver juntamiento con fenbra plazentera. (71)

He professes to have loved and served every woman he has ever seen to the best of his God-
given abilities: “Sabe Dios que aquesta dueña, e quantas yo vi, / sienpre quise guardar las e
sienpre las servi” (107ab). According to the Libro, loving women must certainly be “good” for
men, because if that were not the case, God would not have created female company (109abc).

The Archpriest even sees himself as astrologically-inclined to be more obsessed with women
than the average man, as a result of his birth under the sign of Venus.

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180 “As Aristotle says, and this is true, / The whole world strives for two things in life, / Firstly, to
have enough to eat, and the other thing / Is to mate with an attractive female.” The Archpriest
goes on to make a confession in stanza 75-76 that “When man sins he knows well he is slipping,
/ but does not turn away, because nature impels him. // And I, being man and sinner, like any
other / have at times been greatly in love with women. / It is not always wrong to try out
everything / and learn good and bad, then make use of the best.”

181 “Sy dios, quando formo el omne, entendiera / que era mala cosa la mugger, non la diera / al
omne por compañera, nin del non la feziera.” (109abc)

182 “Muchos nasçen en Venus, que lo más de su vida / es amar las mugeres, nunca se les olvida;
trabajan e afanan mucho, sin medida, / e los más non rrecabdan la cosa más querida. /? En este
signo atal creo que yo nasçí . . .” (152-153a)
CHAPTER III CONCLUSIONS

My comparative study demonstrates how all three extradiegetic narrators use “wit-for-guilt” humor in strikingly similar ways, all of which involve a comic variation of the self-fashioned “mock trial” case scenarios that I have described. In the Libro’s prologue, the juxtaposition of the ostentatious proclamation of purity with the subtle advertisement of sin—all rolled into a showcase of narrator’s cunning—is not unlike the comic bravado demonstrated in Boccaccio’s apostrophes to readers’ imagined accusations in the Conclusione and the introduction to Day IV of the Decameron, or Chaucer’s “disingenuous apology” at the start of “The Miller’s Tale.” In these excerpts, the disclosure of the narrator’s methods of outwardly “proving” (or feigning) innocence perhaps only serve to reinforce any suspicions that he may be just the opposite.

As my analysis has shown, all three narrators are using wit for guilt substitutions, each with their own twist. They call attention to accusations coming from outside of the text, in dramatized anticipation of the readers’ judgment and feigned attempts to be concerned with avoiding it. As I have argued, the “mock trials” fashioned by these narrators serve more to entertain the audience rather than to offer any earnest defense.

True apologies, feigned apologies, mock trials, defenses, call them what we will, the commonalities evidenced between these narrators’ humorous invocation of moral responsibility as a pretense for showcasing their rhetorical expertise are undeniable across these three fourteenth-century frame collections. Their parallels illustrate a shared comic taste—a common sense of humor—among our fourteenth-century writers and the audiences that their frame tales inscribe.
CHAPTER IV

FROM BEGINNING TO END, AND THE ROADS IN BETWEEN: HERMENEUTICAL HUMOR IN *THE NUN’S PRIEST’S TALE* AND THE *LIBRO DE BUEN AMOR*

I am not the first person to suggest that the humor of the *Libro de buen amor* is often intertwined with its ambiguous hermeneutics.\(^{183}\) However, few scholars have analyzed the relationship between hermeneutics and humor as a defining comic trend in the *Libro*, and none have studied this trend across other fourteenth-century European frame tales. In the present chapter I identify a comic mode that I call “hermeneutical humor” and I explain its role in the *Libro de buen amor* as well as to parts of *The Canterbury Tales*. I focus my analysis on several key sections of these texts, specifically, Chaucer’s *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, and the *Libro*’s prose prologue and episode of the Greeks and the Romans. This chapter will elaborate the ways in which the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* and the *Libro de buen amor* poke fun at specific interpretative strategies. It will explain the origins and predominance of those strategies in the historical context of these two fourteenth-century European texts; and it will argue that the identified comic trend—hermeneutical humor—targets audiences who possessed the interpretive dispositions that it parodies.

\(^{183}\) My working definition and general understanding of “hermeneutics” is in line with that which is summarized by Paul de Man in his introduction to Hans Robert Jauss’s *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*: “Hermeneutics is, by definition, a process directed toward the determination of meaning; it postulates a transcendental function of understanding, no matter how complex, deferred, or tenuous it might be, and will, in however mediated a way, have to raise questions about the extralinguistic truth value of literary texts.” (ix)
The “hermeneutical humor” that I identify is a playful meditation on certain tenets or processes of the reader’s interpretive orientation toward the written word, a meditation that often assumes the form of a parody of the medieval hermeneutical tradition. It is unique from the other comic trends that I investigate in this dissertation because of its exceptionally bookish nature. Hermeneutical humor targets an audience familiar with the hermeneutical tradition, as those readers’ own expectations about how to read and interpret are often the subject of parody. The texts in question invoke several of those hermeneutic orientations comically at different narrative levels: from the external narrators’ teasing invitations to their readers to “seek the correct meaning,” to the self-consciously tropological exempla offered at the outset of these texts, to the tongue-in-cheek self-characterization that occurs when these texts dwell on metaphors about interpretation and its limits.

In The Nun’s Priest’s Tale, an opening description and a closing moralitas invite the audience to seek a hidden meaning, but the beast fable housed between them eludes coherent

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184 As addressed in my Chapter I, my reference to “readers” in this study is problematic because of the observed orality of these frame collections. Audiences undoubtedly enjoyed these texts as they were read aloud in a group setting, as well as by reading them in silence and solitary settings. The present chapter on “hermeneutical humor” refers to audiences members as “readers” (rather than merely “the public” or “listeners”) more often than my other chapters because the mode of humor in question (“hermeneutical humor”) targets the scholarly audience member (someone far more likely to be enjoying the texts in a private reading) more so than the other comic moments that I examine in Chapters III and IV.
interpretation as it chronicles a rooster’s dream premonition, his debates with a hen, and his subsequent brush with death. In the Libro’s prologue, an external narrator reminds his audience of the importance of correct interpretation, and promises that his book will grant them great wisdom if they read it correctly. The exemplum of the Greeks and the Romans illustrates how easy it is to be played for a fool even when one believes to have interpreted correctly.

Before I explain this comic mode further, I should clarify to what it is not. The hermeneutical humor that I analyze in this chapter is not a readily-observed or immediately obvious comic trend in the same fashion as the substitution humor described in my Chapter II, and it would likely not have registered as humorous with as wide a spectrum of audience members as substitution humor. It is not a “laugh-out-loud” or theatrical humor, the kind we might associate with punch lines that elicit guffaws and knee-slapping. It is an extremely bookish and “heady” kind of humor—the sort that might best be enjoyed by an audience of equally bookish caliber. As I will discuss in greater detail below, some of the “bookish” interpretive approaches that become the subject of parody include things such as the propensity to envision texts as a “reading-road,” the application of exegetical approaches to vernacular texts, and the assumption that tropes such as the opening exemplum or closing moralitas are invitations to seek a hidden meaning. Hermeneutical humor is distinctively oriented toward those audience members familiar with these hermeneutical enterprises, as those who applied them regularly would have undoubtedly recognized and appreciated the fun in turning those principles on their heads.

Any study of hermeneutics’ connection to humor in these texts needs to be grounded on an understanding of “hermeneutics” itself, and especially, on an investigation of how the
fourteenth-century readers and writers of these works may have understood the hermeneutical enterprise. Hermeneutical approaches to texts are ones in which the very process of reading or interpreting are understood to be a search for meaning. This assumption is, in turn, based on two other underlying presuppositions: first, that a text or texts in question has underlying, extralinguistic messages that can be uncovered through interpretive efforts; and second, that the extraction of such messages is “the point” of all interpretive activity. Based on this definition, the goal of any hermeneutic enterprise is the extraction of extant, underlying meaning. From the hermeneutical standpoint, then, the process of reading itself, in its value and function, can become a “means toward an end” in the sense that the actions of reading and interpreting do not achieve or create meaning in and of themselves, they merely intervene in the larger process of that meaning’s exposure. According to this view, the role of reading or of interpretation is one of mere “interven[tion]” in the a hermeneutic undertaking: just like “computation in an algebraic proof, [reading/interpreting] is a means toward an end, a means that should finally become transparent and superfluous; the ultimate aim of a hermeneutically successful reading is to do away with reading altogether” (de Man ix). These are the assumptions that the hermeneutical humor in the Libro de buen amor and The Nun’s Priest’s Tale make fun of when they employ hermeneutical humor.

The comic effects of the hermeneutical humor that I observe in the Libro de buen amor and The Nun’s Priest’s Tale have less to do with the content of these texts than with the processes of reading that they inscribe. Hermeneutical humor, in order to function comically, forces the hermeneutically-inclined reader to become self-aware of his own interpretative predispositions. It prompts the reader to a heightened consciousness of where and how his “tried
and true” interpretive strategies may fall short, or how a text might defy them entirely. This phenomenon (in which reading a specific text for a specific meaning brings the more general problem of interpretation itself to the foreground) constitutes an important premise for my concluding arguments to this chapter: namely, that hermeneutical humor is not only a comic catharsis for its target audience, it is also a defense of reading for reading’s own sake.

My above arguments about the effects of hermeneutical humor depend, at least in part, on the premise that a reader’s interaction with a text heightens his or her own awareness of the phenomenon of meaning-production in general. Reading is an affective aesthetic experience. It is not “a passive process of acceptance” but rather an active “productive response” in which the reader’s “habitual experiences, which [are] a past orientation” interact with that reader’s own “presence in the text” being read (Iser 133). An interpreter of a text becomes especially self-aware of the unique characteristics of his own approach to reading if and when he is presented with a specific situation (or a specific text) that produces an experience incongruous to those preexisting assumptions, interpretive inclinations and preconceptions.

185 As Iser has observed in The Act of Reading, “The ability to perceive oneself during the process of participation is an essential quality of aesthetic experience; the observer finds himself in a strange, halfway position: he is involved, and he watches himself being involved. However, this position is not entirely nonprogrammatic, for it can only come about when existing codes are transcended or invalidated.” (134, emphasis my own)
“HORIZON(S) OF EXPECTATIONS” FOR HISTORICAL AUDIENCES

By identifying certain “interpretive predispositions” as the basis for the hermeneutical humor that I observe, I am addressing what Hans Robert Jauss would call the “horizon of expectations” for these fourteenth-century texts and their inscribed audiences. The term “horizon of expectations” refers to the collective assumptions of certain communities of readers, as well as to the texts themselves that are produced in and by those communities. To speak of the “horizon of expectations” for these frame collections, then, implies the need to outline a historical understanding of what readers expected in their interactions with and enjoyment of the texts. Although it would be impossible to outline a complete profile of the horizon of expectations for these texts (frame collections that crisscrossed different languages and cultural contexts over six centuries ago), it is still feasible to proceed with some common assumptions.¹¹⁸⁶ In this chapter, I have placed special emphasis on several aspects of these probable reading-mindsets that I see as essential to the function of hermeneutical humor in the Libro and The Nun’s Priest’s Tale. These include the influence of classical rhetoric in exegetical strategies, the Augustinian concept of

¹¹⁸⁶ For examples of recent scholarship that has treated the commonalities among audience expectations for late medieval readers of European texts in the vernacular (textual communities that included audiences of the Libro de buen amor and The Canterbury Tales), see Rita Copeland, James Murphy, Catherine Brown, and Mary Carruthers.
“the reading road,” and the common prescriptive models for use of exempla in narrative works.¹⁸⁷

One interpretive predisposition that is humorously deconstructed by The Nun’s Priest’s Tale and the Libro is the exegetical imperative to approach a text’s literal or surface meaning with the aim of unlocking a hidden meaning below or inside of it.¹⁸⁸ Many medieval readers expected the immediate surface of a text to be “code” for some more valuable and desired meaning that was not immediately accessible.¹⁸⁹ More importantly, those readers understood the process of reading itself to be an extended exercise in glossing. It required the application of interpretive strategies in order to “strip away” the integuments that “cloak the truth” of literary

¹⁸⁷ The term “reading road” is a familiar reference point to describe interpretive practices connected to exegetical approaches, most specifically those inspired by Augustine. Some sources that provide further reference and examples of this term and its ubiquity in medievalist scholarship on interpretation include Rita Copeland’s Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric, Mary Carruthers’s Rhetoric Beyond Words (especially its chapter on “ductus”) and Brian Stock’s Augustine the Reader.

¹⁸⁸ See “Diversa sed non adversa: The Poetics of Exegesis,”

¹⁸⁹ Catherine Brown likens the medieval interpretive predisposition toward a complex surface text to the way in which many twenty-first-century readers might conceive of an “encrypted data file:” it is understood to be the container or vehicle for the message, and it must necessarily be subjected to an “unzipping” before one can have full understanding of its contained communications. (See Brown 21)
language and, if done correctly, it would clarify obscurities and arrive at true meaning.\textsuperscript{190} Many members of these inscribed audiences understood that there existed several specific mechanisms and methodologies that, once applied correctly, would allow them to access the more vital meaning within, underneath, or inside of the surface text.\textsuperscript{191}

When we trace the trajectory of rhetorical theory from ancient times through the Middle Ages, we can see how this sort of approach to a text (i.e. one in which our object of study is presumed to have hidden layers of meanings and that it is our responsibility as readers to find them) developed through the adaptation of select tenets of classical rhetoric to the processes of Christian Exegesis. As far as medieval reading practices are concerned, the term “hermeneutics” itself is often synonymous to “Scriptural Exegesis,” and exegetical approaches permeated the mindset of the authors and inscribed audiences of the \textit{Libro de Buen amor} and \textit{The Nun’s Priest’s Tale}. Some medieval readers would have likely approached texts with the assumption that any opacity of a surface meaning was an indication of the value of the messages or lessons.

\textsuperscript{190} My phrasing of this description borrows from the popularly-cited passage from the \textit{Roman de la rose} in which Reason explains the value and function of glossing to the Lover. The result of using these interpretive tools would yield both knowledge and delight. (7153-7181)

\textsuperscript{191} It is important to note that the readers I am referring to did not consider that “surface” or “literal” level of a text could provide delight in the same fashion that we might today as twenty-first century readers. For many fourteenth-century audiences, and certainly for any “trained” readers, enjoying a text was \textit{equivalent to} interpreting it.
contained within.\textsuperscript{192} The tendency to view all interpretation as akin to Exegesis is precisely the sort of propensity that these texts are mocking.

Thanks especially to thinkers such as Augustine, classical ideas about mastering the art of political persuasion came to be adapted as a handbook for the process of reading Scripture. In turn, the same interpretive approaches that were applied to sacred texts came to be the models for readers’ interactions with all other texts. Classical rhetoric especially would have formed the basis of a person’s thought process in approaching language, whether as the poet who composes a text or the exegete who decrypts it.\textsuperscript{193}

No matter if he planned to be a priest, king, doctor, scribe or mathematician, grammar and rhetoric would have been the two arts that form the pillars of a fourteenth-century student’s education in most every European institution from Salamanca to Oxford. There were several branches of classical thought on rhetoric—most notably the Ciceronian rhetorical tradition and the Aristotelian tradition—and these branches had varying influence on thinkers of the European Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{194} Although a summary of these traditions and their application is beyond the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{192} Eric Jager links the opacity of surface meaning in teaching texts to the Fall. See \textit{The Tempter’s Voice: Language and the Fall in Medieval Literature}.
  \item \textsuperscript{193} See Copeland, \textit{Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric}.
  \item \textsuperscript{194} Ciceronian traditions were uninterrupted from their classical introduction and were studied throughout the medieval period. In Europe, Aristotle’s \textit{Ars Rhetorica} did not enter medieval scholarship until as late as the thirteenth century, when it was translated from Arabic manuscripts through projects launched by scholars such as William of Moerbeke and Thomas Aquinas. The
\end{itemize}
scope of this study, it is important to clarify my assumption that the Ciceronian schools of thought would have been the most likely influences for the authors and audiences of the two texts in question. The Ciceronian rhetorical tradition is generally considered to have had a much “longer reach” throughout the European Middle Ages than the Aristotelian tradition.\textsuperscript{195} For Chaucer, as for many of his contemporaries, Cicero would have been the expert on discourse.\textsuperscript{196} As for the Archpriest of Hita, the \textit{Libro} itself offers direct evidence of its author’s ample familiarity with St. Augustine’s writings, which were heavily and directly influenced by Ciceronian rhetoric.\textsuperscript{197}

\footnotesize{more influential rhetoricians of the Early Middle Ages (Cassiodorus, Isidore of Seville, Alcuin, and others) may never have even laid eyes on Aristotelian rhetorical theories. See Murphy (90) and Copeland. (52-58)

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{195} Copeland’s introduction discusses the differences between the Aristotelian and Ciceronian rhetorical tradition, and Murphy details the common misconceptions about each tradition’s use in context: “It would seem probable that the surge of interest in Aristotle’s works, which is so characteristic of the thirteenth century, would have established the \textit{Rhetorica} as a dominant force in the Western theory of discourse. Instead, it is Cicero’s rhetoric which dominates medieval theory despite the generally ‘scholastic’ environment of the period.” (Murphy 90)

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{196} However, it is likely that Chaucer never read Cicero’s works directly in their original Latin. (Murphy 96)

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{197} Regarding the observable allusions to Augustine’s writings present in the \textit{Libro}, see Michael Gerli, Marina Brownlee, and M.K. Read.}
The Ciceronian theories of discourse likely constituted the stronger rhetorical tradition in the Archpriest’s education as well as Chaucer’s, and the dominance of Ciceronian rhetoric supports my assumption that many audiences would have been familiar with the interpretive strategies that it inspired, especially with the importance of both pleasing and swaying an audience as per *De optimo genere oratorum*. How this advice for orators about persuading an audience became a fundamental basis for exegetical reading strategies is not as complicated as one might think.

The key entrance point for Ciceronian rhetorical theory into medieval exegetical modes is considered to be Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana*. Described by Copeland as “the first systemic Christian rhetoric,” this influential treatise on how to read Scripture takes Cicero’s advice for orators on grammar and rhetoric and rewrites them as a method for exegesis, positing “inventio” as the best and only method for reading Scripture (47). Cicero was concerned with oral presentations specifically: how a speaker might re-present any series of ideas in ways that would persuade listeners in favor of a specific interpretation of them. *De Doctrina Christiana* adapts this Ciceronian advice to the processes of reading and interpreting as well.

198 See Michael Gerli’s article “The Greeks, the Romans, and the Ambiguity of Signs: *De Doctrina Christiana*, the Fall, and the Hermeneutics of the *Libro de buen amor*” for a survey of the scholarship that forged the connections between the Archpriest’s work and Augustine’s writings.

199 “The supreme orator is the one whose speech instructs, delights, and moves the minds of his audience” (*De optimo genere oratorum* I.3-4)
According to Augustine’s program for reading and preaching (as outlined in his Ars Predicandi as well as Book IV of De Doctrina Christiana), exegesis and its presentation from the pulpit were part of an active and generative process in the same fashion as Cicero’s “inventio.” Augustine refers to Cicero directly—“It has been said by a man of eloquence . . .” (IV 74)—as he explains the importance of instructing, delighting and moving an audience. This advice is straight from Cicero’s treatise for orators, with the exception that Augustine references “teaching” or “instructing” in places where Cicero may have used words to suggest “proving” and “delighting.” Just as the first step or the “discovery” for Cicero’s orator is a process that produces rhetorical arguments, a reader also performs an “inventio” by generating interpretations of the meaning of a text. Specifically, if Scripture is the text in question, as it was for Augustine, the function of such “discovery” or “inventio” involves generating or uncovering the meaning of a text whose correct interpretation is already a known entity (DDC II, XVIII, 28). For Augustine, the true meaning of Scripture has already been revealed, and interpreting with “charity” will allow the reader to make the necessary journey to arrive at the known destination of that meaning.

Thus, for the medieval Christian exegete, the ultimate responsibility of a morally committed and spiritually informed interpreter is that of connecting the dots between a text’s surface meaning and another “true” meaning that is hidden explicitly so that it can be found.

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200 For further specifications on these differences, see Murphy 159. (n117)

201 “In a word, the function of eloquence in teaching [is] to make clear what was hidden from them.” (IV 72)
Augustine speaks of the value of a text that can balance its presentation of accessible as well as difficult material:

Those who fail to discover what they are looking for suffer from hunger, whereas those who do not look, because they have it in front of them, often die of boredom . . . It is a wonderful and beneficial thing that the Holy Spirit organized the holy scripture so as to satisfy hunger by means of its plainer passages and remove boredom by means of its obscurer ones [. . . ] Virtually nothing is unearthed from these obscurities which cannot be found quite plainly expressed somewhere else.

(DDC IV 14-15)

What would be a reader’s reaction to a text that refused to reveal its more valuable meaning accordingly upon applying those fine-honed interpretive strategies practiced by exegetes and scholars? What would be the desired effect of creating and disseminating a text that has been designed to look like a tropological puzzle but does not function as one? Or of designing an interpretive path that promises a challenging and fruitful journey but then presents no one, clear, intended final destination? The fact that the hermeneutical humor in these texts hinges on an audience’s predispositions toward the aforementioned mindsets only further confirms my presumption of the existence of those proclivities among communities of readers. The following textual analyses will demonstrate how the texts parody the processes of reading that were most familiar to their intended readers, and how such parodies can provokes a sort of comic “catharsis” in which the readers’ own interpretive efforts become part of the joke.

I will identify and analyze three main subcategories of hermeneutical humor in these texts. The first is the excess of digression that suffocates rather than services the coherency of the
narrative (in terms of its announced objectives or main story-line), thus undermining the recognized models of “the reading road.” The second is the parodic use of an opening exemplum to begin each text, a trope in which the opening parable poses as a tropological invitation but ultimately mocks the readers’ attempts to interpret. The third is the direct interpolation of the narrators to the audience to search for meaning, which in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale comes in the form of the closing moralitas, and in the Libro comes in the form of the prose prologue, among other extradiegetic commentary throughout the text.

**DIGRESSIONS OF AND FROM THE READING ROAD**

The digressions that characterize The Nun’s Priest’s Tale and the Libro de buen amor can be understood as a play on the recognizable hermeneutical concept of “the reading road,” which is invoked in a tongue-in-cheek fashion when the texts dress themselves up as navigable paths but then offer only detours.\(^{202}\) This idea of reading as an interpretive journey that advances along

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\(^{202}\) As mentioned, the notion of the “reading road” stems from Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana*, which casts the practice of reading as an interpretive journey that is allegorically equated with physical travel along a road or path toward a destination. According to Augustine’s own explanation, “Anyone with an interpretation of the scriptures that differs from that of the writer is misled, but not because the scriptures are lying. [If] he is misled by an idea of the kind that builds up love [then] he is misled in the same way as a walker who leaves his path by mistake but reaches the destination to which the path leads by going through a field” (*DDC*, I, XXXVI, 41). Such a reader, must be
a “road” as would a physical journey, necessarily implicates the conception of the reader’s interpretive process in a series of connected metaphors associated with paths and roads in general. 203

As I will discuss in greater detail in my textual analysis below, for many fourteenth-century readers metaphors of following this “path” were directly related to the idea of hermeneutical reading, biblical exegesis and themes of physical pilgrimage along a road to a determined goal or destination. Ideas of the “reading road” are invoked in both of these texts in numerous ways, some more subtle than others. It would be hard for an audience to push ideas of roads and journeying from their minds. For example, the Libro’s Prose Prologue promises the reader wisdom if he follows the right way of reading: “intellectum tibi dabo et instruam te in via hac gradieris” ("I will give thee understanding and instruct thee in the path that thou shalt follow . . ."), positing the book itself as a journey. In The Canterbury Tales we have pilgrims physically

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203 Some of those associations include the following: the idea that the text is a navigable terrain that, if mastered, will lead us “forward” to arrive at a correct destination; the idea that there are different routes which include combinations of correct and incorrect turns; and the idea that there exist interpretive equivalents to things such as shortcuts, byways and highways, crossroads and dead ends.

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on a journey along a road, and we have the closing *moralitas* of *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* itself instructing the audience to search for meaning according to the teachings of Saint Paul.\footnote{204}{The *moralitas* will be explored in greater depth later on in this chapter.}

In *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* and the *Libro de buen amor*, abundant digressions occur in the absence of a clear path from which to stray or toward which to return, resulting in interpretive possibilities that multiply until cancelling each other out. Such digression, accompanied by the invitations to readers to search for meaning, parody the “reading road” and the interpretive process itself.

*The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* has 690 some lines: 175 of them narrate the actual plot of the tale about what happens to Chanticleer the rooster and his harem of hens, and the other 521 lines make up whatever we might call “the rest.”\footnote{205}{The precise numerical count of lines that is provided here is taken from the breakdown done by Maurice Hussey in *The Nun’s Priest’s Prologue and Tale*, however, the obviously skewed ratio of the tale’s plotline versus digressions from that plotline is plain for anyone to observe.} The plotline that is related by the Nun’s Priest is easily summarized in only a few sentences: One day Chanticleer, a rooster, has a dream about a sharp-toothed attacker. He debates the dream’s meaning with his favorite hen, the lovely Lady Pertelote, but dismisses her advice.\footnote{206}{Perhaps another ironic pun about the ideas of meaning and interpretation is the potentially emblematic names allotted to our feathered characters. Chanticleer means “sing clearly” and it has been argued that “Pertelote” means “one who confuses.” Of course, Chanticleer may also just have been a typical name for roosters, who are popular characters in many beast fables; and}

Perhaps another ironic pun about the ideas of meaning and interpretation is the potentially emblematic names allotted to our feathered characters. Chanticleer means “sing clearly” and it has been argued that “Pertelote” means “one who confuses.” Of course, Chanticleer may also just have been a typical name for roosters, who are popular characters in many beast fables; and
farm and, through a trick of flattery, manages to snatch up the rooster and make for the wood. Chanticleer frees himself in the end through another trick. The tale closes with a *moralitas* reminding readers to discard the “chaff” of the story in order to “take the grain” or the “fruit” of its lesson:

Taketh the moralitee, goode men.

For Seint Paul seith that al that writen is,

To our doctrine it is y-write, y-wis.

Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille.

Now, gode God, if that it be thy wille,

As seith my lord, so make us alle good men,

And bringe us to his heighe bliss.

Amen. (Klove & Olson, 670-680)

A fable of a fox, a cock, a hen,

Take hold upon the moral, gentlemen.

St. Paul himself, a saint of great discerning,

Says that all things are written for our learning;

So take the grain and let the chaff be still.

And gracious Father, if it be thy will

As saith my Saviour, make us all god men,

Pertelote could also come from Old French “little beauty.” Carole Hough’s “Names in Chaucer’s *NPT*” is one of the more recent and relevant studies on this topic.
And bring us to his heavenly bliss. / Amen. (Coghill)

Even if we include the above moralitas as part of the plot sequence of the beast fable as summarized above, the entire storyline accounts for less than one quarter of the Nun’s Priest’s narration. What material constitutes the other 75% of the tale? The majority of the verses can be considered not part of the beast fable’s story but rather as a remarkable collection and variety of digressions. These “side-trackings” offer scholarly debates on topics like Fortune, Predestination and Destiny; as well as theoretical summaries of rhetoric and astronomy; medical apothecary theories; analysis of literature from Antiquity; a sermon about the dangers of flattery; an ode to Venus; verses of courtly love; and several witty summaries of popular medieval misogynist doctrine.

The debate on dreams that ensues between Chanticleer and Lady Pertelote is one of the longest of The Nun’s Priest’s Tale’s many “digressions.” The reader learns early on in the tale that Lady Pertelote is well versed in Cato, in addition to being a knowledgeable apothecary. Pertelote uses these arguments to convince Chanticleer that his dream was no premonition, and offers to prescribe him various herbal laxatives and digestives to correct his humoral imbalance. Chanticleer, who of course is not about to agree with his wife, refuses her laxatives and counters her arguments, supporting his point with several exempla about men who died because they didn’t heed warnings in their dreams. He further backs his stance with references to Macrobius’s writings on Scipio, the Old Testament Book of Daniel, Andromache and Hector, and others. Chanticleer ends the debate with Pertelote by wooing her in mock courtly love discourse. By the time this debate on dreams has winds to a close, the reader has born witness to such an enormous
amount of classical, biblical, medical, misogynist and astronomical discourse that he may well have forgotten the premise of the beast fable itself.

The *Libro de buen amor* is collection of juxtaposed segments that are all loosely chained together by an outside frame narrative about the love affairs and misadventures of the Archpriest Juan Ruiz. Unlike *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, in which the digressions are copious but countable, in the *Libro*, “digression” is so predominant as to defy definition as such. The feat of documenting the *Libro*’s many “detours” is inherently so complex so as to be nearly impossible. The only detailed attempt at such a roadmap that I have encountered appears in Haywood and Vasvári’s *Companion to the Libro de buen amor*. It is a four-page, fold-out diagram, complete with annotations, symbols, and several keys. Despite its length, scale, extra folios, and systematic abbreviations, Haywood and Vasvári’s attempt at illustrating the direction and complexity of the *Libro*’s narrative multi-directionality still only manages to depict a portion of the total work. Suffice to say, the *Libro de buen amor* is an unapologetic labyrinth of interrelated digressions that seems to suffocate rather than serve the narrative storyline itself.

Would such digressions have really been incongruous to the inscribed audiences of the *Libro de buen amor* and *The Canterbury Tales*? Or might these audiences have anticipated or enjoyed a good degree of side-tracking? There is evidence that medieval vernacular writers embraced digression as its own “trope” of sorts, and most late medieval audiences probably expected and appreciated a certain amount of digression. However, despite any tolerances for

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207 Late medieval audiences may have conceived of texts as paths, but they did not necessarily value them for their straightness: “The straight path (*limes rectus*), though it is a necessary
digression that existed, various treatises from the fourteenth-century tell us that “good” rhetorical practices were associated with achieving textual wholeness, order and organic cohesion. In addition to understanding reading as a journey along a road, the path metaphor also governed the composition process for many if not most medieval writers. The words “Limes, iter, via, cursus…” are “the common nouns of medieval argument and medieval compositions” (Carruthers Rhetoric Beyond Words 192). Thus, the prevalence of digression over plot sequence in texts such as the Libro and Chaucer’s Nun’s Priest’s Tale would likely have represented a noticeable incongruity even to those readers who embraced the winding story line. Moreover, the presence of this digression alongside such prominently positioned invitations to “go find the meaning” (such as the moralitas and opening exempla that I will discuss below), would have presented an interpretive maelstrom of sorts. An audience’s ability to notice this reference, makes for a boring journey […] The interesting action is found in the paths of artifice, in schemes that do not simply plot along unidirectionally from start to end, but which multiply (though—note—they do not multiply endlessly).” (192) The comment in parentheses is Carruthers’s, I have italicized it for emphasis to support my argument that the degree of digression in NPT and LBA would have been incongruous even for those readers who expected a winding path.

208 For example, the ideal of the “harmonious body” was a rhetorical standard in medieval discourse modeled on classical treatises. (See Copeland, Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric, 41).

209 Mary Carruthers sustains this idea in her study Rhetoric Beyond Words. See, specifically, the chapter entitled “The Concept of Ductus, Or Journeying Through a Work of Art.”
disconnect would have contributed to their enjoyment of the hermeneutical humor of the tale. Those who recognized or attempted to answer the calls for interpretation, and proceeded to enjoy the excessive detours, would have come to the realization that the instruction to “go find the meaning” had sent them on a wild goose chase. The hermeneutically inclined reading strategies invoked by the texts themselves become the object of mockery when digression renders “the path” not just innavigable but ostensibly obsolete.

According to the medieval conception of *ductus*, the reader “is said to travel through a composition, whether of words or other materials, *led on by the stylistic qualities of its parts and their formally arranged relationships*” (Carruthers Rhetoric 190, my emphasis). Carruthers’ study supports the notion that a textual community of European medieval readers would have expected a vernacular work such as the *Libro de buen amor* or *The Canterbury Tales* to lead them along a road that, for all its winding, would (or should) ultimately take them in a certain direction or toward a certain destination, rather than meander aimlessly. In other words, although these readers would have tolerated many digressions from an announced story-line or didactic aim, they would *not* have expected a text to purposefully take them in circles to nowhere. Multiple invitations to interpret and repeated commentary about the importance of “glossing” are abundant in the *Libro* and *The Canterbury Tales*; and their abundance indicates

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210 Paths that “plot along unidirectionally from start to end” make for “a boring journey,” but a text’s multidirectionality should never “multiply endlessly” (192). Carruthers supports this discussion most immediately with citations from manuals such as Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s *Poetria nova*. 

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that, in addition to inscribing listeners who enjoyed a good story, these texts inscribe readers who expected to and enjoyed searching for meaning as per the clerkly interpretive traditions—traditions that are parodied in these segments of hermeneutical humor.211

The fact that readers of medieval vernacular texts expected a mix of cohesion and digression is in fact entirely congruent to the notion that reading should be akin to a journey along a road. However, in this metaphorical journey, is the responsibility for arrival at the destination born by text or by reader? The medieval trope of “inveniendio” aligns the notion of physical pilgrimage in search of the divine with the hermeneutical activity of searching for meaning in a text, and the concept of pilgrimage was associated with the “inventive” quest for knowledge. The “reading road” model underlines the reader’s responsibility in many respects. As Ryan Giles paraphrases Augustine’s mantra “those travelers lacking in caritas were said to misinterpret the text and take a different path” (“Tomé senda por carrera: Finding and Losing the Cross in the Libro de buen amor,” 370).212 However, despite any notion that readers had to work toward their own “discovery” (inventio) in order to glean meaning from a text, the text still bore the responsibility of guiding the reader, or at least providing a navigable terrain.

211 There are so many references to glossing in the Libro that it is impossible to include a survey of examples. Perhaps the most known stanza is 1631: “Fiz vos pequeño libro de testo, mas la glosa / Non creo que es chica, ante es bien grand prosa, / que sobre cada fabla se entiende otra cosa, / Sin la que se alega en la rrazón fermosa.” (1631)

212 Echoing Augustine’s path metaphors, Giles also describes this responsibility as “idea of ethical reading as an itinerary.”(369)
Notwithstanding the Archpriest’s repeated emphasis on the reader’s own responsibility to interpret correctly, in the *Libro de buen amor* there exists an overarching metaphor of reading as a journey in which the *Libro* posits itself as the guide.\textsuperscript{213}

The idea that a reader who does not arrive at the correct destination has only himself to blame is an intriguing consideration in light of the way in which the *Libro de buen amor* instructs its readers to find redemption by reading a narrative with rather sinful surface meanings. If this injunction to search for the hidden, redeeming meaning is not entirely an earnest imperative, then in effect the *Libro* toys with its readers in inviting their exegesis. Through its instructions in the Prose Prologue, the *Libro* forces its readers to contemplate the sinful nature of the text’s surface meaning because, according to interpretive practices, the contemplation of that surface meaning is the only route to the knowledge of “good love,” which the book promises to reveal. However, it is through the contemplation of those surface meanings that the readers may be tempted to use the book’s advice in a sinful way.\textsuperscript{214} Based on these arguments, we can easily contemplate the possibility that the *Libro* is intentionally controlling the reader’s journey through the text, and that it is doing so in a way that mocks models such as

\textsuperscript{213} The work of Marina Brownlee, Ryan Giles, and Michael Gerli supports this observation.

\textsuperscript{214} As Emily Francomano explains, it is not unusual to see medieval vernacular works take up the theme of mankind’s fallen nature. However, unlike many other texts (which often tended to be “works of [more] straightforward moral instruction”), in the *Libro de buen amor* the Fall itself “takes on the moral ambivalence that characterizes the work as a whole.” (“*Saber bien e mal: The Fall and the Fruits of Reading the Libro de buen amor*” 212)
the “reading road” and “textual itinerary,” hermeneutical commonplaces that must have characterized these readers’ horizons of expectations.

**OPENING EXEMPLA: INVITATIONS TO INTERPRET**

We should never take beginnings lightly in the case of fourteenth-century narratives, as the exposition to a work of literature was typically a matter of great weight.\(^{215}\) Although the *Libro* is an entire collection and the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* is just a tale within a frame, my side-by-side comparison of the two is not concerned with their differences in extension but rather with the similarities between their beginnings.\(^{216}\) In both texts, the use of an opening *exemplum*—

\(^{215}\) See Travis’s “Close Reading: Beginning and Ending” in *Disseminal Chaucer.* Travis offers an extensive analysis of how and why late medieval writers were so “particularly aware of the hubristic resonance of their opening words.” (119-120)

\(^{216}\) My choice to compare the *Libro* itself (an entire frame collection) to one short tale from another collection may seem odd because of the vast difference in length of the texts, but there are valid grounds for their side-by-side comparison, especially with regard to the import of their opening *exempla* to their hermeneutical humor. Notwithstanding the likely differences in the context of the texts’ consumption (a short tale like the *NPT* was likely enjoyed entirely in the same sitting or listening session, where as the *Libro* is more likely to have been enjoyed in bits and spurts rather than from start to finish) it is probable that their beginnings would have been read first, and that those beginnings would have held similar influence on a reader’s approach to the rest of the text.
particularly, the way in which each of those *exempla* direct readers to approach the rest of the text—illustrates a similar trend in hermeneutical humor.

If you knew how to write in the fourteenth-century, odds are you were also aware of a few rules of thumb about the “best” ways to begin a narrative, and your schoolroom exercises would have stressed the strategic value of following those guidelines and appreciating the texts that exemplified them. Some of the most well known tips on the matter of effective commencements during this period included the advice set forth by Geoffrey of Vinsauf in his *Poetria Nova*.

The *Poetria Nova* is a 2,000 line Latin poem designed as a teaching-tool for composition, with numerous instructional glosses. After its initial publication (ca 1210) the *Poetria Nova* quickly became the textbook *par excellence* for grammar and rhetoric in the medieval classroom and was used all over Europe. Adapting tips from Horace’s *Poetria Antiqua*, offers several suggestions about the most effective ways to begin any narration. Although starting *in media res* (as Horace and other classical thinkers advised) is still deemed acceptable, Geoffrey of Vinsauf suggests that writers open with an *exemplum* or a proverb, and his justification for this advice shines some light on what elements were thought to constitute a valuable and effective narrative.

According to the *Poetria Nova*, by beginning with a moral exhortation a writer can better ensure that his work will be understood to offer a higher truth.217 Thus, according to Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s underlying presumptions, all narrative writing is (and should be) inherently didactic.

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217 The last thing that a writer of narrative wants to do, according to Geoffrey, is to risk that his readers assume that his text has a “purely specific relevance.” (Travis 121)
and writers who desire to create quality narratives should begin with a figurative abstraction—such as an *exemplum*—in order to ensure that their opening words to signal to the reader the “value” of the writing to follow:

The beginning proverb or *exemplum* clearly signalizes the narrative principle that follows and thus initiates a way of reading appropriate to the work as a whole. Indeed, the introductory proverb or *exemplum* may be seen as the middle or the end of a work’s *argumentum* in that it provides a distillation of the central point and final purpose to the narrative of which it is an integral part. (Travis 121)

Chaucer was undoubtedly familiar not just with the finer points of composing narratives within the *exempla* genre, but also with his readers’ tendency to approach texts with an interpretive predisposition that stemmed from the best-known methods for writing, detecting and decoding *exempla*-formatted texts. In fact, Chaucer capitalizes on his readers’ familiarity with the *exempla* format in order to parody the reader’s proclivity for applying such interpretive strategies too often and too readily.

The first eighty lines of *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* describe in great and unnecessary detail the widow on whose farm Chauntecleer lives. The description bears all the markings of the sort of literary exercise that medieval readers may have expected to be a command for interpretive decryption, and appears quite obviously to prompt the reader to approach the beast fable’s

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218 All of Chaucer’s other works outside of *The Canterbury Tales* are dominated by the *exemplum* genre, and at least one third of *The Canterbury Tales* themselves include *exempla*. 170
opening as though it should provide some key to the “fruit” of the rest of the story. The Nun’s Priest begins:

A povre widwe, somdel stape in age,
Was whilom dwelling in a narwe cotage,
Bisyde a grove, stondinge in a dale.
Ths widwe of which I telle yow my tale,
Sin thilke day that she was last a wyf,
In pacience ladde a ful simple lyf . . . (Klove & Olson 55-60)

Once, long ago, there dwelt a poor old widow
In a small cottage, by a little meadow
Beside a grove and standing in a dale.
This widow-woman of whom I tell my tale
Since the sad day when last she was a wife
Had led a very patient, simple life . . . (Coghill)

In the several dozen lines that follow these opening verses we learn all sorts of intricate details about the widow’s life and household, including her finances, “for litel was hir catel and hir rent” (61) (“Little she had in capital or rent”) and her livestock, “Three large sowes hadde she and namo / Three kyn, and eek a sheep that highte Malle” (64-65) (“Thee hefty sows—no more—were all her showing, / Three cows as well; there was a sheep called Molly”). We learn that her kitchen is “ful sooty” and her hall a sorry sight (66); and then we are enlightened with a characterization of her diet and exercise regime: she has no fancy sauce for her veal nor drinks any wine (68; 76) but she has plenty of bacon and eggs, bread and milk (78-79). We are also
made aware of how the gout can’t stop her from dancing; and we’re also given an overview of the seemingly symbolic layout of her land (74; 81-82). A handful of the details are a bit entertaining in and of themselves, but most are mundane items that appear to mimic models for allegorically-imperative descriptions.

All of this information about the widow ostensibly has nothing to do with the beast fable about Chantecleer the rooster which is considered to be the meat of *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*. The widow is not mentioned for the rest of the tale except in one very brief reference where she and her daughters witness the fox snatch-up their rooster (609-614). Why spend the first eighty lines of a tale describing in parabolic detail something that sheds no light on the rest of it? The idea that the opening words of the tale are merely to be disregarded does not seem fitting considering that so many medieval writers—and certainly Chaucer—were keenly aware of the importance of opening words. To suggest that this widow’s description *does* in fact introduce an identifiable moralizing meaning with regard to the tale, and that scholarship has simply failed to agree on what it is, seems to me an equally insufficient conclusion.

The fact that even contemporary scholars have picked up on the hallmarks that posit this opening description as an *exemplum* in the medieval tradition, is further evidence that Chaucer has set his readers up to trip over those interpretive “clues.”²¹⁹ The hermeneutical hunt is intentionally (and humorously) dead-ended.

²¹⁹ Travis breaks down the four main ways in which contemporary scholars have read this opening exemplum, concluding that “these four approaches comprise two distinctly different forms of critical activity: the first two read the widow’s portrait as a visual sign or icon, while...
The kinds of details presented in the description of the widow, combined with the description’s positioning at the very start of the tale, prompt the reader to approach it as an exemplum and to search for a key to the “fruit” of the rest of the story. The opening lines distinctly resemble the sort of literary exercise that medieval readers may have expected to be a “tropological injunction” (Travis 125-128). After reading this opening “mock exemplum”—when the reader realizes that there is no readily-extrapolated meaning to the exercise as it relates to the rest of the story, the hermeneutical humor that results can be thought of as a sort of “elbow in the side” to any frustrated glossators who may have been too tropologically-inclined for their own good. Peter Travis’s study on The Nun’s Priest’s Tale’s opening segment supports my reading of the beginning of the tale as a “mock-exemplum”: “Chaucer, while brilliantly in command of the exemplum form, is aware of the dangers of our reading every work of literature as if it were already processed into the exemplum format” (122).

The fact that other elements of The Nun’s Priest’s Tale have been identified as tongue-in-cheek references to Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s rhetorical manuals seems to only further confirm the possibility that Chaucer was inclined to make fun of the rhetorical advice in the Poetria Nova.\footnote{See, for example, Karl Young’s analysis about Chaucer’s parody of the Poetria Nova in The Nun’s Priest Tale.} The opening to The Nun’s Priest’s Tale dresses itself up as an exemplum only to send the second two see the portrait as a form of moral injunction.” Both of these ways, according to Travis, are “in keeping with the two preeminent ways exemplum was originally understood by Aristotle and his Greek contemporaries.” (124)
hermeneutically-inclined readers on a wild goose chase through a rooster tale with no determinate moral. This sort of puzzle would have served to poke fun at certain reading approaches that Chaucer considered to be excessively “by the book.”

With regard to my suggestion that The Nun’s Priest’s Tale mocks the expectations associated with traditional exempla formats, the tale’s position directly following The Monk’s Tale is significant. The Monk’s Tale contains a series of exceptionally didactic exempla, most of which repeat the same moral lessons with different characters and contexts. It is one of the few tales that does not “end” but rather gets “cut off” when the Host interrupts to complain that he is bored to death. What good is it to lecture lessons—the Host asks the Monk—if your listeners wind up face-down in the muddy road because they have fallen asleep? Hence, the whole premise of the Nun’s Priest’s invitation to narrate in the first place is to provide some relief from the morally edifying but ultimately repetitive and predictable “entertainment” of the Monk’s parables. Considered in this light, we can see how the Nun’s Priest’s recipe for merriment (open with a few dozen verses of mock-exemplum, continue with a rooster adventure that digresses in every imaginable direction, and close with an invitation to the reader to “go find the fruit”) is simultaneously playing to and parodying the established hermeneutical models.

The use of an opening exemplum to parody the act of interpretation itself is also a part of the hermeneutical humor employed in the Libro de buen amor. In the case of the Libro, however, the exemplum is not hermeneutically humorous because of its lack of meaning, rather on account of what it does imply. The relationship of this parable’s apparent moral message to the Libro’s self Pronounced didactic value (teaching “good love”) is as complex as it is comic, because the exemplum in effect illustrates how correct interpretation is impossible.
The parable of the Greeks and the Romans, contained in the *Libro’s* stanzas 44-67, is often considered to contain the most important clues about how the work as a whole should be read and understood. Scholars such as Sara Sturm and Anthony Zahareas see this passage’s positioning in the work as indicative of its purpose as a “key” of sorts. The episode’s appearance directly after the introductory poem for the Virgin that follows the prologue certainly is a position of importance. Zahareas believes that the episode of the Greeks and the Romans is intended as a warning to the reader not to misinterpret the *Libro* as a whole. If we consider simultaneously the notion that this parable is warning us to interpret correctly and the notion that the rest of the work actively defies our interpretations (or even sets us up to betray our own intentions), then we have little choice but to recognize that the text is creating an intentional—and intentionally humorous—play on the concept of interpretation itself, in addition to undermining the “reading road” model.

The Archpriest introduces the *exemplum* of the Greeks and the Romans in stanza 46 by instructing his reader:

Entiende bien mis dichos e piensa la sentencia, non me contesca con tigo commo al doctor de Greçia con el rribaldo rromano e con su poca sabiençia, quando demandó Roma e greçia la çiencia (46)

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221 According to some scholars, the episode’s purpose is to “clarify the manner in which we must read and understand” the entire *Libro de buen amor* (Zahareas *The Art of Juan Ruiz*; ctd in Sturm, 404).
Understand what I say and consider its meaning
I want no repeats of what happened to the learned Greek
and the uncouth Roman ruffian with his scant knowledge,
when Rome asked Greece for learning.

Following this apostrophe, the *exemplum* begins with the premise that the Romans want Greek laws, and the Greeks agree to give Romans their laws provided that the Romans can prove themselves worthy in a debate. The two participants for the debate are selected and the deliberation commences through hand gestures, as there is no common tongue. The Greek holds up one finger in order to affirm a belief in one God, and the Roman understands it as a threat to poke out his eye. To this, the Roman responds with three fingers (intended to mean he will take out the Greek’s two eyes and his nose) but the gesture is understood by the Greek to signify his opponent’s profound awareness of the Holy Trinity. Unaware that they are misunderstanding each other entirely, the debaters continue as the Greek holds up an open hand to represent the omnipotent influence of God’s will (“era todo a la su voluntad” 60a). The Roman, not about to let anyone slap him silly (“que me daría grand palmada” 62d), replies defensively with a clenched fist, which to the Greek in turn further evidences the Roman’s awareness of God’s infinite power (60b). The outcome of the debate in sign language is that the Greeks deem the Romans worthy to receive Greek law. The Greek debater explains to his countrymen how his
opponent demonstrated such worthiness, and the ruffian explains to his fellow Romans how his threats of physical brutality must have been very intimidating indeed.222

What does it mean if an exemplum that is positioned to be the “key” for reading the rest of the Libro turns out to be a parable demonstrating how those who are confident in their interpretations are the biggest fools of all? The reader of the Libro de buen amor begins his interpretive journey by being told, first, that he must strive at all costs to “understand correctly;” and next, being forced to contemplate an exemplum that illustrates how the act of misunderstanding something entirely can be easily mistaken for (and indistinguishable from) the confidence that one has understood it perfectly.223 Clearly, the parable of the Greeks and the Romans is humorous at various levels. Michael Gerli posits that the Libro is intentionally

222 See Enrico Fenzi’s study “Raffinatezza greca e brutalitá romana nel <<Libro de buen amor>>: Una dichiarazione di poetica?” for further information about the possible sources that might have influenced the Archpriest’s version of this parable.

223 My phrasing is inspired by the title of Lawrance De Looze’s excellent article on the parable of the Greeks and the Romans: "To Understand Perfectly Is to Misunderstand Completely: ‘The Debate in Signs’ in France, Iceland, Italy and Spain." Although it is beyond the scope of my chapter to discuss the variations of the parable of the Greeks and the Romans, it deserves mention that the general framework for the “debate in signs” is not unique to the Libro de buen amor. De Looze’s study offers vital comparative scholarship about the exemplum’s many different versions across Europe and beyond.
commenting on sign theory in order to suggest the premise that the text is a “morally neutral object” and the reader is responsible for interpretation.  

Any fool can laugh at the idea that a Roman ruffian’s bellicose hand gestures somehow projected a lofty theological awareness that had never crossed his mind, and certainly many different kinds and levels of audiences found it amusing. Likewise, it does not take an scholarly or refined sense of humor to laugh at how the wise Greek debater was truly duped. However, certainly, there is a different and more complex level of humor at play in the context

224 “Recta voluntatas est bonus amor: St Augustine and the Didactic Structure of the Libro de buen amor.”

225 Lynn Williams’s article “The Burden of Responsibility in the Libro de Buen Amor” offers an intriguing reading of the “disguise” element of the Greeks and Romans parable, suggesting that there is also humor to be found in the very idea that this particularly “brutish” character was dressed up in academic garb for the debate.

226 Some scholars, including Enrico Fenzi, interpret the Roman triumph as the Archpriest’s way of making fun of the presumably wise and lofty “philosopher” figures (the Greek debater) and raising-up the idea of physicality and human bestiality (the Roman debater). Then again, various other scholars consider that the story mocks the Roman and the Greek equally. Still others consider that the main point of the parable is not to demonstrate a moral through surveying the different sides in the debate, but rather to foreground the very problematics of sign theory itself and the dilemmas of the “alienation of language” that are exemplified by the anecdote (See Gerli and M.K. Read).
of this parable’s relationship to the *Libro de buen amor* of which it is a critical, opening segment. The *exemplum* of the Greeks and the Romans may have achieved its most exhilarating humorous effects among those audiences who were familiar with the tropes of interpretive predispositions being parodied. These readers would have realized the hilarity of beginning a pseudo-didactic narrative with a parable that illustrates how the man who invests great energy and pride in his interpretive skills is the greatest fool of all. The hermeneutical humor found in the episode of the Greeks and the Romans parodies the reader’s ability to be sure of his interpretation of the *Libro* itself.

As discussed in the above segment on the “horizon of expectations” and historical audiences, hermeneutically-inclined readers expected and enjoyed the challenge of connecting the dots between opaque surface meanings and the hidden meanings to which they presumably pointed. The idea that there is delight to be found in the difficulty of interpretation is a hallmark of Augustine’s approach to reading and interpreting:

> Those who fail to discover what they are looking for suffer from hunger, whereas those who do not look, because they have it in front of them, often die of boredom [...] It is a wonderful and beneficial thing that the Holy Spirit organized the holy scripture so as to satisfy hunger by means of its plainer passages and remove boredom by means of its obscurer ones [...] Virtually nothing is unearthed from these obscurities which cannot be found quite plainly expressed somewhere else”

(*DDC* IV 14-15).

Hermeneutical humor itself is a delightfully “difficult” kind of humor. It requires the readers’ engagement not only in recognizing invitations to interpret and applying hermeneutical
strategies, but then in reflecting on how and why those strategies falter and finally, in turn, realizing that they have been intentionally parodied. The relative complexity involved in recognizing hermeneutical humor would have been even more delightful and entertaining for those exegetically-inclined audience members who valued the delight of difficult interpretations.

**INCITEMENTS TO INTERPRET: THE NUN’S PRIEST’S MORALITAS AND THE ARCHPRIEST’S PROLOGUE**

The commentaries made by narrators in reference to their texts’ own imperative to be interpreted are undoubtedly present in *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, and arguably “excessive” in the *Libro de buen amor*.[227] The hermeneutically-inclined reader is encouraged, if not forced, to appreciate a suspended and humorous meditation on “meaning” itself and the problematics of its existence.

Like other beast fables, *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* also closes with a *moralitas* (cited above in Middle English and below in modern translation) that urges readers to figure out for themselves its true meaning:

> A fable of a fox, a cock, a hen,

[227] Marina Brownlee notes that the Archpriest makes an uncanny number of interpolations to the reader regarding *how to read*, affirming that the narrator of the *Libro* returns “obsessively” to comments about the nature of interpretation. Based on this observation, Brownlee concludes that the Archpriest’s overarching goals were precisely to dramatize the relationship between words and their meanings by creating an intentionally ambiguous text (See Brownlee’s “Introduction” in *The Status of the Reading Subject in the Libro de Buen Amor*).
Take hold upon the moral, gentlemen.

St. Paul himself, a saint of great discerning,

Says that all things are written for our learning;

So take the grain and let the chaff be still… (Coghill)

For any readers who are familiar with the general tenets of hermeneutical strategies and how they are *supposed* to work, the Nun’s Priest’s closing words prompt a distinct suspicion that the Nun’s Priest is toying with us through his explicit prescription about how to approach his tale. This *moralitas* reminds us that we should “take the fruit” and leave the “chaff” of the tale we have just enjoyed, because Saint Paul has said, “all things were written for our learning.” Thus the narrator bids us go and seek out one simple and edifying moral, the fruit, and to leave the chaff, the surface meaning, behind as mere casing. It is important to remember that “having

228 “Taketh the moralitee, goode men. / For Seint Paul seith that al that writen is, / To our doctrine it is y-write, y-wis. / Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille. / Now, gode God, if that it be thy wille, / As seith my lord, so make us alle good men, / And bringe us to his heighe bliss. / Amen.” (670-680)

229 “But what things soever were written for our learning; that, through patience and the comfort of the Scriptures, we might have hope.” (Romans 15.4)

For an in depth exploration of the association of this segment of Paul’s letter to the Romans with the idea of medieval interpretive predispositions, see Catherine Brown’s *Contrary Things*.

230 I will return to my discussion of the metaphor of inner meaning and outer shell below, and discuss the significance of its relationship to the hermeneutical humor of the *Libro* and the *NPT*. 
Saint Paul in mind” and “reading for fun” were by no means mutually exclusive practices in the context of trained readership of the fourteenth-century, especially not for the readers that this hermeneutical humor inscribes. For them, reading was interpreting, and the need to hunt for meanings and allegorical clues was an enjoyable undertaking as per Augustine’s endorsement of the inherent “delight” that comes with the “difficulty” of hidden meaning.231 A reader who is totally unfamiliar with the exegetical imperative that characterized this form of reading and interpreting in the fourteenth-century (at least for “bookish” reading circles) will not get the joke that occurs when the narrator makes fun of that predisposition.

According to this mantra, the act of reading is always and necessarily a hermeneutic enterprise par excellence. In other words, the moralitas to The Nun’s Priest’s Tale echoes several notions characteristic of the hermeneutically-inclined reading approaches that the NPT parodies: that we should read texts with the ends of discovering what lessons they hold, that we should expect those lessons to be worthwhile (and, presumably, discernable), and that we can assume such lessons are more valuable than their textual encasement.

Over the past six hundred years, readers and critics have split much ink in their pursuit of the alleged “fruit” of The Nun’s Priest’s Tale. To cite Pearsall’s study, “no two critics agree on

See Hart’s study for an in depth analysis of this allegorical commonplace and its prevalence in the Libro, specifically.

231 In other words, when we consider that The Nun’s Priest’s Tale does not present a coherent hidden meaning, we can see how the narrator’s mention of St. Paul in this closing moralitas is part of an intentionally funny play on the same interpretive predisposition that it invites.

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what [that fruit] is, except that it is not what the Nun’s Priest says it is.” If there is in fact one true meaning hidden in *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, or the parable of the Greeks and the Romans, or the *Libro* itself as a whole, we can be certain that it is not for lack of scholarly effort that it has not yet been proven or universally agreed upon.

In the *Libro de buen amor*, we see the narrator’s interpellations to the reader to search for hidden meaning in the stanzas immediately following the prose prologue and preceding the first verses for the Virgin. The Archpriest makes substantial efforts to draw our interpretive attention to the notion of his book as a husk containing a fruitful hidden meaning to be sought:

Non tengades que es libro neçio de devaneo,
Nin creades que es chufa algo que en él leo;
ca, segund buen dinero yaze en vil correo
Ansí en feo libro está saber non feo.

El axenuz de fuera más negro es que caldera,
Es de dentro muy blanco mas que la peña vera;
Blanca farina está so negra cobertera,
Açucar dulce e blanco está en vil caña vera. (16-17)\(^2\)

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\(^2\) “Do not think it a book of foolish extravagance, / Nor that what I am teaching you are just jokes and fun; / A poor leather purse can hold great wealth, / A plain-looking book can hold complex wisdom. / The fennel seed is blacker than a cauldron / But inside it is whiter than ermine; / White flour is contained in a black outer husk, / Sweet white sugar comes from the humble sugar-cane.”
This imagery of an inner meaning enclosed in a superficial shell, likened to the idea of a text of imperfect words that are pointing to a hidden meaning of greater value than its encasement, is a common place in medieval allegorical works. Like the NPT’s closing reference to “fruit” and “chaff,” this imagery invokes the commonplace topos of inner meaning and outershell. Additionally, the above comparison of the book’s inner message to the sweet white sugar contained within in a rough sugar-cane (“Açucar dulce e blanco está en vil caña vera”) further enforces the idea that the Libro contains a hidden messages that is nourishing and sweet. In the

233 Augustine accounted for the seemingly shameful literal meanings of many Biblical passages by attributing them to figurative language-use, thus “authoriz[ing] the search for doctrinal ‘fruit’ in the ‘chaff’ of the obscure biblical figures of speech” (Besserman 70).

234 Thomas Hart has commented extensively on the prevalence of this allegorical commonplace in the Libro de buen amor, and explaining how it posits the literal as less valuable than the allegorical, much like a nut within its shell (akin to the “axenuz” referenced in the above stanza 17ab): “the literal must be broken for the allegories to be discovered; as the shell is without taste and it is the kernel which provides the tasty flavor, so it is not the literal but the allegorical which is savored on the palate of understanding.” (Hart 240)

235 Francomano’s study “Este manjar es dulce: Sweet Synaesthesia in the Libro de buen amor” explores the prevalence “sweetness” as a synesthetic concept in the Libro, identifying its capacity to unite ideas of the sensory and the sapiencial, “Sweetness is intersensorial in two ways: it combines the senses of the body, but also crosses the divide between what medieval theologians described as the ‘lowly’ corporeal senses and the divine ‘spiritual’ senses.” (127-8)
Libro de buen amor, we can we see it appear in further conjunction with ideas of Augustinian sign theory and the Fall of human language which cause the irreparable separation of res/verba.

Fiz vos pequeño libro de testo, mas la glosa
Non creo que es chica, ante es bien grand prosa,
que sobre cada fabla se entiende otra cosa,
Sin la que se alega en la rrazón fermosa (1631)²³⁶

The above stanza’s from the Libro, and the moralitas that closes The Nun’s Priest’s Tale are calls for interpretation imbedded in texts that strive to complicate and defy interpretative efforts, and even to mock those who are confident of their understanding. In these texts, the foregrounding of issues of hermeneutics is not merely a meditation on interpretation. It is a witty, tongue-in-cheek ridicule of the predisposition to always search for meaning in the same ways and in the same places where it is invited.

When there are so many other ways to entertain audiences with humor, why would the Archpriest and Chaucer have concerned themselves with building such a complicated comic mode? Why tie humor to meditations on such large-scope concepts as “the value of interpretation?” It must be that “the point” of this comic trend extends beyond comic effect. For the textual communities who most enjoyed these frame collections and their hermeneutical humor, the value of interpretation was a fascinating and pervasive question. The study of

²³⁶ “I have written you a short text, but the gloss / Is anything but, I think; it is substantial holy verse, / Where every story has another meaning / In addition to the one affirmed by elegant discourse.”
grammar and of rhetoric was much more inclusive in the Middle Ages than today: the study of grammar included developing skills in literary analysis and the study of rhetoric implied mastery of expression across multiple styles and genres. Critical questions such as “the efficacy of poetic language or narrative structure,” or even “the purpose of literature” in general, were “not the arcane preserve of poets and academic exegetes” but rather the pedagogical questions which any and every student contemplated at all levels of study (Copeland Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric). The proclivity to probe these questions in a self-reflexive and playful way—through humor—makes sense when consider their prevalence in the minds of our writers and many of their target readers.

If we consider that the “ultimate aim of a hermeneutically successful reading is to do away with reading altogether” (ix), what do these texts’ uses of hermeneutical humor suggest about the processes of reading, writing, and interpretation and their respective value? The Libro de buen amor and The Nun’s Priest’s Tale, having invited the reader’s efforts toward interpretation by exploiting the mechanisms most familiar to his horizon of expectations, are in

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237 According to Copeland, these two arts were considered to be “the abiding theoretical toolbox for anyone engaged in a life of letters” and would have been the pillars of one’s thought process in approaching language. (Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric, 1)

238 I am referring back to de Man’s definition of hermeneutics as discussed in the introduction to this chapter: hermeneutics is a process of determining meaning in which the act of reading is valued as merely a “necess[ary] interven[tion]” that should ultimately become “transparent and superfluous.” (de Man ix)
turn intentionally poking fun at those efforts. For a reader or audience member educated in the fourteenth-century rhetorical tradition, the humorous foregroundings of the problematics of interpretation serves not only to provoke laughter and enjoyment of the texts but also to heighten that reader’s self-awareness of his own “horizon of expectations” with regard to the interpretive process itself. Thus, such hermeneutically-directed humor as we can observe in the Libro and The Nun’s Priest’s Tale can be understood as a mockery of the idea that reading is—or could ever be—just a “means toward an end” in a hermeneutical undertaking (de Man ix).

Through their invocation of exegetical common places and tropes (fruits, chaffs, paths, reading roads) that an audience of fourteenth-century scholarly readers would have undoubtedly recognized, and their subsequent resistance to the interpretative methods invoked, both The Nun’s Priest’s Tale and the Libro de buen amor are playfully and humorously parodying the process of hermeneutics itself. This parody is most humorous to someone who is capable of recognizing its intentional incongruity and of relating its self-referential gesture to the interpretive models it is mocking. By poking fun at certain tenets of the fourteenth-century horizon of expectations for texts and their interpretation, the Libro de buen amor and The Nun’s Priest’s Tale can and are fiercely defending the value of reading against any attempts to define it as a purely hermeneutical exercise. Readers who attempt to read “as a mean toward an ends” (de Man ix) become the butt of this hermeneutical humor and are perhaps also, ironically, the audience who can most appreciate it. The mockery serves to declare that reading could never be just a “means toward an end.” Clearly the presence of this particular comic trend across various fourteenth-century narratives illustrates for us that these texts, their authors, and their intended
readership, were inclined to address the defense of reading as an interpretive process that was non-transcendental and non-superfluous, an “ends” in and of itself.

Occasions of these texts’ simultaneous aversion to interpretation and invitation to be interpreted may serve as parodies of the act of reading/writing itself. The texts fulfill their implicit or explicit promise to make us laugh through the interrogation of parodic targets that may be none other than our own hermeneutical efforts. And yes, that is very funny.
CONCLUSIONS

American author and essayist E. B. White once remarked that analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog: “the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.” (“Preface,” A Subtreasury of American Humor). Of course, studying anything as ephemeral as the comic tends to be a galling, at times elusive, enterprise. However, I would argue that its entrails should represent an enticing subject matter for comparative scholars in the humanities. Not unlike the fruit within the chaff of The Nun’s Priest’s Tale, or the sweet nut inside the brown shell mentioned in the Libro, there are a thousand others in which the humor in these collections defies analysis, but there are also many others in which these comic moments elucidate one another. Despite the challenges and impossibilities of studying humor in these collections, I have proven how their comparative exploration yields fruitful conclusions.

As my chapters have demonstrated, the modes of humor in the Libro de buen amor, the Decameron, and The Canterbury Tales have abundant elements in common, and that includes their defiance of standard theoretical approaches to their humor. My examination of theoretical lenses in Chapter I suggests that the study of humor in these texts may always and necessarily defy the application of theoretical lenses. While many of the approaches explored—including superiority theories, tension-relief theories, incongruity theories, and others—are enlightening in isolated instances, most are too reductive to be truly useful to a study of medieval comic modes. No one theory or combination of theories proved applicable across the multiple kinds of comic moments that I investigated in each of my chapters.
One of the largest challenges attempted in this dissertation, and one that deserves further attention through continued study, is the evaluation of the “horizon of expectations” for inscribed readership in the *Libro*, the *Decameron*, and *The Canterbury Tales*. Although the above mention evaluation of humor theories yielded no “magic key,” code, or lens to illuminate the comic moments of these collections, my subsequent investigations about audience—in Chapter I as well as throughout Chapters II, III and IV—led to enlightening conclusions. This analysis of audience is of further relevance because it is the first sustained attempt to isolate inscribed audiences through the study of humor in these fourteenth-century frame collections. For example, by identifying certain interpretive predispositions or intertextual knowledge as essential “prerequisites” for the hermeneutical humor analyzed in Chapter IV, I have established that the only historical audience members capable of enjoying the full spectrum of the comic in these frame tale collections are those familiar with hermeneutical strategies being parodied. The specific modes of humor that I identify and compare in previous four chapters suggest that, more often than not, these collections found their best and most enthusiastic fan-base in the form of a snickering group of clerics or schoolboys. They likely read silently and privately just as much as they enjoyed texts aloud as a group. The kind of reader *best* positioned to enjoy *all* of the humor of these collections must have been a member of a quick-witted, intelligent and well-read textual community.

Though limited in their scope, my initial investigations of inscribed audiences are important contributions because they have proven how such studies on audience are possible in the comparative context, notwithstanding their difficulties. My research has paved the way for others to continue exploring inscribed audiences through humor. By dedicating significant space
to the study of inscribed and historical audiences in an analysis of late medieval humor, I have demonstrated how such explorations of audience are vital to the exploration of the comic

Finally, one of the most innovative contributions of this study is the fact that it examined the humor of the *Libro de buen amor*, the *Decameron*, and *The Canterbury Tales* side-by-side for the first time, whereas previously the collections had only been studied in pairs or in isolation. The simultaneous investigation of these fourteenth-century frame collections elucidates all three of them in ways that other explorations cannot. Most fascinating among the results of my comparative reading is that the comic parallels between the three texts truly illustrate a common comic taste among three texts and contexts that are allegedly unconnected by language or chains of influence. The *Libro de buen amor*, the *Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales* represent a shared sense of humor among three fourteenth-century writers and the audiences that their frame tales inscribe.

As stated in the opening pages of this dissertation, the *Libro de buen amor*, the *Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales* are texts that beg to be studied together. Through simultaneous study, they inform each other in far more ways than I have been able to explore in the four preceding chapters. However, my research has laid the groundwork for their continued comparative study in the realm of the comic as well as with regard to the other topics and elements that it at once intersects and constitutes: didacticism, parody, rhetoric, poetic justice, hermeneutics, reception, intertextuality, and many more.
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