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Daron Burrows, *The Stereotype of the Priest in the Old French Fabliaux: Anticlerical Satire and Lay Identity*. Bern and New York: Peter Lang, 2005. 265 pp. \$50.95 U. S. (hb). ISBN 0-82-046888-86.

Review by Wendy Scase, University of Birmingham, UK.

The priest is one of the stock figures of fun in the Old French *fabliaux*. Daron Burrows sets out to discover what the treatment of the priest might suggest about the production and the reception of these narratives. Burrows seeks an alternative to previous approaches to the problem of the relation between the *fabliaux* and their socio-historical context. In Burrows' analysis, older criticism viewed the representation of the priest in the *fabliaux* (and related satire) as a reflection of historical reality: in this view, libidinous and self-serving clergy in the texts mirrored the real clerics in medieval society. More recently critics have swung to the opposite pole: the depiction of the priests in the *fabliaux* meets the needs of narrative logic; it does not reflect anticlerical feeling. Burrows looks to research in social psychology for ways of navigating safely and innovatively past this Scylla and Charybdis. His analysis leads to a conclusion in which he tentatively provides a new hypothesis concerning the original audience for the *fabliaux*—an important problem which has long vexed critics and has never been satisfactorily resolved.

Burrows draws on theories of stereotyping in the social psychology of Walter Lippmann and the development of those theories by Henri Tajfel, J. C. Turner, D. M. Mackie, and others. This work sees stereotyping as a cognitive mechanism. Stereotyping is associated with categorisation, a process fundamental to the individual's ability to make sense of and function in his or her society that is also basic to the formation of individual and group identities. For this reason, Burrows argues, although it has not been much applied to literature, social psychological analysis is relevant to investigations into the audiences of texts, having the potential to contribute to knowledge of the beliefs and ideologies of the "original target audiences"—that is to say, those for whom texts were originally intended. Burrows chooses the figure of the priest in the *fabliaux* as an ideal subject for this kind of analysis. *fabliaux* abound in stereotyping, and of the most common stereotypes—other examples being those of women, and peasants—the priest is the most obviously specific to particular socio-historical circumstances.

The decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 and other ecclesiastical provisions for the priesthood from the period provide Burrows with a benchmark against which to assess the representation of priests in the *fabliaux*. Requiring that the laity confess annually to their parish priest and setting out standards of learning and conduct for members of the priesthood, the decrees of Lateran IV defined the role of the priest and emphasised his separateness from the laity. Possibly, Burrows suggests, there was a historical connection with the composition of the *fabliaux*—the Council was influenced by reformers in northern France, apparently the region of origin of the earliest *fabliaux*. He comes back to this suggestion at the end of the volume, developing it in his concluding discussion concerning who might have constituted the original audience for the *fabliaux*.

The stereotype of the priest in the *fabliaux* "constitutes a reaction to the developments enshrined in Lateran IV" (p. 63), Burrows suggests. This code and church teaching on priests' appearance and conduct, more broadly, are related to the negative stereotyping in comic narratives. Priests who transgress the church's strictures on their separateness and distinction from the laity are presented as ridiculous failures in the *fabliaux*. Burrows analyses this characteristic in terms of social psychology, praising one group and condemning another for what is effectively the same conduct (being hedonistic

and libidinous, for example) “equates to the creation of a ‘moral-group’ image” (p. 121). Thus the texts perform two functions: they deny the moral superiority of priests over the laity, and they assert the superiority of the laity. Burrows considers the hypothesis that texts performing such a function may project and defuse laypeople’s guilt at their own financial and sexual desires. He rejects this view in favour of the view that fears of abuses of the priests’ powers (for example, fears that they may pollute the sacrament, or subject the layman to extortion or to unjust excommunication) motivate their depiction in the *fabliaux*. Recurrent motifs of the castration and death of priests in the *fabliaux*, in Burrows’ analysis, bear out this suggestion: they defuse fears of the priest by demonstrating that the laity may recover power from the priest, and that justice may be achieved and order restored. Burrows concludes that it was possibly laypeople in the urban centres of northern France who formed the original target audience for these texts. Members of this society comprised a newly emerged group struggling to achieve a distinct identity and a positive self-image; this group therefore had very particular uses for a literature that would enhance the image of the laity and define laypeople’s proper relation with the priesthood.

The book is not without its problems. Burrows readily recognises that the comic narratives from the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries can be seen as formative of a tradition, and as one small segment of a huge mass of anticlerical writing: “here [in the early *fabliaux*] one encounters for the first time a critical mass of texts depicting the stereotypical figure which will proliferate, with few fundamental modifications, in the short narrative literature of western literature in the following centuries” (p. 43). But if it is the case that there are “few fundamental modifications” across several centuries and across western Europe, then Burrows’ methodology and his concluding suggestion (that the stereotypes in the early *fabliaux* reflect the preoccupations of the laity in the urban centres of northern France at the time of Lateran IV) are questionable. If stereotypes perform functions specific to their socio-historical contexts, one would expect them to change as their audiences changed across the societies and cultures of medieval western Europe. This raises the question of whether the mode of analysis employed here is finely-grained enough to calibrate difference. If, however, we allow that stereotypes do perform socially-specific functions without changing their characteristics as they migrate across time and place, it must follow that one cannot infer their culturally-specific functions from analysis of their characteristics.

A second difficulty is that it is hard to write satisfactorily about comic literature, and this problem is compounded in this case by the huge disparity between the discourse of the *fabliaux* and that of social psychology. This is a very solemn book which takes its task of systematising the *fabliaux* extremely seriously. Burrows rarely acknowledges, let alone celebrates, the astonishing, disturbing, transgressive, and wickedly comic properties of these texts, the very properties which make them finally, I suspect, irreducible to critical theories and systems.

However, there is much to praise, too. Burrows argues his thesis carefully throughout; he writes lucidly, and he stays on message. He summarises the social psychology clearly, and sensitively (given his own target audience) uses its terminology sparingly. He provides careful and judicious surveys of the formidably extensive critical work on the *fabliaux*. If his methodology does not entirely convince, this does not mean that his hypothesis is wrong. His suggestion as to the original audience for the *fabliaux* is an innovative contribution to a long-running critical debate. It is to be hoped that this hypothesis will be further investigated and tested in other ways.

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