A “Rasic” Aesthetic in Medieval French Storytelling

Evelyn Birge Vitz

Scholars working on medieval Europe tend to think of the aural performance of narrative works as merely that: “aural”—the speaking aloud of a text; the page rendered audible; medieval “books on tape” with an invisible and disembodied reader. But the auditory element, however important, was, I believe, only one part of the live performance of many medieval works of narrative. Stories, just like dramas and lyrics, often received strongly physical and emotionally engaging performances with substantial audience interaction. I have examined conceptual
frameworks, methodologies, and historical documents to explore questions about how stories were told and, more generally speaking, “performed” in medieval Europe.¹

Applying key points of Richard Schechner’s article on Indian performance theory and practice, “Rasaesthetics” (2001:27–50), offers a way to recognize and make sense of the strong emotional flavors and dynamism inherent in the performance tradition of many medieval narrative works. The French medieval tradition of storytelling knew and enjoyed an aesthetics markedly rasic in nature—festive in character and often high in emotion and physicality. This tradition had a strongly energetic and rambunctious mode—the mode in which fabliaux and other comic tales were performed; it also existed in a subtler mode, characteristic of the performance of courtly romances and similar works. However, these rasic performance modes also coexisted and competed with a restrained and subdued performance style: clerkly delivery, used particularly for reading aloud.

Medieval European narrative received from the East—through complex patterns of influence, mediation, and also transformation—a significant heritage of physical performance: in medieval storytelling, the role of the body and the savoring and sharing of emotions were just as important as the transmission of the plot—and perhaps more so.

**Rasaesthetics**

Schechner draws a fundamental opposition between Western and South Asian performance traditions, exemplified by Aristotle’s *Poetics*, dating from 384–322 BCE, and the Sanskrit manual of performance and performance theory attributed to Bharata, the *Natyasastra*, composed between the 2nd century BCE and the 2nd century CE.² These works articulate the principles of their respective performance traditions. The *Poetics* is a secular and rational work in which theatricality is understood to be experienced primarily by the eyes: “theatre” means “place of seeing” and the connection between knowing and seeing is “the root metaphor/master narrative of Western thought” (29). By contrast, the *Natyasastra* is a sacred text full of storytelling; it is

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¹. By “performed” I mean any manner in which a work is brought to the attention of its audience. This broad definition includes private reading, though my current interests are primarily in physical and dramatic performance modes. I have experimented with performance of such works in the classroom and on a website.

². According to Schechner, the *Natyasastra* is probably not the work of a single author but a compilation of the best opinions of its epoch. It may be useful to note that in these pages I have chosen to posit Schechner’s description of Indian rasa aesthetics as accurate; my purpose is not to pursue rasa in its own right, but instead to apply it to medieval European literature. It should, however, be noted that at a number of points I do take Schechner’s concept of rasa in ways unintended by him. In particular, at some points I use rasa thematically, whereas he defines it “processually” (Schechner 2007).

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Evelyn (“Timmie”) Birge Vitz is Professor of French and Affiliated Professor of Comparative Literature, Medieval and Renaissance Studies, and Religious Studies at New York University. Her current work bears largely on performance of medieval narrative, on which she has published widely; recent books are Orality and Performance in Early French Romance (D.S. Brewer, 1999) and (coedited) Performing Medieval Narrative (D.S. Brewer, 2005) and Medieval and Early Modern Performance in the Eastern Mediterranean (with Arzu Ozturkmen, forthcoming). She is now completing Performability of Medieval French Narrative, and also working on cognitive and neuroscientific approaches to performance. She teaches an undergraduate course called “Acting Medieval Literature” (students perform all the works studied) and other performance-based courses. She codirects “Performing Medieval Narrative Today: A Video Showcase”: http://wilde.its.nyu.edu/mednar/.
“active, oral and corporeal” (28). Theatricality here is located in the mouth, or rather, in the “snout-to-belly-to-bowel” (27). Thus, what we call the “oral tradition” is not localized in or focused just on the mouth and voice, but instead is connected to the entire physical person—to the insides, the “gut” (35).

The guts are indeed very important, and Schechner emphasizes the importance of the whole body and the entire sensorium. Rasa engages the eyes and ears (people see and hear food being prepared, served, and eaten); the nose (they smell the food); the hands (they prepare and eat the food); and, decisively, the mouth, throat, stomach, gut, and bowels. Rasa is moist and “processual,” joining the outside to the inside. The mouth, which “explores the outer world and relates it to the inner world,” is open to both the nasal cavity and the digestive system. Lips and tongue engage the senses of touch, taste, and smell. Whereas sight is tightly focused, the “snout system is wide open, combining rather than separating” (30). Rasa extends pleasure, as in an “endless banquet”; it values “immediacy” rather than “distance,” and tasting rather than judging. The “attainment of pleasure and satisfaction in rasic performance is oral—through the snout.” It is visceral—experienced “in the belly” (33).

Thus, rasaesthetics is “not something that happens in front of the spectator, a vision for the eyes,” (35) as in the West. Rather, rasa happens in the snout and gut; it is an experience occurring at the boundaries between the outer world—the mouth—and the insides of the body involving the Enteric Nervous System, or ENS (Gershon 1998), which is an ancient (evolutionarily speaking) and powerful bundle of nerves made up of the tissues that line the esophagus, stomach, small intestine, and colon. This network of neurons produces gut feelings. To some degree the ENS operates independently of the brain’s nervous system; the two systems are connected by the vagus nerve. Rasic performances are thus essentially emotion-driven: the acting evokes “permanent” or “abiding” emotions (31). According to the Natyasastra, the eight rasas are: desire/love (sringara); humor/laughter (hasya); pity/grief (karuna); anger (raudra); manly energy/vigor (vira); fear/shame (bhayanaka); disgust (bibhatsa); and surprise/wonder (adbhuta) (31). A ninth rasa, bliss/nirvana (shanta), was added in the 10th century. These emotions are understood to be “knowable, manageable, transmittable” (in art but not in life). As with making a meal, there are recipes for producing them—and for allowing audiences to experience them. The audience is, moreover, “expected to show strong response—to beat out the rhythm, to clap hands in harmony, to sing along” (33).

Works rooted in a rasa aesthetic thus focus on the pleasures of performance; tight narrative structures are of lesser importance than the playing out of variations on emotional themes. Such
works do not depend on “clear beginnings, middles, and ends”; they are not plot-driven but instead favor “open narration—a menu of many delectables—offshoots, side-tracks, pleasurable digressions, not all of which can be savored at a sitting” (34). Indeed, Indian performance genres that followed the teachings of the Natyasasthra often lasted over a period of days or even weeks and were usually part of festivals and celebrations that also included feasting and audience participation. “Circumambulations, hymn-singing, food-sharing and wraparound theatre staging” were important parts of such events (34–35).

Focus on pleasure and emotion also means that the social circumstances of the performance are key. In traditional rasic theatricality, “performances were part of feasts of the rich or royal,” and they still take place today at happy occasions such as weddings. Religion (Hinduism in particular) has “a feasting quality that interweaves performing, worshipping, and eating.” It is more common in the West, according to Schechner, to separate work from play, and the sacred from the profane (34).

Schechner thus lays out a series of oppositions between the Poetics and the Natyasasthra, and in his view these contrasts hold not just for antiquity but for subsequent periods: the Renaissance revived Greco-Roman theatrical thinking, and devised—over time and with variations—frontal theatres with raised stages and curtains separating the actors from an immobile audience. From the 18th century on, playwriting emphasized the plot in the “well-made play,” as in the works of Ibsen, Pirandello, and Miller. Although under attack for more than a century, this kind of dramaturgy is still operative, if no longer dominant. While Western-derived theatre is common throughout India, traditional genres are also thriving, and here rasaesthetics is strong. In Indian traditional dance theatre (kathakali, bharatanatyam, odissi, etc.) performers dance, make meaningful gestures, and impersonate characters, while musicians play and sing and storytellers narrate (44). Spectators identify with the performer more than the plot—as in much American and world pop music. Indian traditional theatre “wanders” and may “explore detours and hidden pathways,” (46) and spectator interest focuses not on the story as plot but rather on how the story is performed. In these theatres, the experience is rooted in “visceral arousal”—in enjoying the full sensorium, including smell, taste, and touch (47).

Schechner concludes his article by inviting an investigation into theatricality as orality, digestion, and excretion, as distinct from a theatricality “only or mostly for the eyes and ears” (47). In the pages that follow, this medievalist working on Western European performance traditions accepts Schechner’s invitation.

**Rasic Aesthetics and Medieval Storytelling**

An aesthetic of a strikingly rasic nature existed in medieval France. This is particularly the case in storytelling, and most obviously in the comic tales of the 13th and 14th centuries. There we find the strongest, most conspicuous—sometimes even outrageous—and most persuasive examples of a rasic mentality and corporeality. Actually, such an aesthetic can be found already in the 12th century—virtually at the dawn of French literature—and even in serious and high-tone works such as romances. These rasic performances competed with clerkly, restrained, idea-centered performance.

But how can there be an Eastern performance aesthetic in the West? Schechner strongly contrasts Western/Aristotelian/ocular performance traditions with Eastern/rasic/guts-centered ones. The Aristotelian tradition was indeed strong in Antiquity, and it was revived in the European Renaissance—but the medieval period was not Aristotelian. (More precisely, it became somewhat Aristotelian on certain philosophical issues starting in the late 13th century,

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7. Hardly any French vernacular literature survives from before the late 11th or early 12th centuries; prior to that, except for a few vernacular fragments, extant works are in Latin.
but not at all as regards literature and theatre.) The non-Aristotelianism of the Middle Ages comes as no news to medievalists. The fact that the medieval period is unlike both Antiquity and the Renaissance is a key reason why many of today’s literary theorists (and some drama historians as well) jump from the classical period straight to the Renaissance, entirely bypassing the Middle Ages.

Just how Western—or “Greco-Roman”—was the Middle Ages in general? Of course, the medieval period was Catholic, and Catholicism is “Roman”—or, more precisely and specifically, the Pope and the Church’s administrative center are in Rome. But Greece and Rome—along with their traditions of logic—were themselves infiltrated and influenced by Asian thought and religious practices, especially from the Hellenistic period onward. Thus, hard-and-fast distinctions between East and West do not suit the complexity of cultural realities, even in antiquity—and even less so in the Middle Ages. And is Catholicism really so very—and exclusively—Roman? G.K. Chesterton may have been right when he said that Christianity is an exotic Eastern religion. Eastern mentalities and traditions were present, and remain, in the West.

The medieval period had no theatres in either the ancient or Renaissance sense, and no drama based on sight and distance. Indeed, for much of the medieval period no firm line existed between types of performers: dancers, acrobats, singers, instrumentalists, mimes, fools, storytellers, and a whole host of others (see figs. 1, 2, and 4). For example, in The English Medieval Minstrel, John Southworth notes that the term “minstrel” designates “a host of men and women who live by their wits as entertainers at every level of society; all those professional performers known (in Latin) as mimi et bistriones, or (in French) as jugleurs or jongleurs, or (in Old English) gleemen” (Southworth 1989:3).

Traditions based in physical mime and mimicry seem to have been particularly important. Scholars of the history and pre-history of medieval drama all emphasize continuity between the late-classical mimes and medieval minstrels (e.g., Axton 1974, esp. chap. 1; Chambers 1903, Part I; Faral [1910] 1970; Wickham 1985, esp. chap. 4). People in the Middle Ages believed that Terence was mimed by actors while someone read aloud, rather than played dramatically (see for example Davidson 1991:54–56). Grace Frank states:

It is evident that for the Middle Ages there was less distinction between narrative and dramatic genres than for us. Narrative works depended for their circulation upon a single jongleur, the usual means of distribution at a time when manuscripts were relatively scarce and printing had not yet made books easily accessible to a wider reading public. (1954:213)

Truly dramatic productions separated themselves out late, and slowly, from a broad matrix of performances enacted by minstrels and players of all kinds: storytellers and actors; dancers, acrobats and jugglers; singers and musicians, playing a wide range of instruments; performers who worked with bears, dogs, and other animals, and those who imitated animals and bird

8. Roman theatre and entertainment exhibit many influences from throughout the Empire, which was a performance crossroad (see for example Chambers 1903, I:1–22; Nicoll [1931] 1963). The mystery religions are also a good example of this phenomenon. Greece, too, was influenced by rasa (see Varadpande 1981); Greek theatre was not all Aristotelian, by any means.

9. Catholicism in particular has experienced many competing influences over the centuries—from Palestine, Syria, and Egypt, and other parts of the Middle East; from Byzantium; and from the very non-Roman Celts.

10. Moreover, in the medieval period Indo-Roman rasic practices intersected with indigenous European performance culture. We see this phenomenon particularly clearly in the so-called “Roman” liturgy. Early Roman liturgical traditions intersected with local liturgies—most importantly that of Milan, in Italy (the Ambrosian liturgy), and the Gallican liturgical traditions in France. Roman practice, as conceived and defined, was eventually imposed uniformly on the West, largely under Charlemagne in the late eighth and early ninth centuries.
songs; professional fools—and more. Performers often knew and combined several different arts (Nicholl [1931] 1963; Vitz 1999:186–89).11

Stages and uniquely marked theatrical spaces were very much a late-medieval/early-modern phenomenon. In the medieval period, performances took place in a common space where entertainers mixed and interacted with their audiences: there was no fourth wall (see, for example, Nicoll [1931] 1963). As stated above, the medieval period was not Aristotelian. What is more to the point and perhaps more surprising, however, is that Western medieval performance was in many respects Eastern: festive, bodily, and passionate.

Did Indian and other Eastern performance concepts influence the European Middle Ages? The answer is clearly yes—but the influences are hard to trace with historical accuracy because they took place in complex and indirect ways over the course of many centuries. The medieval period in Europe represents a largely nontheoretical, experiential, and intuitive fusion of Western, Eastern, North African, and Middle Eastern stories, practices, and ideas. Early medieval storytelling tradition was part of a vast, essentially global brewery. In it, European plots, themes, and performance styles—some, but not all, inherited from Greco-Roman antiquity—coexisted cheek-by-jowl with stories, concepts, and performance modes that originated in the East—India in particular, but China too.

Some of the many kinds of performers known to the Roman (and Byzantine) world survived the fall of the Roman Empire. Other sorts of performers came in with the Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Vandals, Huns, Persians, and others, including Africans and North Africans. These types of performers and performance traditions all enriched, and further complicated, the East/West mix. One vignette will give some sense of this blend: the Byzantine historian Priscus was eyewitness to a banquet on the Danube given by Attila the Hun in 448 for Byzantine imperial ambassadors (Gordon 1960:94–99). The guests heard a recitation of warlike deeds and were

11. For medieval images of types of performers, see Davidson (1991); Southworth (1989); Wickham (1985).
entertained, first by a Scythian (Central Asian), then by a Moorish (Mauretanian) comic performer. The Moor did a comic walk and gestures, and spoke in Latin, Hunnish, and Gothic (whether he jumbled or alternated between the three languages is unclear).\textsuperscript{12} In any event, Attila was not amused (97). The mixing and juxtaposing of performer types was extensive and also disconcerting: Priscus was riveted; Attila was put off.

In later periods—from the 10th to the 13th centuries—new rounds of interaction between East, Middle East, and West occurred: Crusaders and the performers they brought with them from Western Europe met singers, storytellers, and others in the Holy Land and Eastern Mediterranean, a region constantly flooded by new influences such as the various Arabic groups, Kurds, Turks, and Mongols. For centuries before and after the Crusades, political embassies and caravans trekked the silk road bringing Eastern and Western traditions repeatedly into contact with one another (see for example And 1991; Vitz and Ozturkmen forthcoming).

Of special importance were Indian traditions. Scholars have long recognized that many tales told in the West originated in India in famous tale-collections as the \textit{Jataka},\textsuperscript{13} the \textit{Panchatantra},\textsuperscript{14} the \textit{Hitopadesa},\textsuperscript{15} and others. These works were translated into Persian, Pahlavi, Syriac, Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, and other languages, as well as into Latin, as in the \textit{Disciplina Clericalis}\textsuperscript{16} and the \textit{Dolopathos}.\textsuperscript{17} Tales of Indian origin also made their way into the various European vernaculars in

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{12} For further information on the complex blending of peoples and influences in Europe in the late antique and early medieval worlds (I set aside the situation within Asia itself as beyond the scope of this article), see for example Ferdinand Lot’s classic study, \textit{The End of the Ancient World and the Beginnings of the Middle Ages} (1927) 1961. Lot speaks little about performers or performances, and indeed, historians and cultural historians hardly ever speak of these, or the arts of language other than “letters” (which are constantly, in this period, declining). But sometimes one can hear whispers between the lines—and Lot does note: “No people exists, however savage it may be, that does not have its songs of love and of mourning, and does not take delight in telling tales and histories” (380).

\textsuperscript{13} The \textit{Jataka} is a compilation of tales about the many earlier incarnations of the Buddha as a man and as an animal. It was written in Pali (an Indic language, used for liturgical and scholarly works in Theravada Buddhism) in around the 3rd century CE. Some of the stories in the \textit{Jataka} come from earlier vernacular works, and many \textit{Jataka} tales were retold (sometimes with modifications) in other languages, including Persian, Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and Arabic. The \textit{Arabian Nights} and many other works contain tales found in the \textit{Jataka}. See \textit{The Jataka, or Stories of the Buddha’s Former Birth} (Cowell 1969). See video clips at http://wilde.cis.nyu.edu/mednar/.

\textsuperscript{14} The \textit{Panchatantra} (Five Books; Ryder [1925] 1956) is an Indian Sanskrit compilation of animal fables and tales of magic built around a frame (like the \textit{Arabian Nights} and many other tale collections) with the purpose of teaching the wise conduct of life to young men. In its original form, the \textit{Panchatantra} dates to around 200 BCE, but it was often revised and exists in many different recensions. An Arabian version from about 750 CE attributes the \textit{Panchatantra} to a sage named Bidpai, possibly Sanskrit for court scholar. The work in the form translated in this volume dates from 1199. Tales from the \textit{Panchatantra} made their way to Europe through oral storytelling, and by way of Persian, Arabic, and other translations.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Hitopadesa: Fables and Proverbs from the Sanskrit} (Wilkins [1886] 1968), a book of “Good Advice,” is a Sanskrit compilation of animal stories largely derived from the \textit{Panchatantra}, but with an even greater commitment to instruction in wisdom. It was translated into many languages including Persian and Arabic.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{The Scholar’s Guide: A Translation of the Twelfth-Century Disciplina Clericalis} (Pedro Alfonso 1969) is a collection of stories whose purpose was to entertain, but with a mock-serious didacticism (18). It was written in Latin in the 12th century by Petrus Alphonsus (Pedro Alfonso, or Alfonsi), a Spanish Jewish convert to Christianity. The collection draws primarily on Arabic stories, themselves often derived from Indian tales, but Petrus apparently knew not only Arabic, Latin, Hebrew, and Spanish, but also Greek, Provençal, Catalan, French, and English (16). Among his sources was \textit{Kalila wa-Dimna}, an Arabic version of the \textit{Panchatantra} based on a lost Pehlevi translation from the Sanskrit (19).

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Dolopathos, or the King and the Seven Wise Men} (Johannes de Alta Silva 1981) is by a French Cistercian monk. Johannes’s \textit{Dolopathos}, written between 1184 and 1212, derives its essential structure from the \textit{Panchatantra}, and also draws on the Indian story of Sindebar, which survives today in Arabic, Syriac, Greek, Spanish, and Hebrew versions (xiv–xvi). The Western version of the frame—called the “Seven Sages of Rome”—may be Hebraic in origin, and was perhaps disseminated by the Radanites, the “roving Jewish merchants who traveled all over the world” (xxvii).}
such compilations as *El Conde Lucanor* (The Book of Count Lucanor and Patronio)\(^{18}\) and Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, both from the 14th century. The oral peregrinations of tales are difficult to track.\(^{19}\) In many cases, tales clearly floated loose from the frame-compilations in which they were transmitted in written form. Moreover, we can safely assume that many obscene and immoral tales were deemed unsuitable for written collections—especially since most of the traditional narrative frames claimed that their purpose was to teach wisdom. The Eastern rasic tradition strongly affected how Western stories were performed. Narrative was open not just to the appeal of particular stories, but also to styles of performance.

This rasic influence of the East on the West is particularly true of French medieval storytelling narrative—even more so than the theatre as it (re-)emerges in the West. Storytelling is a universal phenomenon: stories and storytellers travel widely; they get around. By contrast, theatre as strictly defined—several performers working from more or less fixed scripts—is rarer, at least in the West: it was expensive, dependent on a high level of patronage, and generally existed under ecclesiastical, royal, or urban patronage and control. Western drama has thus been intrinsically less open to a wide range of influences and inspirations than storytelling.

Many narrative works both invited and received rasic performance in that they were strongly physical: the voice was rooted in and emerged from the body; presenting and sharing emotions

\[^{18}\text{El Conde Lucanor, or The Book of Count Lucanor and Patronio (Juan Manuel 1977), was written by a Spanish nobleman of the 14th century. In writing this dialogue between a count and his wise counselor Patronio, Juan drew on a wide range of sources. He had extensive contacts with Moors and reworked tales from Kalila wa-Dimna, an Arabic translation of the Panchatantra, and from The Arabian Nights (influenced by the Jataka).}\]

\[^{19}\text{Many scholars have discussed the travels—in part contested and controversial—of Indian fables from East to West, but a classic study is F. Max Müller’s “On the Migration of Fables” ([1881] 1976). He attributes no role to storytellers themselves in the transmission of these tales: for him it is all apparently textual, and performance issues seem not to cross his mind—though he does note that tales were used in sermons (526).}\]
were key; and performance was communal, interactive, and festive. Rasic aesthetics took two forms: one large, bold, unbuttoned, and popular; the other subtle, restrained, sophisticated, and noble.

**Rasa in the Fabliaux and Other Comic Tales**

We find rasic features in the big and ebullient fabliaux—comic tales dating from the 13th and early 14th centuries. There is a fascination with “guts,” with the entire alimentary canal, and with the reproductive organs.20 Voices emerge from varied and strongly represented bodies. The body in its parts, organs, and members is the object of acute performance interest. The expression of passions is intense, going well beyond advancement of the plot, and often engages the audience emotionally.

A few examples will suffice. Let us work our way down the digestive system, noting as we go how the body is performed and how the emotions are engaged in a rasic manner. The mouth and hunger provide the primary subject for many fabliaux, such as “Des Perdrix” (The Partridges).21 In “The Partridges,” a wife whose husband has brought home two birds for dinner cannot resist having a little taste as she cooks. First, she steals just a bit of skin; then, she cannot resist devouring one wing. Soon she furtively and greedily gobbles down both birds. The scene is sensual, comic, and disturbing—we are meant to understand her gluttony as sinful.

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20. In thematizing the guts, I take Schechner in a novel direction (Schechner 2007). I do not, however, assume that rasic performance requires such a thematization.

21. Insofar as is possible, I have chosen to discuss passages that have video clips on the website I codirect: “Performing Medieval Narrative Today: A Video Showcase”—http://wilde.its.nyu.edu/mednat/ (Vitz and Lawrence 2008). I will note when a clip is available.
La langue li prist a fremir
Sus la pertris qu’ele ot lessie:
Ja ert toute vive enragie
S’encor n’en a un petitet!
Le col en tret tout souavet,
Si le menja par grant douçor;
Ses dois en leche tout entor.
“Lasse, fet ele, que ferai?
Se tout menjue, que dirai?
Et comment le porrai lessier?
J’en ai mout tres grant dessier!
Or aviegne qu’avenir puet,
Quar toute mengier le m’estuet!”
Tant dura cele demoree
Que la dame fu saoulee. (Noomen and van den Boogaard 1983–98, IV:9)

Her tongue began to twitch and fret
Over the bird she hadn’t had.
Her appetite would drive her mad
Unless she had one little peck.
Carefully, she dislodged the neck,
Deliberately ate off the meat,
And licked her fingers clean and neat.
“Alas,” she said, “what shall I do?
What shall I say if I eat this, too?
But how can I keep from eating still?
I want it, don’t I? So I will!
I don’t care. Let the worst befall.
I have to eat. I’ll eat it all.”
She meditated thus until
The meat was gone and she was full. (DuVal 1992:47)

The wife throws the blame for the missing partridges onto the priest who has come for dinner.
The husband chases after the priest with a knife—with the priest thinking the husband wants to cut off his “couilles” (balls).

Fabriciaux like these were meant for performance—but just how were they performed?
We cannot of course be altogether certain (we are often lacking in hard evidence concerning medieval phenomena), but two kinds of compelling evidence can give us some measure of certainty about fabliau performance: complaints about actors and performers by churchmen, and medieval images of performers.22

Medieval churchmen railed against the medieval jongleurs—mimi and histriones—who performed such stories. Theologians’ complaints did not bear primarily on the content of the stories, but rather on the art of the jongleurs: they were sometimes partly naked; they wore disturbing masks or costumes; they used vulgar language; their physical movements were obscene. And it was not just that the performers’ actions or the stories they told were obscene; the storytellers inspired lust and other sinful passions in their audiences.

22. Many literary and historical works also allude to, or describe in part, performances of stories—but an examination of this evidence would require extensive discussion of the sources.
In the 13th century, Thomas Chobham spoke about entertainers in his famous, influential, and frequently quoted manual for confessors, the *Summa Confessorum*:23

Some *histriones* contort and distort their bodies with shameless jumps or shameless gestures, or in shamelessly denuding their body, or in putting on horrible garments or masks, and all such are damnable unless they relinquish their trades. (Page 1990:21)

On a similar note, Thomas Docking, a major 13th-century Franciscan, stated:

Concerning *histriones* it should be noted that they are called as it were *histriones* ("story-tellers") in that they represent, with gesticulations of their body, various obscene, false or true stories, just as *tragedi* and *comedi* formerly did in the theatres, and as is done today in shameful shows and shameful games, in which people strip off their clothing. (21)

However, Docking distinguished between performers who moved men and women to lust and other sinful emotions, and those who consoled and strengthened their audiences. We will return to this issue later. But it is important to note that the nature of the emotions that performers expressed and inspired in their listener-viewers appears to have been even more disturbing to theologians than the content of the stories.

Medieval visual images provide another revealing source of information concerning performance of fabliaux and other comic works. Images show performers wearing sexually suggestive clothing, as in the case of the illustration (see fig. 5, discussed by Levy 2005:138)24 that shows a jongleur wearing twin drums that look like large testicles; the cord that hangs down between them is clearly phallic. Numerous images also show performers (and other figures) who are partly or entirely naked. Michael Camille (1992) provides many images of naked figures, often showing their behinds or genitalia—though not all such images relate to performers or performance.

The evidence argues that a fabliau like “The Partridges” would have been performed from memory by a professional entertainer—a jongleur or minstrel.25 The performer would have impersonated the various characters—the husband, the wife, the priest—imitating their voices and miming, in turn, their passions, gestures, and actions. Thus, he would have played the wife, consumed with desire to eat those roasted birds but afraid of her husband, licking her lips, stuffing pieces into her mouth, looking furtively around; the husband, with his angry voice and his violent gestures, sharpening his knife, then chasing the priest; the priest, who at first is full of happy anticipation at the meal before him, then becomes terrified and runs away for dear life with his hand over his heart—or his privates.26 This story calls for a strongly rasic kind of performance: physical and passion-driven.

A fabliau that takes us several steps farther down the digestive system, important to rasae-esthetics, is “Des .III. Dames de Paris” (The Three Women of Paris), which places voices firmly within bodies and moves performance involvement down in the “gut,” then through and out the

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23. This tradition of ecclesiastical censure has been widely discussed by scholars (see, recently, Page 1990: esp. 20–33, 193–207; Vitz 1999:122–24; Baldwin 1970:198–204). A number of important issues have not received adequate scholarly attention—especially the antiquity and the vigor of the tradition being censored, and—important in the current context—the fact that the performers in question are storytellers, not actors (many condemnations predate the existence of organized theatre).

24. This image is from the *Luttrell Psalter*. Many obscene images in medieval art come from the margins of religious manuscripts. Such images have been studied, in particular by Michael Camille (1992).

25. “Minstrel,” “jongleur,” and other similar terms are often used interchangeably in the Middle Ages, though jongleur tends to refer to performers of epic material and comic tales, and to wandering performers; minstrel is apt to refer to performers of romances, and to figures with an ongoing relation to a particular court (see Vitz 1999:49–52).

26. Brian Levy (2005) walks through “The Partridges,” showing in detail how it might have been performed.
alimentary canal; it goes from consumption to digestion to excretion. This fabliau also dramatizes strong emotions and actions vividly. Three named and clearly differentiated women eat and drink together, getting increasingly—and comically—drunk until they fall down in the street. They are naked, having removed their clothes when they went outside to dance, and lie in obscene positions. Taken for dead, the women are buried in the cemetery. But the booze oozes out of their bodily openings and the women wake up. They crawl out of their graves, smelling awful, their bodies covered with slime and worms, hardly able to stand—but they still call out loudly to Druin, the tavern boy, for wine and salted herrings:

[S’en raloient ces .III. entr’elles
qu’à paines pooient parler;
ne ne poïssent mie aler
.II. pas ou .III. sanz trebuschier;
souvent les oïssiez huchier:
“Druin, Druin, où e alez?
Aporte .III. harens salez
et .I. pot de vin, du plus fort,
pour faire à nos testes confort,
et penses de tost revenir
pour nous compagnie tenir,
et si clorras la grant fenestre.”
Ainnssi qu’elles cuidoient estre en la taverne toutes trois.

At last the trio made a rally, even though they scarce could talk, and not one of them could walk two steps or three without a fall, and often you might hear them bawl: “Druin, Druin, where are you, dear? Go bring three salted herring here and a jug of wine—the strongest, please—to give our heads a little ease. Remember, no tomfoolery;

27. In my emphasis on the theme of excretion in fabliaux, I am taking the concept of rasa in a different direction than Schechner.
come back and keep us company—
and shut that window on your way!"
(This last because they thought that they,
all three, were in the tavern still.) (Harrison 1974:412–13)

At the end, risen from the dead in this parody of a resurrection miracle, the women go home.

In light of the attacks on jongleurs by churchmen and theologians—and the obscene images in manuscripts—such a fabliau would have received a strongly physical performance. This is not just a story told in words. Rather, it required a skilled jongleur, able to switch back and forth among the three distinct women, making them each sound and act increasingly drunk. Some element of real or mimed nakedness was also likely, given that jongleurs were accused of being partly or entirely naked, and of using their bodies in a “lewd” manner. A single performer for this and most other fabliaux is consistent with the fabliau tradition, but the world of the fabliau performers intersected and competed with that of dramatic actors in the 13th and 14th centuries, so a small troupe might well have performed a piece like this (see for example Wickham 1980, I:181ff). In any case, a blend of storytelling, physical mime, and some kind of dramatic representation is altogether likely.

But this fabliau is not merely a funny story—nor is the role of the storyteller just to tell it and act it out. This fabliau, like many others, invites the audience to experience a variety of rasic “tastes” and emotions in the course of the story. The poet/performer begins by urging his audience to feel wonder and awe (ādabhuta) but he also invites laughter (hasya): he says in his opening lines that this is a story of “wonders” and “truth” (grans merveilles and vérité), but it becomes clear very quickly that this is primarily about three silly women getting drunk. The audience is expected to laugh, probably with some real or faked disapproval, as the women get increasingly intoxicated and out of control; to feel disgust (bibhatsa) at the repellently smelly, slimy women, covered with dirt, crawling with worms (this is all described in detail); but also to admire, even to marvel at, the women’s vitality and their delight in life: they rise from the dead shouting, “One more round, Druin!”

The audience shares other characters’ passions as well, including the husbands’ grief and mortification (karuna—their hearts are “inflamed with wrath”) when they see their wives’ naked bodies; then anger (raudra—all “burn with rage”) upon discovering that they have been taken in: the women who appeared to have risen from the dead were merely dead-drunk. The jongleur closes with a return to wonder and awe, claiming that only in Scripture (“escriture”) can stories so astonishing as this be found. This fabliau is truly a rasic tour de force.

Along with the digestive system, other parts of the guts are important to the form of rasic aesthetic present in fabliaux. Sex and genitalia often provide the physical and emotional dimensions of fabliaux, many of which deal frankly, and quite snoutishly, with sexual desire and behavior. One of many fabliaux where the body and sexuality are primary themes is “Le chevalier qui fist parler les cons” (The Knight Who Made Cunts Speak). The fabliau poet/performer plays with this theme and the feelings it embodies in a way that inspires humor, amazement, and fear more than sexual desire. The title of the story makes clear the nature of the knight’s astounding gift, which he received from three fairies, along with the ability to make women’s arses talk. The fabliau-poet is restrained in his treatment of the theme, seeming above all intrigued by the very fact that these lower parts can speak and tell the truth—and by the amazement and fear that this gift inspires in others: a priest, on whose mare the knight first tries out his new skill, flees in terror. The knight goes to a court where his talent becomes a subject of controversy. A lady bets that he does not have the talent he claims to possess—but just in case, she plugs up her vagina.

Le chevaliers le con apele:
“Sire cons,” fait il, “or me membre
que quist votre dame en sa chambre,
The knight, by way of salutation, said: “Sir Cunt,28 feel free to speak; what object did your mistress seek in her chamber when she left the hall?” The cunt could not reply at all, its gullet being packed so full and overstuffed with cotton wool, it couldn’t either trot or run. (Harrison 1974:250–51)

But the knight is able to make her arse speak, and when it explains the truth of the situation, he wins the bet. This fabliau enacts the desire (of men) to hear the lower, interior parts of the female body speak up—and for these parts, unlike women’s mouths, to tell the truth. This fabliau does not discuss or explore the sexual desire of private parts; that they speak is apparently enough.29 Once again, if we judge by theologians’ complaints and manuscript images—including naked figures showing their behinds—performances of this fabliau would have featured the jongleur’s bodily contortions as the private parts struggled to speak out, along with the production, with comic effect, of strange, muffled voices imitating the manner of speech of those hidden parts. If tastelessness was taken to a high art—and theologians asserted that this was often the case of fabliau performance30—the jongleur might well have drawn on ventriloquism, an art familiar to the Middle Ages,31 to make private parts speak. Medieval jongleurs seem to have mimed physical representations more graphically and obscenely than most stand-up comics today, who rely largely on the use of shocking words but with a fairly restrained array of gestures.

Many fabliaux represent sexual organs and intercourse openly and crudely. For example, in “Les .III. Souhais Saint Martin” (The Four Wishes of Saint Martin; Harrison 1974:177–89), the husband has received from Saint Martin of Tours four wishes (a common folktales motif). His wife, irritated with his hesitation, makes a wish that he be covered in male genitalia—done! All are described in vivid detail. The husband then wishes that she were covered from head to toe in female sexual organs—and again the varieties are represented physically. The appalled couple then wish they had no sexual organs at all—a mistake they must remedy by wishing themselves back to normal. The four wishes have now been wasted. Some fabliaux, such as “La Damoisele

28. It is “Sir Cunt” because in French, as in Latin and other Romance languages, the grammatical gender of a word takes precedence over its other associations—however odd and counter-intuitive that may appear to us—and “con” is a masculine noun. There is certainly irony here, as is often the case of such grammatical identities. This passage may well call for a psychoanalytic discussion—but this is not the place, nor am I the scholar, for that discourse.

29. E. Jane Burns has discussed this and similar fabliaux, and the larger issues of sexuality and obscenity that they raise (Burns 1993:54ff).

30. Medieval audiences relished many kinds of performers that we might think strange and tasteless. For example, the professional “farter” was a recognized and valued performer (see, for example, Southworth 1989:47, 81). Famous for his skill, Roland le Pettour could apparently fart in tune.

31. The early Church Fathers (including Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa in the East, and Augustine in the West) were familiar with the phenomenon of ventriloquism which, not surprisingly, they understood as demonic in nature; many other mystified spectators have seen it as magic (see for example Vox 1993). Steven Connor briefly discusses the fabliau under consideration here (2000:197) in the context of his discussion of Diderot’s Les Bijoux indiscrets, which has a similar premise; Connor does not, however, discuss the performance of this fabliau.
qui ne poot oïr parler de foutre” (The Maiden Who Couldn’t Hear Fuck; DuVal 1992:64–70) and “Du Sot Chevalier” (The Silly Chevalier) by Gautier le Leu (Harrison 1974:323–41) represent intercourse in considerable physical detail and are virtually sexual how-to manuals that invite the acting out of sexual excitement and penetration—as well as providing sexual stimulation to the audience. Many other fabliaux are essentially pornographic. While fabliaux almost always aimed at making people laugh, they often provided sexual excitement to audiences, like today’s raunchiest nightclub acts and other R- and X-rated performances.

It was a sin to patronize this sort of jongleur. But Church rules, like civil laws, were (and still are) often ignored. Entertainers of all kinds in fact found many patrons over the centuries—including princes and prelates (Baldwin 1970, I:201)—despite repeated official ecclesiastical condemnations.

Fabliaux were unquestionably rasic in their festive and celebratory character: jongleurs performed these comic tales to entertain groups of all kinds. But precisely because fabliaux were frequently immoral, they were not typically performed at noble occasions such as Pentecost or coronations; rather, they appear to have provided entertainment at more ordinary gatherings, as in taverns, where the hat was passed. Or, if a fabliau performer got lucky, his performances were slipped in toward the end of the evening at a high-tone event, when audience members had drunk a good deal of wine or ale and had lost their inhibitions. Even high-born and educated patrons and audiences, then as now, might sometimes enjoy low, vulgar entertainment, and would pay to get it.

We have had ample opportunity to witness fabliau engagement with the physical appetites of hunger, thirst, and sex. But some fabliaux are rasic in the attention they draw to various parts of the sensorium. (We already caught a whiff in “Three Women of Paris” when the ladies spent a nasty night underground.) “Le Vilain Asnier” (“The Peasant and His Ass”) deals with smell. In “Le Vilain Asnier,” a peasant who is not used to pleasant odors comes to town. Smelling the sweetness in the rue as espiciers, or spice-merchants’ street, he faints dead away. A bystander holds a clump of manure under his nose—a nice familiar smell that totally revives the peasant.

Quant cil sent du fiens la flairor
Et perdi des herbes l’odor,
Les elz oevre, s’est sus sailliz
Et dist que il est toz gariz:
Molt en est liez et joie en a,
Et dit par iluec ne vendra
Ja mais, se aillors puet passer. (Noomen 1983–98, VIII:214)

When he smells the odor of the dung
And has lost the smell of the herbs,
He opens his eyes, and jumps up
And says that he is all healed.
He’s very happy and joyful
And says that he will never come to this place again
If he can go some other way. (author’s translation)

The performance of such a fabliau turns on how the player mixes delight and disgust—or, in rasic terms, sringara and bibhatsa—the two being paradoxically inverted here. As often in rasic performances, the two rasas are layered or alternated. A knowing person would experience pleasure upon smelling the odors of spice street, but the country bumpkin is shocked by the strange odors and falls down as though dead. It is only when he smells familiar manure that he feels pleasure—and is indeed miraculously healed. The challenge—and the fun—of this fabliau

32. They are never listed among the kinds of works performed on such occasions, and several such lists exist.
in performance lies in the performer’s ability to help the audience experience two paradoxical and contradictory smells—the good smelling bad, the bad smelling good. This fabliau does not use crude language. The French word used here is *fiente* (manure), not *merde* (shit). The entertainment is not in vulgarity but in the paradoxical and surprising inversion of the feelings evoked by powerful smells.

Some fabliaux combine several rasic elements, such as the taste of food, sexual desire, and the alimentary canal. “Les chevaliers, les clercs et les vilains” (Knights, Clerks and Churls),\(^{33}\) manages in just a few lines to bring together the pleasures of eating, sex, and defecation. Two knights come upon a beautiful field and declare it to be a wonderful place for a picnic; they speak enthusiastically about the pleasures of food, then depart. Two students (young clerks)\(^{34}\) arrive and remark that this would be a great place to have sex with a woman:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Si ont come Cler devisé,} \\
\text{Et dist li uns, qui averoit} \\
\text{Ici fame qu’il ameroit,} \\
\text{Moult feroit biau jouer à li;} \\
\text{Bien averoit le cuer failli,} \\
\text{Fet li autres et recreant,} \\
\text{S’il n’en prendoit bien son creant.} \\
\text{Iluec ne sont plus arrestu. (Barbazan 1808, III:29)}
\end{align*}
\]

They spoke the way clerks speak. One said, “Whoever had a woman here, One that he loved, tender, dear, Could have some very pleasant fun.” —“He’d be a fool,” said the other one, “A feeble-hearted, cowardly cur, Not to have his way with her.” When they had spoken, on they passed. (DuVal 1992:44–45)

Finally, two peasants arrive.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Si ont parlé si come il durent,} \\
\text{Et dist li uns, sire Fouchier,} \\
\text{Com vez ci biau lieu pour chier!} \\
\text{Or i chions, or, biaus compere;} \\
\text{Soit, fet-il, par l’ame mon pere:} \\
\text{Lors du chier chacuns s’efforce. (Barbazan 1808, III:29)}
\end{align*}
\]

The way churls speak is how they spoke: One said, “Sir Foosher, here we sit, What a perfect place to shit! My friend, let’s take a shit right here.” —“Yeah!” said the other, “Good idea!” Then each churl strove and strained and did it. (DuVal 1992:44–45)

The performance of this fabliau invites the rapid evocation of three pairs of men with very different identities and outlooks. Each evokes the passion most central to them: nobles love to taste good food in beautiful surroundings; students love to make love to women; churls love to “shit.” While the early parts of the fabliau uses refined language, the passage about peasants

\[^{33}\text{Video clip at http://wilde.its.nyu.edu/mednat/}.
\]

\[^{34}\text{For a definition of clerks/clerics, see Vitz (1999:49–52).}\]
is vulgar. This fabliau might well have ended with the performer’s vigorously (and probably noisily) mimed bowel movement—images of defecation and excrement are common in medieval manuscripts and illustrations (see fig. 3). (In my class, one pair of students performed this fabliau using rubber buttocks and chocolate turds to the mixed delight and disgust of their fellow students.)

Fabliaux of the 13th and 14th centuries thus typify a certain kind of rasic performance that stresses high physicality, involvement with the body’s guts, and delight in the sensorium, and that makes a direct appeal to the audience’s lower emotions. But fabliaux are not the only medieval French performed stories where a rasic type of aesthetic existed. One could adduce many other examples from comic narrative literature, in particular from the stories about Renard the Fox (see Terry 1983; Dufournet 1970) and other animals: the Wolf, the Lion, the Rooster, etc. (Our website contains numerous clips from the Renard material, see Vitz and Lawrence 2008.) In enacting these stories, performers focused on the beasts’ emotions, especially anger and fear, but also amazement and desires such as hunger and lust (never glorified in these works as noble “erotic desire”). Sometimes the audience was invited to share those emotions, but more often to laugh at the beasts’ passions—and to see the frightening ways in which human passions mirror, but disguise, those of the animals.

Rasa and Romance

Chrétienn de Troyes and Arthurian Romance

Rather than focusing on other comic works—whose rasic aesthetic may by this point be obvious—I now turn to a very different sort of story. I submit that we can find a rasic aesthetic where medievalists might not expect to find one at all: in the romances of the great 12th-century narrative poet Chrétienn de Troyes, the famed originator of Arthurian romance, and in other similar works. Some rasic elements that we have seen in the fabliaux are missing in the romances: Chrétienn’s stories are unfailingly courtly, and he never invokes the lower gastro-intestinal and reproductive tracts. Chrétienn doesn’t do guts.

Chrétienn’s stories are the refined pinnacle of 12th-century performance: ethical entertainments about King Arthur and the Round Table, performed for the wealthiest, most distinguished lords and ladies of the period. But several important elements of Chrétienn’s romances are rasic: his representation of voice as firmly grounded in physicality; his rich and varied presentation of emotions, in which the audience is to partake; his fondness for adventures featuring colorful and memorable characters with little or no importance to the plot; the festive, celebratory nature of his romances; and the lack of distinction between the sacred and the profane.

Perhaps the most dramatic and memorable embodied voice is that of the Lion, a key character in Yvain ou le Chevalier au Lion (Yvain or the Knight with the Lion).35 The Lion has no lines, but he cannot be a silent character: he must roar and cry out—and indeed Yvain first notices him because of the loud noises he is making:

Mesire Yvains pensis chemine
Tant qu’il vint en une gaudine;
Et lors oy en mi le gaut
Un cri mout dolereus et haut (Chrétienn 1994:ll.3341–44)

The Lord Yvain rides pensively
on through the deep wood. Suddenly
he hears an awful cry of pain
come from the trees (Chrétienn 1975:94)

35. Video clip at http://wilde.its.nyu.edu/mednar/. The website includes many clips from this important romance.
Here, a serpent is biting the Lion, who suffers acute physical pain. We must hear his roar—
that is, hear the performer imitate that roar.

But what do we know about the performance of animals by jongleurs and minstrels? First, it
is clear that imitating animal and bird sounds was an important part of the performers’ art (see
for example Strutt [1830] 1968:203–04; Vitz forthcoming; Leach 2007). Moreover, we know that
performers wore animal masks and sometimes animal costumes (see figs. 6 & 7).

The Lion in this romance would almost certainly have been performed with a wide range
of loud, impassioned, leonine noises. He is much like the Wookie in *Star Wars*: a dramatic
character who speaks no words yet gives a forceful and varied vocal performance. The Lion
“speaks” to express the many emotions he feels during the course of the romance, and even
perhaps invites the audience to share them in an inarticulate fashion—an “irrational” way,
speaking in medieval terms (Leach 2007). That is, human speech is rational and can be repre-
sented in writing; the sounds made by animals and birds are irrational and unable to be written
down. The Lion expresses joy and gratitude (to Yvain for saving his life), grief (later, he thinks
Yvain is dead), happiness (Yvain is not dead!), and loud rage (repeatedly, as evil men try to kill
Yvain). One cannot simply read such scenes aloud—there is nothing to read! Rather, the lion
feels and expresses emotions that a minstrel must perform with a range of animal sounds, which
constitute the Lion’s voice. The storyteller might have roared loudly and frighteningly in rage, 

...snarled aggressively in attack, groaned in sorrow, and perhaps rolled out leonine purrs of joy—
but in any case, it was his job as a performer to make the Lion’s passions “sound,” that is, to give
voice to these emotions.

The use of animal masks and costumes would have further intensified the Lion’s intensely
rasic potential, and the storyteller’s physical posture and gestures would also certainly have
accompanied these passionate leonine sounds. Expressive claws and jaws might further help
the performer embody the Lion as he hunts deer and drinks their blood, tries to commit suicide
in despair at Yvain’s apparent death, and scratches his way out from under a door and rushes to
the attack, tearing entire limbs from evil men.

While the Lion’s case is particularly striking in its rasic character, many other scenes in
Chrétien’s romances also call for strongly embodied voices to express a wide range of passions.
For example, Yvain comes to a castle where the members of the family give him a smiling
welcome, but their underlying sadness soon becomes clear as they alternate between joy over
his arrival and overwhelming grief. The father tells Yvain that he is full of sorrow because the
next morning he must choose between seeing his beloved daughter raped by all the lowest
servants of an evil giant or watching his four sons murdered before his eyes.
Nus mix de moi ne se doit plaintre
Ne duel faire ne duel mener.
De duel devroie forsener,
Que sis fix chevaliers avoie,
Plus biaus el monde ne savoie,
Ses a tous .vi. li gaians pris.
Voiant moi en a .ii. ochis,
Et demain ochirra les quatre
Se je ne truis qui s’ost combatre
A lui pour mes fix delivrer,
Ou se je ne li vuel livrer
Ma fille; et dit, quant il l’avra,
As plus vilz garçons qu’il sara
En sa maison et as plus ors
Le liverra pour ses depors,
Qu’il ne la desire mais prendre.
A demain puis chest duel atendre
Se Damedix ne m’en conseille.
Et pour chou n’est mie merveille,

Biau sire chiers, se nous plourons,
Mas pour vous tant com nous poons
Nous reconfortons a le fye
De faire contenanche lie;
Car fols est qui predonne atrait
Entour lui s’oneur ne li fait. (Chrétien 1994:ll.3856–80)

No one is better justified
than I am to have mourned and cried.
I think my sorrow may unfix
my reason, sir, for I had six
fine sons, the handsomest and best
the world has ever seen, fair guest,
six fine sons, all knights, and one day
the giant took all six away.
He has killed two of them before
my eyes; he’ll kill the other four
tomorrow, if I find no knight

to save my sons from him and fight,
or else I shall be forced to yield

my daughter to him. He's revealed

he means to make her be the sport

of the most vile and oldest sort

of groom and lackey in his house.

Now he won't take her as his spouse.

God help me, he will come tomorrow,

so do not wonder at our sorrow.

And yet, my lord, we've tried to make

our faces joyful for your sake. (Chrétien 1975:108–09)

Rasa analysis helps us understand the meaning and importance of this passage. We can see an underlying courage, virility, and knightliness (vira), on which are superimposed by turns, and at times together, feelings of sadness (karuna, over the two already-murdered sons), revulsion (bibhatsa, at the prospect of the daughter's horrifying gang-rape), and fear (bhayanaka, over the very prospect of the choice, and all the possible outcomes of his decision). All these are mixed with the pleasure that is a noble host's duty (mild sringara). Yvain's compassionate response to this scene and other similar passages is of great importance to the romance: in the first half, Yvain had followed his own passions—anger and erotic desire—though they were to some degree masked by chivalric idealism. But Yvain is then dishonored for failing to keep an oath to his wife. In the second half of the romance he not only does good works but, more importantly, he feels—and responds to—the suffering of others. The audience also empathizes; we, along with Yvain, hear these people tell of their sorrows and mistreatment, and learn compassion.

To grasp more fully the nature of the rasic performance presence in Chrétien's romances, it is useful to look at him and his work in light of the comments by the theologians to whom I referred earlier. Thomas Docking spoke positively about performers who were ethical and dignified, who:

use their trade to earn their food and with the intention of giving people comfort against anger, sadness, weariness or sloth, or against bodily infirmities, they are to be given benefits like the poor of Christ. (Page 1990:22)

Performers who provided comfort and consolation to their audiences by arousing moral emotions such as aesthetic delight, renewed courage, moderate humor, and the restoration of peace of mind were seen as providing a valuable service to society. The Church and civil authorities also viewed performers that sang of the deeds of saints and great princes—such as King Arthur—as worthy and respectable for inspiring feelings of courage and wonder in their audiences. Chrétien is precisely the sort of performer of whom Docking (and his fellows) would have approved: Chrétien's romances express and encourage above all high moral passions.

Enacting stories like these requires far more restrained and dignified performance techniques than those used in the fabliaux. But they too must be clearly, if more subtly, physical and rasic: the various characters need to be embodied in their passions. The daughter, who also speaks at length to Yvain, feels the terrible fear her father experiences—but her fear must be represented differently than her father's: she is afraid of having to suffer a horrible and ignominious series of rapes.

Chrétien's rasic handling of emotion goes deeper and is more thoroughgoing than merely exposing the emotions of a family menaced by an evil giant, or the highly physical role of the Lion. The handling of love—“Love”—is powerfully consistent in all of Chrétien's work, and indeed in many medieval works.
The experience of love in such works is rasīc in several ways. It is acutely physical—but its physicality is not limited to sexual desire, which indeed may not be explicitly mentioned or represented at all. To taste love is often to taste something sweet, but love is by no means experienced only as sweetness! The character who falls in love receives, through the eyes, a terrible wound—to the heart, to the entire body. To love is to have been hunted down and caught as prey by Love. To love is to enter a prison: one is trapped and cannot escape. Sometimes, to fall in love is to have drunk a magic potion, even poison: the lover is drastically changed, and may feel deathly ill permanently. Or it may be to contract a terrible fever: the lover alternately burns and shivers. Or, to fall in love means that a stranger—something alien—has moved in and taken over. Or, when one falls in love one has lost one’s reason; one may even act truly crazy. All these emotions must be enacted by the storyteller in physically convincing ways, and yet without overstepping the bounds of propriety. Moreover, when performed effectively, the emotions of love inspire strong feelings in other characters, and in the audience as well, who may be inspired to love—and to imitate the lover (see Vitz 2005). Medieval lovers, both in literature and in historical texts, are often represented as falling in love after hearing stories about other lovers: love stories invited imitation. Alternately, such scenes might stimulate in the audience feelings of amazement, fear, and humor.

On the rasīc treatment of love (srīngara), one could take scenes from any of Chrétien’s five surviving romances (and works by many other poets as well), but I choose a scene from Yvain. Early on in the romance, Yvain kills the knight who was defending his wife’s land and magic fountain. Seeing the dead man’s widow, Yvain falls madly in love with her.

Mais de son çucre et de ses breches
Li radolcist Nouvele Amours,
Qui par sa terre a fait son cours,
S’a toute sa proie cueillie,
Son cuer en maine s’anemie,
S’en maine ce qu’ele plus het.
Bien avengie, et si nel set,
La dame le mort son seignor;
Venjanche en a prise gregnor
Qu’ele prendre ne l’en peüst,
S’Amours vengie ne l’eüst,
Qui si doucemment le requiert,
Que par les iex el cuer le siert,
Et cist cols a plus grant duree
Que cols de lache ne d’espee.
Colz d’espee garist et saine
Mout tost, des que mires y palne;
Et la plaie d’Amours empire
Quant ele est plus pres de son mire.
Chele playe a mesire Yvains

36. Schechner notes: “This is not very far from the classic representation of Srīngara in Bharatanatyam (and other traditional Indian forms) where Radha is both excited and betrayed by her love for Krishna—a love that is both erotic and divine” (Schechner 2007).
37. The most famous handling of this particular motif is the story of Tristan and Isolde, in almost all of the various surviving versions.
38. The fullest handling of many of these themes and motifs is in the 13th-century Romance of the Rose by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun.
Dont il ne sera jammais sains,
C’Amours s’est toute a lui rendue.
Les lieus ou ele est espandue
Va reverchant et si s’en hoste;
Ne veut avoir hostel ne hoste
Se chestui non. (Chrétien 1994:ll.1360–85)

But now, a new Love sweetens him
with sugar and honey. Love, at whim,
has hunted in her lands today,
and now she gathers in her prey.
His enemy has his heart. He’ll love
the one who hates him far above
all other men on earth, so she
avenged her lord unknowingly,
and Love’s revenge will soon have grown
worse than she could have done alone,
since Love’s pursuit’s a gentle art:
through the knight’s eyes she strikes his heart.
The wound that Love has dealt the lord
won’t heal like wounds from lance or sword,
for any wound a sword has cut
the doctors can cure quickly, but
the wounds of Love, by definition,
are worst when nearest their physician.
So wounded is the lord Yvain,
and he will not be whole again
since Love’s possessed him totally
and left the place she used to be.
She wants no other house or host
but him. (Chrétien 1975:ll.1253–75)

The performer likely mimed physically for the audience each of the emotions of love evoked here: the sweetness of the taste of love, but also the fear of falling into the hands of an enemy, the pain of having received a deep and incurable physical wound, and the disturbing feeling that Love has moved in and possessed him. Yvain soon experiences in concrete detail, in a number of scenes, all of these emotional and physical experiences. Thus, love engenders intense emotions—and audiences might be inspired to want to try them (there are many medieval stories in which characters hear about love or a lovable person and promptly fall in love), or be frightened away (this too occurs in stories), or be entertained at the spectacle, but at some emotional distance (there is much medieval laughter at the craziness of lovers).

Chrétien’s romances are rasic in narrative structure as well: they contain much of what Schechner calls “open narration”—that menu of delectables, offshoots, sidetracks, and pleasurable digressions (2001:34). Most romances are constructed largely around adventures: the hero—the “knight errant”—wanders from place to place in a quest that will eventually resolve some problem (Yvain needs to create a new identity for himself and win back his wife). These adventures may continue for hundreds of pages—or a great many hours of performance.39

The hero meets up with many people on the way—and part of the delight that audiences

39. We still see this at the beginning of the 17th century in romances like Cervantes’ Don Quixote, and in others well after the close of the Middle Ages. Even today, romances often retain something of this feature.
experience is in the emotionally riveting characters who briefly take the limelight, then disappear; ongoing characters are few. One example from *Yvain*: early on, a young knight meets a giant bull-herder. This huge fellow is appalling: ugly and humpbacked, with an enormous head, ears like an elephant and teeth like a boar; he wears the raw hides of wild bulls for clothes. But then the monster speaks: “Et il me dist: ‘Je sui uns hom’” ([Chrétien 1994:l.328]; “And he replied I am a man” [1975:10]); he goes on to provide useful information to the knight in search of adventure. The performer would make the listeners and spectators experience, first, the blend of horror, wonder, and fear that this creature inspires in the knight; and then humor and delight, and perhaps compassion, as he, and we, discover that this man is a fellow human being. This scene may be a clever and emotion-provoking representation of “a nobleman meets a peasant”: peasants are huge and ugly, but human! Chrétien’s romances are full of such cameo appearances by characters with memorable voices, emerging from equally memorable bodies, who display in themselves and excite in the audience strong and often surprising emotions.

Stories were understood to be “exemplary”—that is, to provide models of feeling and behavior to audiences.

For romances such as Chrétien’s, as for fabliaux, texts do exist: performances are far from pure improvisations. But substantial differences often exist between manuscripts of the same work: lines and many details may be added or deleted. Moreover, the performance of the words of a scene could be suspended while the performer embodied and acted out the characters—for example, the ugliness and frightening behaviors of the bull-herder. Historians of medieval performance—including that of song and dance—are in agreement that our written records are deeply inadequate in showing us how works were actually performed; such are the problems that arise in the complex move from an oral and performed tradition to a written culture. There is simply much that we cannot know for certain, about which we can only conjecture; given this, we base our analyses on what we know of performance in this period—and also hope that common sense will not let us down.

Chrétien’s romances are moreover rasic in that they are works—to quote Schechner—“not all of which can be savored at a sitting” for performances that “took place over periods of days or weeks”; often in festivals that were “multifaceted celebrations that also featured feastings and audience participation integral to the whole performance complex” (2001:34). Lengthy works such as Chrétien’s romances (and many other romances, and epics as well) were performed over the course of days, even weeks, in several-hour sessions, at great feasts. Performances took place during and after dinner, and audience response to performance was unquestionably important to how it proceeded (see Vitz 1999:275–82).

Finally, romances such as Chrétien’s are rasic in that they do not separate the sacred from the profane. Romances were performed at such major Christian feasts as Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, and at semi-religious celebrations like coronations, weddings, and dubbing ceremonies. Minstrels typically told these stories during, and especially after the festive meal, in the hall where the meal took place. Thus, in medieval Catholic culture,40 as in Hindu culture, no line strictly marked a boundary between the sacred and the secular, or separated theatre from feasting and rejoicing. While *Yvain* is not an explicitly religious work, it begins with a reference to Pentecost and includes several references to the Holy Spirit (Pentecost celebrates the Descent of the Holy Spirit); it may well have been performed at the Pentecost feast. Characters pray for the hero’s success in battle, and secular adventures are set into a general, if discreet, Christian backdrop.

We have found rasa in fabliaux and other comic and vulgar material; and we have found it in noble, refined works. How are we to account for the differences between these two divergent

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40. The Protestant Reformation, which abolished medieval, more-or-less Catholic traditions of festivity and drama, significantly contributed to the clear break between the sacred and the profane that began in the mid-16th century.
manifestations of a rasic aesthetic? To some degree, genre can account for the divergences: fabliaux and romances belong to deeply dissimilar genres or kinds of narrative; they speak about different kinds of characters and human passions. It is not surprising if romances, which aim in almost every sense to speak of matters that are noble and “high,” and fabliaux, which delight in “low” things, are rasic in different ways.41

But we also need to ask what other performance practices coexisted and competed with performances of a rasic nature (Schechner 2007).

Rasic Aesthetics in French Medieval Performance of Narrative

**Clerical Performance**

Several forms of rasic aesthetic are strong in medieval France and elsewhere in Western Europe, but rasa does not represent the sole performance tradition. It had a major competitor in clerkly performance, that is, performances by Church-trained intellectuals who might be priests, private chaplains, or monks (in “major orders”), but also historians, archivists, administrators, or secretaries (often in “minor orders”) (Vitz 2002). Clerks not only wrote many works—they were the custodians of written literature—they also performed many kinds of texts, often in Latin but also, and increasingly over the years, in the vernacular. Clerical performance was the oral presentation of works of learning, devotion, or literature.42 Works written for performance by clerks were generally intended for reading aloud, rather than recitation from memory. Clerks also read silently, a practice that was rare at the time. When clerks read aloud, their performance was controlled and subdued; it might contain some gestures—but these shows were never fully histrionic. Theatrical-style performing was already viewed negatively in such classical arts of rhetoric as the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (attributed to Cicero) and this hostility was reaffirmed in medieval rhetorical arts dealing with the delivery of texts (see Vitz 1999:215–17). Clerkly works tend to present voice as the vocalization of thought or of the words on the page, with little emphasis on the body from which the voice emerges; voice does not engage substantial impersonation of a speaking character by a performer. Thus, clerkly performance tended to be strongly intellectual, conceptual, restrained, and sedate. It was a highly important mode not merely in such places as churches, monasteries, and schools, but also in royal and all noble courts, where learned figures were essential both for religious functions and as the keepers of the historical record. Clerks had great authority because of their sacred and secular knowledge and frequent proximity to monarchical and ecclesiastical power; those who were priests had added authority through their important sacramental roles in the life of the faithful.

In the 12th century we see substantial competition between non-rasic clerkly performance and rasic minstrel performance—and some reciprocal influence. Clerical performance up to this period had been dominant in society, at least in terms of authority. Jongleurs, as we have seen, were on the whole frowned upon. But figures like Chrétien represent a new challenge: the rise in cultural prestige of strongly embodied performances of “noble” stories. There is, however, something a bit clerkly about performances of early romance,43 and the relatively restrained nature of the rasic presence in Chrétien’s romances probably results from a desire on his part, like that of many other vernacular poets and minstrels of his time, to show that their works are

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41. Rasic performance could take other forms than those discussed here, such as performance strongly involved with singing (the case of the epic) and dancing. I set these aside for lack of space.

42. Clerical performance can take several different modes—e.g., simple reading aloud or chanting—but the distinctions are not particularly relevant here.

43. The semi-clerkliness of Chrétien’s romances has led some scholars to assume that he was, in fact, a clerk—though he never identifies himself as one, and there are important arguments against his clerical identity (see Vitz 1999:86–135).
ethical, cultural, and refined; that they—the poet/performer and his work—belong in court. They are, or aspire to be, “noble.”

The 13th and 14th centuries brought important developments in performance style—and in the conflicts between clerkly and rasic performance. By the 13th century, performance of vernacular literature in France was highly self-confident, and jongleurs’ exuberant performances of fabliaux bear eloquent witness to this lack of reserve. French narrative works composed in verse up through the late 13th and early 14th centuries were generally performed in a rasic aesthetic of some type; many romances are bolder in performance—closer to fabliaux—than were those of the 12th century. In this period, theatre was also rising in importance—and separating itself out from storytelling. But the 13th century also saw other new performance developments that promoted clerkly performance: the rise of prose and an increase in literacy.

The introduction of prose is indeed correlated with the rise of literacy, the popularity of the book, clerkly (or at least written) culture, and reading, including some private reading. By the 14th century, works are less and less apt to be recited or performed from memory, in a rasic spirit, by minstrels and other entertainers. By the end of the Middle Ages, minstrels have lost the arts of language and dramatic impersonation—they are now merely musicians. Works are now read aloud by professional readers (Coleman 1996). Private reading is increasingly common (see Saenger 1997).

A rasa-esque performance aesthetic is less and less present in performance of narrative; concern is now with the transmission of words, ideas, plots. Works whose purpose is to calm rather than to arouse passions, or to promote clarity of thought are, not surprisingly, particularly lacking in rasic performance aesthetics. While characterization remains important in narrative fiction, the “enactment” is conceptual, not physical: characters are written, not embodied and acted out. When presented aloud, works are performed by sedate figures, often shown sitting or standing at a lectern (see fig. 8). But private, silent reading also becomes increasingly common. Outside of the theatre—which itself has been challenged only relatively recently by the avant-garde, from Dada to performance art—that is how people in the West experience most literature today. Even children's storytelling is apt to feature a person sitting in a chair, reading aloud—the librarian model—rather than telling the story from memory in a strong, physical way. We are all clerks now.

**Conclusions**

In medieval France, the strongest expression of a rasic aesthetics occurred in the performed verse narratives of the 12th through the 14th centuries—works intended by their poets for dramatic and physical performance in popular or festive gatherings. Stories from the French Middle Ages often give us much more than disembodied voices—words made audible from off
the page; they offer examples of strong impersonations with a significant investment in the dramatic presentation of a full range of embodied emotions. From bodies that are powerfully and emotionally conjured up, voices come forth and mingle with those of appreciative audiences.

The sort of delight in the body and the emotions that is found in Indian (and other Asian) traditions traveled West over the centuries along with mimes, minstrels, merchants, missionaries, and mercenaries—not to mention invaders. In the Middle Ages, these kinds of performances also met with moral censure and with competition from churchmen and intellectuals. Rasa performance practice existed alongside of, and competed with, clerical performance, which was more strictly intellectual and text-based.

The issues explored in this essay will, I hope, open new avenues to scholars and performers. Theatre historians and actors may find it useful to look more closely at the interrelated histories of performance of narratives, for much of what eventually became “theatrical” is deeply incorporated in the practices of storytelling. Western medievalists as well might want to look East—not just for stories but also for performance practices. In theorizing the transmission of narrative material, they may wish to look not just at texts but also at bodies and at passions.

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