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Medieval Attitudes toward Literary Pleasure

Literature gives pleasure. From Plato's recognition of Homer's power to charm and enthrall to Roland Barthes's The Pleasure of the Text, critics and theorists of literature have always acknowledged its capacity to give delight. There is even more persuasive evidence from a larger audience, the people who in the Middle Ages listened to minstrels tell stories, who in the Renaissance made Shakespeare a commercial success, who in the nineteenth century waited for the next installment of Dickens, and who today buy paperback editions of Harold Robbins or Joseph Heller. Although to some extent literary enjoyment remains suspect even now, we have a fully institutionalized, philosophical rationale for it: a separate intellectual category of "aesthetic pleasure" that makes the experience of works of art a valid mode of knowledge in itself. And if such academic approaches usually restrict themselves to only the "best" literature, we have another category, popular culture, for explaining the psychological, sociological, and even artistic satisfactions that obtain from movies, television, and formula fiction. In general, gaining pleasure from works of art seems a decent, even laudable, activity.

In the Middle Ages, according to the conventional wisdom, such was not the case. The early Christian hostility to pagan

^{&#}x27;Cf. The Pleasure of the Text, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1975), p. 57: "No sooner has a word been said, somewhere, about the pleasure of the text, than two policemen are ready to jump on you: the political policeman and the psychoanalytical policeman: futility and/or guilt, pleasure is either idle or vain, a class notion or an illusion."

culture, and hence to classical poetry, resulted in the most cautious and restricted acceptance of literature. Throughout the period the emphasis in literary theory and in the justifications put forward by the works themselves is not on the pleasure poetry provides but on the moral benefit it bestows. This exemplum is worth hearing because it teaches you about the dangers of avarice. This ancient story is worth reading because it depicts virtuous actions you should imitate. This pagan fable, which if taken literally involves immoral acts by gods, has an allegorical meaning that is consistent with natural or religious truth. Literature becomes the servant of Christian morality and faith. To respond to a text only for the pleasure it gives is to misspend one's time; the pleasure, rather, should lie in the satisfactions of using literature to further one's understanding of right action or right belief.

No one should deny that such attitudes existed, and dominated, in the Middle Ages and that many important artists and thinkers held them, as we will see shortly. But I want to begin this survey of medieval views of literary pleasure not with statements about what literature should do but with a very broad generalization about what in fact it does. Medieval understanding of the function of poetry depended to a large extent on these lines from Horace's *Ars poetica:*

Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere vitae. quidquid praecipies, esto brevis, ut cito dicta percipiant animi dociles teneantque fideles: omne supervacuum pleno de pectore manat. ficta voluptatis causa sint proxima veris, ne quodcumque velit poscat sibi fabula credi, neu pransae Lamiae vivum puerum extrahat alvo. centuriae seniorum agitant expertia frugis, celsi praetereunt austera poemata Ramnes: omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci, lectorem delectando pariterque monendo.

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Poets aim either to benefit, or to amuse, or to utter words at once both pleasing and helpful to life. Whenever you instruct, be brief, so that what is quickly said the mind may readily grasp and faithfully hold: every word in excess flows

away from the full mind. Fictions meant to please should be close to the real, so that your story must not ask for belief in anything it chooses, nor from the Ogress's belly, after dinner, draw forth a living child. The centuries of the elders chase from the stage what is profitless; the proud Ramnes disdain poems devoid of charms. He has won every vote who has blended profit and pleasure, at once delighting and instructing the reader.²

The first two lines are probably the most familiar literary commonplace in the Middle Ages, and line 343 often accompanies them. I have cited the entire passage so that we can see what Horace means when he talks about the different poetic goals. Having posed three literary intentions—profit, pleasure, and the combination of the two-he first takes up the matter of instruction. That which profits in poetry should be briefly but clearly stated; Horace seems to be thinking in terms of straightforward moralizing here, points stated rather than dramatized, what Brink calls "the teaching of lessons" (Prolegomena, p. 263). Lines 338–40 give advice on the second goal: literary pleasure comes from a verisimilar fiction, not from fairy-tale exotica. The rest of the passage points to the superiority of the third kind of poetic work, that which combines pleasure and profit: it will appeal to both old and young, bringing, as Horace goes on to point out, fame to its author.

Certainly the Ars poetica intends the third kind of poetry to be valued most. But the firm categorizing of lines 333-34, emphasized by the three "aut"s, and the repeated use of words that denote one or the other poetic goal ("delectare," "iucunda," "voluptatis causa," "dulci," "delectando" versus "prodesse," "idonea . . . vitae," "praecipies," "utile," "monendo") contribute to the likelihood of the passage's being taken more descriptively than prescriptively. Quoting line 333 by itself, as medieval texts

²Lines 333–44. Satires, Epistles and Ars poetica, ed. and trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, rpt. 1966), pp. 478–79. I have changed Fairclough's translation of "fabula" in line 339. See the notes to these lines in C. O. Brink, Horace on Poetry: The Ars poetica (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 352–58, and for more on the evolution of the ideas of pleasure and profit from Aristotle through Neoptolemus to Horace, Brink's Horace on Poetry: Prolegomena to the Literary Epistles (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), pp. 57, 128–29.

sometimes did, would lead further in that direction, especially to the frequent habit of taking the prodesse-delectare distinction to indicate the difference between serious and frivolous work. But the medieval understanding of Horace's lines involves more than just the reading or misreading of this passage. The evolution of a conception of fiction in the classical period which is more rhetorically based than Aristotle's in the Poetics, which tends to separate content (ideas, truth) and form (story, style) rather than fuse them in the way that Aristotelian mimesis does, lies behind both Horace's terminology of profit and pleasure and the even more extreme separations of content and form in medieval Christian literary thought.³ The very fact that Horace's literary ideal combines the two functions suggests an understanding of fiction that is inherently dualistic; it is one that does not substantially change until the emergence in recent centuries of a conception of aesthetic experience more Aristotelian than Platonic or Christian in its willingness to accord works of art an independent status as a form of human understanding.

Accordingly, one strain of medieval literary thought developed by taking the distinction between pleasure and profit as a means of justifying fiction by its conformity to moral and religious truth. *Delectare* became the function of the narrative surface, *prodesse* the function of the spiritual truth embodied in the fiction. A medieval commentary on Statius known as *On the Thebaid*, attributed to Fulgentius the Mythographer but probably written some centuries later, makes explicit the allegorical use of Horace:

I take up again, with great respect, that knowledge deserving of scrutiny and that inexhaustible vein of intellect found in those poets who, under the alluring cover of a poetic fiction, have inserted a set of moral precepts for practical use. For when Horace testifies that "poets seek to instruct or delight,

³See Wesley Trimpi, "The Ancient Hypothesis of Fiction: An Essay on the Origins of Literary Theory," *Traditio*, 27 (1971), esp. 63-65, and "The Quality of Fiction: The Rhetorical Transmission of Literary Theory," *Traditio*, 30 (1974), esp. 46-51. Also Richard McKeon, "Literary Criticism and the Concept of Imitation in Antiquity," in *Critics and Criticism*, ed. R. S. Crane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), pp. 147-75. For twelfth-century discussions along these lines, see Edgar de Bruyne, *Etudes d'esthétique médiévale*, 3 vols. (Bruges: de Tempel, 1946), II: 146-72.

or say what is both pleasing and useful in life," they are found to be no more delightful and entertaining through their literal meaning and narrative skill than they are instructive and serviceable, for the building of habits of life, through the hidden revealing of their allegories.⁴

The commentary goes on to compare a poem to a nut, its literal meaning like a shell one needs to break in order to get to the desirable kernel of allegorical truth. "A child is happy to play with the whole nut, but a wise adult breaks it open to get the taste." The analogy not only delineates the sources of pleasure and profit but ranks the two poetic functions: being content with surface delight alone is childish play, seeking the inner wisdom is properly mature activity.

D. W. Robertson, Jr., has firmly established that such a conception of poetry was pervasive in the Middle Ages.⁵ The critical approach of Robertson and those who adopt his theories, an exceptionally important influence on modern medieval studies, has occasioned so much discussion that a full-scale presentation of it here is unnecessary. But I do need to comment on it briefly from the standpoint of literary thought and as it relates to this book. Roughly, Robertson believes that the theory of poetry enunciated in the Statius commentary was virtually the only respectable one in the Middle Ages, that therefore medieval writers wrote in accord with it, and that consequently modern critics must adopt it in order to approach medieval literature in a valid historical way. Many of the critical readings that have emerged from these principles have occasioned sometimes reasonable, sometimes irrational, disagreement. I do not think specific quarrels with Robertsonian interpretations deal very effectively with the approach. A more important general question is whether Robertson is correct in imputing the views of On the Thebaid to all writers of medieval literature, and one (certainly not the only) means of answering that question is to see exactly what other ideas about literature were current. That there were

⁴Trans. Leslie George Whitbread, Fulgentius the Mythographer (n.p.: Ohio State University Press, 1971), p. 239.

⁵See especially "Some Medieval Literary Terminology, with Special Reference to Chrétien de Troyes," SP, 48 (1951), 669–92, and A Preface to Chaucer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962).

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other ideas seems to me undeniable, and this book is about a few of them. It is meant not to refute Robertson's assertions of a medieval theory of allegory but to suggest that there are limits to its applicability, that the belief in a single "medieval" way of responding to literature is unwarranted, and that accordingly the judicious use of medieval literary thought in the interpretation of any individual work entails first establishing rather than assuming what critical ideas are most relevant to it.

So let us return to the Horatian distinctions and to some references that use them not to justify allegorical readings but to indicate, frequently with some objectivity, the varying functions poetry may serve. A fourteenth-century commentator handily summarizes the three goals of fiction as he explains Ovid's purpose in composing the Metamorphoses: "His intention is to write down fables so that he may please and profit by means of their presentation, as Horace says: 'Poets wish either to profit or to please.' Some profit but do not please, as when they produce unpolished sermons; some deal with buffoonery that pleases but does not profit; some do both, and they are complete. Ovid is one of these."6 That a tale from the Metamorphoses offers both pleasure and profit is understandable enough when one considers medieval allegorizations of that book. But what is the commentator thinking of when he speaks of "sermones scabros" that only profit and "scurrilia" that only please? "Sermo" has a variety of meanings in the Middle Ages; here it perhaps suggests something of the classical conversational sermo, something of its Christian adaptation into sermo humilis. Seneca in one of his letters contrasts a plain style meant to profit the soul with a more ornate style meant to please, and this seems to be much the sense here, in which the purely profitable is linked with both a stylistic level and a nonfictional genre.7 "Scurrilia" also suggests both content and style. What

⁷For the classical background see Wesley Trimpi, Ben Jonson's Poems: A Study of the Plain Style (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), pp. 5-19; the passage from Seneca is on p. 11. For the Christian, see Erich Auerbach,

^{6"}Intentio sua est describere fabulas ut per harum descriptionem delectet et prosit, ut ait Flaccus: 'aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poete.' Quidam prosunt et non delectant cum habeant sermones scabros; quidam scurrilia tractant que delectant et non prosunt; quidam faciunt utrumque, et isti sunt perfecti: de his est Ovidius." Ed. Fausto Ghisalberti, "Mediaeval Biographies of Ovid," Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, 9 (1946), 58.

pleases is the buffoonery of jests and funny stories, doubtless with some implication of vulgarity in language or action, though it is not always appropriate to read modern senses of "scurrilous" into the Latin, which on occasion may simply refer to improper levity.⁸ In any case, this passage acknowledges that although the best poetry fulfills both Horatian precepts, there are recognized types of literature that aim at only one.

Other testimony throughout the Middle Ages confirms the polarization of pleasure and profit as indications of literary purpose. Augustine defines *fabula* as "a lie composed for profit or delight (compositum ad utilitatem delectationemve mendacium)," the disjunction indicating that he does not consider all fictions to be profitable. This definition occurs in the *Soliloquia*, following a discussion of falsity, in which Reason distinguishes between two types, the deceptive and the feigned, saying that only the former intends duplicity: "What I call feigned is created by fabricators, who differ thus from deceivers: every

[&]quot;Sermo Humilis," in his Literary Language and its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), pp. 27–66. Perhaps a good example of a sermo scaber is John Gower's Vox clamantis; at least in the Prologue to Book II he points up his use of plain speech for moral ends. That Gower thought of his Latin poem as meant for profit rather than pleasure is implied in the later Confessio amantis, where he explicitly tries to write "somwhat of lust, somewhat of lore," i.e., to combine pleasure and profit. He observes, with what I take to be a rueful allusion to his two earlier, lengthy, nonfictional, moral poems: "who that al of wisdom writ / It dulleth ofte a mannes wit / To him that schal it aldai rede." Prologue, lines 13–21, ed. G. C. Macaulay, The English Works of John Gower, I, EETS e.s. 81 (1900; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 2.

⁸In 1300 Bishop Ralph of Walpole drew up statutes for the Benedictine priory of Ely. One of them, alluding to the Rule of St. Benedict's prohibition against "scurilitas" and idle speech provoking laughter, defines verba'scurilia as speech that is "unreasonable and destructive to mature behavior," a definition that seems to refer to most any kind of verbal frivolity, not just the coarse and insulting. Ely Chapter Ordinances and Visitation Records 1241-1515, ed. S. J. A. Evans, Camden Third Series, LXIV, Camden Miscellany 17 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1940), p. 13. Cf. Bernard of Clairvaux on the third step of pride, "foolish mirth (inepta laetitia)," in The Steps of Humility, trans. George B. Burch (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950), pp. 200-3. The fifteenth-century Summa theologica of Antoninus of Florence, following Aquinas who followed Gregory, lists "scurrilitas" as one of the daughters of gluttony and gives a wide range of meanings for it, from the fairly innocuous "enjoyment that stirs laughter (jucunditas, quae risum movere solet)" to much more pejorative descriptions involving insults and sexual provocation. Pars I, tit. VI, c. 4, § v (Verona, 1740), col. 779.

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deceiver tries to trick, but not everyone who fabricates wishes to trick. For mimes, comedies, and many poems are full of lies in the desire to please rather than to trick (delectandi potius quam fallendi voluntate), and almost everyone who makes jokes (jocantur) fabricates." Here is an inventory of a range of verbal expression, from jokes to stage performance to "poemata," that is apparently concerned only with pleasing. Although fiction is a kind of lying and thus never rises very high in Augustine's estimation, he recognizes at least that it need not be created from evil intent, and that while some of it has usefulness, some seems to be purely entertaining.

Augustine's reference to jokes leads us to another treatise defending their use, Macrobius's Saturnalia. In the Commentary on the Dream of Scipio, he acknowledges that one type of fabula has no moral purpose, and he separates fictions that simply "gratify the ear" from those with serious moral aims, admitting into a philosophical work only a fraction of the latter. 10 But in the context of the Saturnalia he is more tolerant of discourse meant principally to entertain. There the speakers deal not only with philosophic concerns but with more trivial subjects; in fact, Macrobius describes Saturnalia as a festivity in which distinguished men speak during the day on serious matters relating to the liberal arts and then after dinner turn to "merrier talk, meant more for pleasure than for seriousness (sermo iucundior, ut habeat voluptatis amplius, severitatis minus)."11 Book II begins as the first day's dinner is over; the participants, wishing neither to reject pleasure nor to place too high a value on it, decide to amuse themselves by rehearing some witticisms

⁹Soliloquia, II, 9, 16; ed. J.-P. Migne, Patrologia Latina, vol. 32, col. 892. The definition is from II, 11, 19; PL, 32, col. 894.
¹⁰Macrobius, ed. J. Willis, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1970), II: 5–8. Trans.

¹⁰Macrobius, ed. J. Willis, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1970), II: 5–8. Trans. W. H. Stahl, Commentary on the Dream of Scipio (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), pp. 83–87. See below, n. 18. Macrobius's chapter on poetry was well known in the later Middle Ages and used by humanists to defend morally useful literature while rejecting worthless tales. It certainly seems to have contributed to Boccaccio's classification of fictions in the Genealogy of the Gods, XIV, 9. The early fifteenth-century encyclopedia of Jacques Legrand cites its distinction between stories for pleasure ("fabule voluptatis gratia") and those for exhortation in order to separate useless from useful fictions. Sophilogium, II, 5 (Lyons, 1495), f. 24v.

¹¹Saturnalia, I, 1; Willis, I: 4.

of the ancients, citing Plautus and Cicero as frequent tellers of such *joca*. This literate enjoyment is more dignified than the cruder pleasures usually introduced at such banquets; it pleases the speakers, who all laugh at the tales related. These *joca* cannot be equated with any category in the classification of *fabulae* in the *Commentary*, for they are so short as to be more like puns or quips than narratives, and Macrobius calls them "dicta." Many, too, are jests with a distinct purpose and usefulness, and in this sense can claim satiric or moral relevance. Still, it is clear that the author thinks of them essentially as entertainments. Like Augustine, he appears to include *joca* as part of that kind of discourse which is meant to please, and their presence in the *Saturnalia* as an after-dinner pastime, along with the discussions of moral and scientific matters, suggests the legitimacy of entertainment as long as it observes due place and time

Isidore of Seville is less judgmental in his classification of fictions than the Macrobius of the Commentary. In the Etymologiae he devotes a chapter to fabula, defining its functions: "Poets have created some fictions for the purpose of delighting, some in regard to the nature of things, and have put forth many dealing with human behavior."13 He then gives examples of each type. Fictions for the purpose of delight include stories for the multitude and the plays of Plautus and Terence. One instance of a fiction "ad naturam rerum" is the story of limping Vulcan, which shows that fire never moves straight upward. Of fictions "ad mores" Isidore gives three examples: Horace's use of animal stories in his satires, Aesop's fables, and the parable in the Book of Judges of the trees choosing a king. He emphasizes that this last kind of fabula is made for the purpose of morality, that even though it is fictitious it has a true meaning. Opposed to it implicitly are those stories made "delectandi causa," where Isidore puts, without comment, Roman comedy and popular tales.

This classification was highly influential, and one can find it

¹²Saturnalia, II, 1; Willis, I: 134-35.

¹³"Fabulas poetae quasdam delectandi causa finxerunt, quasdam ad naturam rerum, nonnullas ad mores hominum interpretati sunt." *Etymologiae*, I, 40, ed. W. M. Lindsay (Oxford, 1911). Isidore's other comments on poetry are in VIII, 7, as part of a series of chapters on aspects of the pagan world.

repeated throughout the Middle Ages. 14 It appears in conjunction with Horace in the twelfth-century treatise of Dominicus Gundissalinus, De divisione philosophiae. He says that poetry "delights or instructs in knowledge or behavior (delectat uel edificat in sciencia uel in moribus)." Discussing fabula, he repeats Isidore almost verbatim, noting that some fictions are written to delight, some to edify. About the purpose of poetry he says: "Its goal is to delight through playful material or instruct through serious material (Finis eius est aut ludicris delectare aut seriis edificare)," and he quotes lines 333 and 343 of the Ars poetica as authority. But although he cites Horace's ideal that pleasure and profit be combined, his own definitions (based more on Isidore's classification, apparently) always separate the two functions: a poem is composed either for delight or usefulness ("causa delectacionis uel utilitatis"). 15 He also alters, in characteristically medieval ways, the Horatian understanding of the causes of pleasure and profit. Delight is the result of *ludi*cra, of sportive and trifling matters, edification of seria, of serious thought; the distinction between pleasure and profit becomes that between game and earnest, between the frivolous and the substantial. The tendency to equate literary delight with sport or play is also observable in less objective discussions. John of Capua, changing the Horatian terms, says that his collection of fables is intended for knowledge and play ("scientiam et ludum"), the wise man finding the wisdom in it, the fool finding "ludum et solacium." We have seen On the Thebiad describe taking pleasure in fictional surfaces as like a child's play. When there is a truth underneath the covering, then it

¹⁴For verbatim borrowings, see Vincent of Beauvais, Speculum doctrinale, III, c. 113 (Douay, 1624), cols. 289-90, and the epilogue to a collection of fables of Romulus, ed. Léopold Hervieux, Les fabulistes latins, 5 vols. (Paris, 1893-99; rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, n.d.), II: 454. Conrad of Hirsau uses it as the basis for his discussion of fabula in the section on Aesop in the Dialogus super auctores, ed. R. B. C. Huygens, Collection Latomus 17 (Brussels, 1955), pp. 24-25.

15Ed. Ludwig Baur (Münster, 1903), pp. 54-56; see also p. 68.

¹⁶Hervieux, V: 80. For this and other medieval references to pleasure and profit I owe a debt to Stephen Manning, "The Nun's Priest's Morality and the Medieval Attitude toward Fables," JEGP, 59 (1960), 403-16. For a variety of ways in which the Horatian distinction appears in French literature, see Tony Hunt, "'Prodesse et Delectare': Metaphors of Pleasure and Instruction in Old French," Neuphilologische Mitteilungen, 80 (1979), 17-35.

is immature to enjoy the fiction alone. But in regard to that type of literature which has no kernel, which exists solely "causa delectandi," it would seem that there is nothing to do but enjoy the sport.

Distinctions between fabula and apologus also rest on Isidore's classification, or at least on its principle. Pietro Alighieri alludes to it when discussing his father's use of the apologue, a fictitious "oratio" meant for edification, in the Divine Comedy: "[Apologues] differ from the usual tale (fabula), a word deriving from the word hearsay, which contains no ideas but only words. Moreover, the poet employs these tales either to delight, or to expose to view the nature of things, or to shape morals, as Isidore says in his *Etymologies*: concerning whose views see the Dream of Scipio, by Macrobius, near the beginning."17 The linking of Isidore's categories with Macrobius's is intriguing, especially since the Commentary does not cite Isidore and offers a different, though reconcilable, schema of fabulae. 18 Pietro must have been most struck by the resemblance between Isidore's fictions "delectationis causa" and those which Macrobius says merely gratify the ear, both of which point to a strain of nondidactic literature. There may be some echo of Isidore in John of Garland's observation that every apologue is a fabula, "but not vice versa." He defines apologues as narratives in which "dumb animals are made to speak for our edification, as in Avianus and Aesop."19 Although the context involves a distinction between the beast fable and other types of fiction which convey truth, it is reasonable to infer that John would not claim that all fabulae operate allegorically for the purpose of instruction.

¹⁷Trans. Robert Hollander, *Allegory in Dante's* Commedia (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 281; text p. 278.

¹⁸Isidore's distinctions are based wholly on function: (I) fictions that please; (II) fictions that explain the natural world; (III) fictions that treat human behavior. Macrobius first makes a functional distinction between (I) fictions that merely please the ear and (II) fictions that "encourage the reader to good works" (Stahl, p. 84). Within this second category tales are divided according to content: (A) wholly fictitious stories, such as Aesop's; (B) stories based on truth, such as legends of the gods. Macrobius further divides (B) into unworthy and respectable stories. Macrobius's II.A certainly encompasses Isidore's III and probably II as well, assuming the kind of encyclopedic knowledge it offers is taken as conducive to useful action.

¹⁹Ed. and trans. Traugott Lawler, *The* Parisiana Poetria of *John of Garland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 104–5; see p. 331 for John's source.

Even Ovid, though we have seen him praised for combining pleasure and profit, might be explained in terms of pleasure alone, and not only by way of censuring the *Ars amatoria*. One thirteenth-century accessus to the *Amores* takes up the traditional introductory questions, including *materia*, *intentio*, *utilitas*, and the *pars philosophiae* to which the work belongs:

The author's subject is his own love. The work differs from the *Art of Love* in that there Ovid puts forth rules of love and here he deals with frivolous and amusing episodes. His intention is to describe humorously some aspects of his love affairs. There are two motives behind this intention, one to delight (for, as Horace says, "Poets wish either to profit or to please"), one to recommend himself to his lover, whom he calls by the fictitious name Corinna. The work's usefulness is delight, or commendation from Corinna. It pertains to ethics, because in speaking about his behavior he reveals the characters of bawds and of certain concubines who are rivals of his mistress.²⁰

Although the last sentence, doubtless prompted in great part by the section in the *Amores* on Dipsas (I, 8), may seem typical of the medieval effort to moralize Ovid into acceptability, the passage as a whole is remarkably sympathetic to the poem, alert particularly to its wit and humor. The double motive and double *utilitas* is based on a distinction explicit in other commentaries between public and private values (see Ghisalberti, 52, 58). For Ovid personally the work is useful in that his poetry is his means of attracting Corinna (for the rival claims of poetry and wealth on Corinna's affections, see I, 8, 10; III, 8). For the larger audience, the result is the *delectatio* of amusing literature—we will consider later the implications of delight

²⁰"Actoris siquidem materia est de amore suo. Distat autem hoc opus ab opere Artis Amatorie, quia in Arte Amatoria dat precepta de amore, in hoc opere ludicra tractat et iocosa. Intentio sua est quedam de amoribus suis iocose exponere. Causa intentionis duplex: vel ut ille delectet quia ut ait Horatius: 'aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poete' etc., vel amice sue quam falso nomine Corinnam appellat se commendet. Utilitas est delectatio, vel apud Corinnam suam commendatio. Ad eticam spectat quia de suis moribus loquendo quarum-libet succubarum pelicis rivalium et lenarum mores insinuat." Ghisalberti, 46. For similar evaluations of the *Amores* see 39 n. 1. Rand obviously saw a manuscript in this tradition. On the history and organization of the medieval accessus, see Edwin A. Quain, S.J., "The Medieval Accessus ad Auctores," *Traditio*, 3 (1945), 215–64.

being perceived as *utilitas*. The work belongs to the philosophical category of ethics, as almost all poetry does, because it deals with human behavior and one can make judgments about character; but the author of this commentary does not suggest that moral evaluation is part of either Ovid's *intentio* or the principal *utilitas* of the poem.²¹ To be sure, such nondidactic readings of Ovid are rare in the Middle Ages, but that they exist at all should remind us that when Robertson, by way of arguing a monolithic approach to fiction in the period, asks, "Had not medieval men been making 'ernest of game' for centuries in Ovid's stories?" (*Preface to Chaucer*, p. 367), the answer is "not always." Even one of the classical *auctores* could be accepted as writing to delight rather than to instruct.

The evidence thus far reveals that literature for pleasure rather than profit was acknowledged, if not venerated, in the Middle Ages. Some classical compositions were thought by at least some critics to be for enjoyment rather than edification, and it would follow that medieval works might make the same appeal. At this point we need to look more closely at what constitutes literary pleasure, and for that we do not need to restrict ourselves to the criticism of works meant for delight alone, since those that offer both pleasure and profit would obviously meet criteria for entertainment as well as instruction.

Basically, medieval generalizations about what gives literary pleasure fall into two groups (I except for now theories in which profit is also referred to as a source of delight). The first has to do with formal considerations. A pleasing style delights the ear. "Style" here involves all verbal resources, the rhetorical devices so familiar from the arts of discourse, and in the case of poetry, meter and rhyme as well. As one example of this familiar medieval idea we may consider a letter from Petrarch to his brother Gherardo, a monk, which contains an allegorical eclogue. In it he defends poetry by appealing not only to the values of allegory but also to those of heightened language. He

²¹The fact that poets treat human activity and that therefore their works are classified as a part of ethics does not necessarily mean that every poem is didactic in intent or usefulness. Conrad of Hirsau specifies only three categories of philosophy within which a work may fit: logic, physics, and ethics (Quain, 217; cf. 239 n. 56). Any text dealing with human behavior thus belongs to ethics regardless of its specific purpose. As Quain points out, 251–52, the categorization was often applied quite mechanically.

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explains that poetry originated in praise of God, "sacred hymns remote from all the forms of speech that pertain to common usage and to the affairs of state, and embellished moreover by numbers, which add a charm and drive tedium away." He anticipates his brother's objection to such "sweetness" and points out the biblical use of meter and the Church fathers' employment of "poetic forms and rhythms." He asks Gherardo to "consider the underlying meaning alone, and if that is sound and true accept it gladly, no matter what the outward form may be."²² But if poetic charm is an impediment to the austere Gherardo, it certainly is not to Petrarch. Allegory is central to poetry, but there is also pleasure—a natural pleasure fully demonstrated throughout history—in the response to verbal beauty. Petrarch would have us break the shell to get the kernel, but not until we appreciate how attractive the shell is.

Pleasure also comes from narrative itself, from what it is that a poem or story presents to its audience at the literal level of detail or plot. An accessus to the Latin bestiary *Physiologus* explains the work's intention as "delectare in animalibus et prodesse in figuris." The profit is in the allegorizations, but the pleasure is simply in finding out about the animals. The Middle Ages did not need Aristotle's *Poetics* to tell them that people naturally delight in representations, though by the later thirteenth century Aquinas had cited him on that score. 4 If allegorical poetics turned Horace's delight into the attractions of a distinctly fictitious surface, other approaches, such the Averroistic Aristotle, which tend to be exemplary rather than allegorical, maintained the association of pleasure with the verisimilar,

²³Accessus ad auctores, ed. R. B. C. Huygens, Collection Latomus 15 (Brussels, 1954), p. 21.

²²Familiares, X, 4. Robinson and Rolfe's translation, in *Petrarch*, ed. David Thompson (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 90–93.

²⁴Using the Hermannus Alemannus translation of Averroes's Middle Commentary on the Poetics. For the references in the Summa theologica to this principle, see William F. Boggess, "Aristotle's Poetics in the Fourteenth Century," SP, 67 (1970), 284. According to Hermannus, man naturally delights both in representation and in "meter and melody." Poetic delight, however, is distinctly moral: "The art of poetry does not seek any sort of pleasure (delectatio) but seeks the level of pleasure which moves to virtue through imagination." Trans. Hardison in Classical and Medieval Literary Criticism, ed. Alex Preminger, O. B. Hardison, Jr., and Kevin Kerrane (New York: Ungar, 1974), pp. 352–53, 363. Text in Boggess, ed., "Averrois Cordubensis Commentarium Medium in Aristotelis Poetriam" (Diss. University of North Carolina, 1965), pp. 11–12, 43.

with fidelity to real life. Hence the truth-claims of a variety of medieval tales, even some preposterous ones—not only, I suspect, for the sake of authentication, but also for the pleasure induced by the contemplation of an event that could have or might really have happened.²⁵ John Barbour's *Bruce* begins by claiming a "doubill pleasnce" for itself: one in the "carpyng," the stylistic delight that obtains even in tales that are "nocht bot fabill"; the other in "the suthfastnes, / That schawys the thing rycht as it wes; / And suth thyngis that ar likand / Tyll mannys heryng, ar plesand."²⁶

These and other medieval texts explain what aspects of literature cause delight, but they do not analyze the process of literary response that engenders it. Is it possible to be any more precise about the nature of literary pleasure? Phillips Salman has explored this question in important ways, relating literary delectatio to the faculty psychology of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, which was influenced in great part by such Aristotelian texts as the De anima and the Nicomachean Ethics. 27 I can do no better than summarize certain of his arguments here. His central insight is to see literary response as one species of human perception generally. "A response to a text is essentially the same as a response to any sense datum except that an artist causes a text to mediate between the reader and the created world. A response to a text is therefore part of one's general movement toward his last end, and a text must therefore be used the way any perception is" (315-16). That way involves the activation of the faculties receiving the data, abstraction and judgment by the intellect, the movement of the soul to-

²⁵See, on this complicated matter, William Nelson, Fact or Fiction: The Dilemma of the Renaissance Storyteller (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 1–37, esp. 22–28. We may be better able to understand the habit and the appeal of stories claiming factual status in light of such recent forms of discourse as nonfiction novels and television docudramas. Paul Theiner applies Morton Bloomfield's idea of authentication to fabliau truth-claims in "Fabliau Settings," in The Humor of the Fabliaux: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Thomas D. Cooke and Benjamin L. Honeycutt (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974), pp. 120–23.

²⁶Ed. W. W. Skeat, I, EETS e.s. 11 (1870; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 1–2.

²⁷"Instruction and Delight in Medieval and Renaissance Literary Criticism," *Renaissance Quarterly*, 32 (1979), 303–32. Salman has completed a book that deals with ideas of literary delight from Plato through the Renaissance.

ward the desired object, and the delight attendant upon its possession. There are a variety of delights in literature as there are in life—delights of the sensitive soul, delights of the rational soul. Salman shows the varying attitudes of Augustine, Aquinas, and some Renaissance critics toward these delights, from Augustine's firm insistence that any sensual delight is valid only insofar as it conduces to spiritual pleasure, to a Renaissance willingness to accept "that a faculty may be activated and pleasured without either that activity or that pleasure being related directly to one's last end" (317).

Delight is possession, rest. We desire something that we perceive as good, and upon attaining it we are satisfied, resting in it. Delight is thus necessarily attendant on happiness. Aquinas says, whether it be the perfect happiness of achieving man's last end or the imperfect happiness of man in this life. The supreme delight is, of course, enjoyment of union with God; sensual delights can hinder the attainment of perfect happiness because they distract one from the higher delights of the intellect (ST, I-II, q. 4, a. 1; for background see all of questions 2-5). Hence the innumerable medieval criticisms of those works of art which offer only sensory delight by merely pleasing the ear or which encourage sensual indulgence. Even less frankly pejorative views of surface pleasure acknowledge a hierarchy of delights, such as this well-known passage from Dante's Convivio: "the goodness and the beauty of any discourse are separate and distinct from each other, because the goodness lies in the meaning while the beauty lies in the adornment of the language; and while both the one and the other are accompanied by delight, it is the goodness which is to the greatest degree delightful."28 Both pleasure and profit are "con diletto." In one case the ear, in the other the intellect, moves to possess that which is desired. Both possessions produce delight, but intellectual satisfaction is superior to that which gives rest to the senses.

Salman presents a medieval psychology of *delectatio*. We will see it echoed in Chapter 3, in discussions of recreation which equate the delights of entertainment with rest, *quies*. But there

²⁸Convivio, II, 11, 4, trans. Robert S. Haller, Literary Criticism of Dante Alighieri (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), p. 71. Cf. De vulgari eloquentia, II, 1, in Haller, p. 33.

the context is earthly living rather than final goals, and lesser pleasures are not as deprecated as in some of Salman's evidence. His study is important for understanding the role of pleasure in all literary works, especially as it accompanies the acquisition of profit. I am more concerned with pleasure per se, within the framework of the Horatian dichotomy, which Salman's article tends to resolve in basically Aristotelian ways. He shows what literary pleasure is. The Middle Ages was often more concerned with what it does, and it is the justification of pleasure in terms of its effect on an audience that is the principal concern of this book. That fascinating line from the commentary on the *Amores—utilitas est delectatio—*still needs explication. How can pleasure be profitable?

Some of the medieval answers to that question are reasonably familiar. They find in delectatio some further educational or literary usefulness. One approach, treating delight as a result of stylistic elegance, justifies it by making it a means of improving one's skill in writing. Ruotger's tenth-century biography of Bruno of Cologne, discussing his learning, notes that his Latin was excellent and suggests a reason: "Jests and buffoonery which make everybody shake with laughter when put in the mouths of various persons in tragedy and comedy, he read through gravely and seriously. He thought their meaning was worthless; he estimated the style as the main thing."29 In the Philobiblon, Richard de Bury argues that "even in an unseemly subject-matter we may learn a charming fashion of speech." But he spends most of his time on another defense of pleasure, its role in leading the reader of more substantial fictions into their allegorical meaning. Not all people, he says, "take the same pleasure in learning," and in fact some "fling away the nut, before they have broken the shell and reached the kernel." The ancients realized that they could "entice" men to learning by concealing it beneath "the mask of pleasure." He cites lines 333 and 343 of the Ars poetica by way of further explanation, transferring Horace's ideas, as On the Thebaid did, to the argument of allegorical poetics. This notion of a pleasing fiction as sugarcoating over the pill of moral truth is well known in the

²⁹Trans. James Harvey Robinson, *Readings in European History*, I (Boston: Ginn, 1904), p. 260. Text in Suchomski, p. 83. On Bruno, see Auerbach, pp. 159–63.

Middle Ages and Renaissance. Related to it is the idea that the process of moving from surface to depths, by virtue of one's having to think through the allegorical implications, makes the final discovery of meaning all the more pleasurable.³⁰

The educational benefits of both style and content appear in a passage from the preface to Bernardus Silvestris's commentary on the Aeneid, which sums up a number of the concerns of this chapter:

> Some poets (such as the satirists) write for instruction; some (such as the comic playwrights) write for delight; and some (such as the historians) write for both. Horace speaks about this: "Poets aim either to benefit or to amuse or to utter words at once both pleasing and helpful to life".... The Aeneid gives pleasure because of verbal ornament, the figures of speech, and the diverse adventures and works of men which it describes. Indeed, anyone who imitates these matters diligently will attain the greatest skill in the art of writing, and he will also find in the narrative the greatest examples of and inspiration for pursuing virtue and avoiding vice. Thus, there is a double gain for the reader: the first is skill in composition which comes from imitation, and the second is the good sense to act properly which comes from the stimulus of examples.³¹

First comes the division of poetry by Horatian functions; like Isidore, Bernardus views comedy as meant to delight. Then comes a more detailed consideration of the Aeneid: it meets the goal of delectatio through both its pleasing language and its representation of human events, its story line. These sources of delight, when probed further, yield profit. From the style one learns to write better, and, more important, from the actions one learns virtuous behavior. Bernardus goes on to give examples of the latter: Aeneas's labors reveal patience, his piety promotes religious devotion. (As Schreiber and Maresca note, p. xxi, all these benefits accrue through a literal reading of the epic, a response to Virgil the historical poet. The allegorical

³⁰Philobiblon, c. 13, ed. and trans. E. C. Thomas (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), pp. 124-27. On the relative pleasures of cortex and nucleus, and of getting from one to the other, see Preface to Chaucer, pp. 53-54, 60-64.

31Commentary on the First Six Books of Virgil's Aeneid, trans. Earl G. Schreiber

and Thomas E. Maresca (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), p. 4.

meanings of the *Aeneid*, the work of Virgil the philosopher, lie hidden in its *involucrum*.) This succinct analysis of the values of even a literal reading of the poem recognizes delight as a part of literary response and then refers that delight to what it perceives as higher kinds of *utilitas*, the acquisition of intellectual and moral knowledge. And surely, as Dante would say, there is even greater delight in these possessions than in the immediate pleasures of Virgil's eloquent Latin and compelling story.

So much for that perfect poetry which combines pleasure and profit. But what of that imperfect poetry which exists only (or principally—surely pleasure and profit may coexist in varying proportions) to provide delectatio? Are the Ovidian commentator's scurrilia, Gundissalinus's ludicra, Ovid's Amores, Bernardus's commediae defensible only on the grounds that they help people write more elegantly? And what even of the role of pleasure in the best poetry—is it always and only to be referred to a didactic end? Utilitas est delectatio. Delight does not lead to usefulness, it is itself useful. Or as a modern critic said of Cervantes's view of fiction, "'delectare' is 'prodesse.' "32 The phrase certainly implies values in literary pleasure different from those emphasized in moral theories of poetry, ones seemingly unrelated to whatever, if any, rational profit a work might offer. What are those values? How can pleasure per se be profitable?

The following two chapters attempt to define medieval theories that justify pleasure, and consequently literary pleasure, on medical and psychological grounds, and to show that these justifications tend to become ethical as well. On the one hand, the evidence that will be presented works to challenge severely the idea that medieval literary thought ignored or denigrated pleasure without profit, for as we will see there are some spirited defenses of the value of taking delight in fictions. On the other hand, the theories discussed are certainly not modern in any sense, not efforts to create a category of aesthetic delight or to define literary pleasure as an end in itself. Indeed, the justifications of pleasure to be investigated remain distinctively medieval in their "pragmatic" concern, to use M. H. Abrams's helpful

³²Quoted in Clements and Gibaldi, p. 12.

schema of critical orientations.³³ They look principally at what value the work has for an audience, what effects it produces in the reader or listener, what we have seen the medieval accessus refer to as *utilitas*. Hence the defenses of pleasure, though based on medical and psychological principles, almost always have a moral dimension. Taking pleasure in a fiction, even one that may not instruct the intellect, is a response that, in the proper circumstances, contributes to physical or mental wellbeing and hence to one's capacity for activities more directly related to one's final end.

Of course, a work that combines pleasure and profit would thus be doubly useful. In that sense justifications of literary pleasure in no way contradict what more didactic theories may argue about the value of fiction. But since profit was always more respectable than pleasure in the Middle Ages, a work that could lay claim to moral purpose would naturally do so, perhaps to the neglect of claims to please. Hence most of the evidence dealing with the values of pleasure comes in the context of more trivial literature, and in order to keep the arguments as clean as possible I will generally treat them as they apply to nondidactic material. But I do not consider the theories defined here applicable only, say, to the fabliaux, and I hope that in the long run they will find their due place, much as Augustine has found his, in the modern understanding of medieval literary thought and of the light it can shed on the status of poetry in the Middle Ages.

³³The Mirror and the Lamp (New York: Norton, 1953), pp. 14-21.