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**Dispersed Parallelism in *Hervis de Mes*¹**

Studies of composition in the chanson de geste often focus on the relationship between narrative and lyric functions in the genre.² The narrative component of an epic text may be defined as the progressive unfolding of a story; this progression involves the accretion of details that serve to advance the fictional chronology or to expand our knowledge of circumstances and simultaneous events. The lyric dimension, on the other hand, concerns the epic’s status as song; the refrains, repetitions, and parallels which link consecutive laisses reveal the traces of an oral-musical tradition. Whether a given chanson was orally composed or written to be performed, it participates in a generic system that privileges echoic effects. Generally, such effects tend to decelerate narrative progress or even to obscure the sequence of events: parallelism and repetition divert attention from the anecdote to the rhymic chant of its expression.

Certain chansons de geste, particularly the later texts, have been criticized for favoring the narrative at the expense of the lyric dimension. While some late epics manifestly imitate the techniques of their twelfth-century counterparts, others are characterized by

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¹ This study is the revised version of paper originally presented at the 7th annual Symposium on the Romance Epic, held within the framework of the 22nd Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, Michigan (May 1987). I wish to thank Professors William Kibler, Larry Crist, and Joan Williamson for their valuable comments and suggestions.

² All references to *Hervis de Mes* are based on the edition of Edmund Stengel: *Hervis von Metz: Vorgedicht der Lothringer Geste*. Gesellschaft für romanische Literatur 1 (Dresden: Niemeyer, 1903). Unless otherwise indicated, quotations reproduce the readings of MS E.

exceedingly long laisses and a distinct emphasis on narrative progression. Among the latter texts is the thirteenth-century Hervis de Mes, which represents a belated prologue to the provincial geste des Loherains. Hervis has been consistently cited as an example of "degenerative" epic production, partly for its incorporation of romance subject matter, but also for its apparent lack of epic "tone." The departure from traditional modes of composition is particularly evident in the first half of the text, which not only contains few examples of conventional epic motifs, but also allocates its narrative development to monumental laisses of up to 1400 lines. This transformation of laisse structure obviously diminishes the text's capacity for "lyric" effects. Jean Rychner maintains that the attenuation of strophic boundaries profoundly alters the function of epic as song: "Autant vaudrait composer en couplets d'octosyllabes!"

Rather than denouncing the later epic as a contaminated or degraded form of earlier models, recent scholarship has pursued a more fruitful avenue of study by examining not only the transformations but also the continuity of the genre in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Indeed, a close reading of Hervis de Mes reveals that the compositional techniques displayed by the short consecutive laisses of earlier epics are not entirely absent even from the first half of this text. In particular, certain episodes make extensive use of parallel structuring; however, the components of these parallel scenes are displaced and dispersed throughout several

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3 Other late branches of the Loherain cycle, particularly Yon, exhibit a return to earlier laisse structure. See Yon or la Vengeance Fromondin, ed. Simon R. Mitchneck (New York: Columbia University, 1935).


5 Rychner 110.

laisse and hundreds of decasyllabic lines. The following study will examine the mechanism of dispersion in the celebrated episodes of the fairs, all of which adapt a complex narrative progression to the incantatory principles of the early chanson de geste.

The first half of *Hervis de Mes* recounts the hero's youth, which is portrayed as a constant struggle between two value systems. Hervis is the son of Aelis, daughter of the Duke of Metz, and Thiéri, provost of Metz. Since the boy has inherited noble preferences for hunting, chess, and extravagant spending, his bourgeois father Thiéri tries to curb these tendencies by initiating his son into the world of commerce. Hervis is thus dispatched with his paternal uncles to the fair at Provins, where he spends all of his father's money on feasts, a horse, and hunting animals (vv. 258-565). Although Thiéri is outraged, he is persuaded to give the boy another chance; at the subsequent fair in Lagny, however, Hervis again lavishes huge sums of money on feasts, and in addition he purchases a beautiful slave named Biatris with funds originally designated for "le vair et le gris" (vv. 566-608, 1198-1907).

This portion of the text, like 95% of the poem, is composed in assonanced decasyllabic laisses of varying length. However, conventional epic motifs clearly do not play a role in the composition of these two episodes, whose subject matter is very loosely based on popular versions of the Grateful Dead legend. Indeed, the romance-like allure of the commercial "quest" links *Hervis* to other *chansons d'aventure* of the same period. Moreover, Daniel Poirion

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7 *Hervis* contains one segment composed in alexandrines (ranging from 571 to 579 lines in the three principal manuscripts E, N, and T.


declares that the poet's logical demonstration of opposing value systems severely detracts from incantatory expression.\textsuperscript{10}

Nevertheless, the accounts of the fairs do retain certain basic techniques and effects of earlier epic structuring, especially strategies of parallelism. Like \textit{laissez parallèles}, the two episodes proceed according to a very similar pattern that may be broken down into a series of symmetrical stages.\textsuperscript{11} Unlike the components of \textit{laissez parallèles}, however, the repeated stages do not all appear in the succeeding laisse, but are separated by intervals of one to three strophes and several hundred lines.

The mechanics of this dispersion become evident when one examines the distribution of the motifs that comprise each fair episode:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fair in Provins (L.8) [i]</th>
<th>Fair in Lagny</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Instructions</td>
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<td>2. Secret Oath</td>
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<td>11. Uncles' report</td>
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<td>12. Thierry's anger</td>
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<td>interval: time lapse (L. 9)</td>
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\textsuperscript{10} "Ici le problème tient d'abord à la logique démonstrative, presque pédagogique, exerçant une contrainte sur l'imagination épique, et son expression incantatoire." Introduction, \textit{Hervis de Metz: Roman du moyen âge adapté par Philippe Walter} 6-7.

\textsuperscript{11} Each of these stages may be said to constitute a "fabricated motif," i.e., a repeated compositional unit that combines traditional formulas into a new context, that of the fair. On fabricated motifs, see Marguerite Rossi, \textit{Huon de Bordeaux et l'évolution du genre épique au XIIIe siècle}, Nouvelle Bibliothèque du Moyen Age 2 (Paris: Champion, 1975) 172.
The lengthy Laisse 8 successively relates all twelve of the incidents connected with the fair in Provins. These stages proceed as follows: 1. Thieri gives his son specific purchase instructions and threatens reprisals if his wishes are not carried out (vv. 298-319). 2. Hervis takes a secret oath to buy whatever he pleases, despite his father's orders (vv. 320-24). 3. Hervis travels to the fair with his paternal uncles (vv. 325-39). 4. However, he refuses to remain with them, preferring to find separate lodging (vv. 340-42). 5. The first evening, he invites eighty merchants to dine with him; the number of guests is multiplied every evening thereafter (vv. 343-59). 6. His paternal uncles chastise him for spending too much money, but he stubbornly refuses to follow their thrifty ways (vv. 360-83). 7. Hervis makes a purchase with the last of his father's money, stipulating only that the seller leave him enough money for the return voyage to Metz (vv. 384-416). 8. Upon Hervis's departure, his host praises his remarkable generosity (vv. 417-25). 9. Hervis tests the value of his purchase (vv. 426-57). 10. During the return voyage, Hervis once again encounters his paternal uncles, who ridicule his purchase and warn him of his father's reaction (vv. 458-84). 11. The paternal uncles report Hervis's behavior to Thieri (vv. 485-513). 12. Thieri berates and punishes his son (vv. 514-65).

Laisse 8 is followed by a short strophe that indicates the passage of time between fairs (vv. 566-83). The first two stages of the fair in Lagny are then related in laisse 10, which resumes the same assonance as laisse 8 [i] and repeats the stages of the fair in Provins with identical or nearly-identical formulas (vv. 584-608).12

After the first two stages, however, the poet interrupts the tale to recount a related plot sequence, namely the story of Biatris. This portion of the poem, which occupies three and a half laisses

12 Witness the motif of the "secret oath" in the two episodes:

Puis dist em bas, que il ne l'entendit:
"Par cele crois u li cors diu fu mis,
Quant je verrai a la foire a Provins,
J'acaterai mon bon et mon devis." (vv. 320-23)

Puis dist en bas li damoisiaux gentis,
Que li siens peres ne l'ot ne entendi:
"Par cele crois u li cors diu fu mis,
Quant je venrai a la foire a Laigni,
J'accaterai mon bon et mon devise." (vv. 604-08)
and 589 lines, concerns the betrothal of the Tyrian princess Biatris to the King of Spain and the subsequent abduction of Biatris by a band of wicked squires (vv. 609-1197). It is the squires' decision to sell the princess at the fair in Lagny that will ultimately join the separate trajectories of Hervis and Biatris.

Laisse 14 resumes the account of the hero's adventures at the fair in Lagny. Stages 3, 4, 5, and 6 of the Provins episode are repeated in this laisse, which again uses the assonance [i] and generally echoes the formulaic structure of laisse 8 (vv. 1198-1234). Another interruption follows: this rupture in the parallel sequence portrays the meeting of Biatris and Hervis and the latter's decision to buy the slave; Biatris refuses, however, to reveal her true identity (vv. 1235-1378). The subsequent laisses 17 and 18 contain parallel stage 7, the actual purchase of the maiden (vv. 1379-94). One final interlude postpones the last stages: in laisse 19, Biatris and Hervis encounter three wicked young men who attempt in vain to kidnap the maiden (vv. 1395-1724); parallel stage 8 is embedded in this segment (vv. 1521-24, 1539-43). After this lengthy interval, parallel stages 10, 11, and 12 conclude the episode of the fair in Lagny (vv. 1544-1907).

The function of dispersed parallelism is revealed by the diverging roles of intervals and repeated sequences in the Lagny episode. The intervals operate in the following manner: the first interval, the story of Biatris and the Spanish king, furnishes a related plot sequence, simultaneous with the fair in Provins and the first stages of the fair in Lagny. It prepares the encounter of the hero and heroine and eventually serves as a stimulus for a war between their families. The second interval, the encounter between Hervis and Biatris, initiates a union that serves two principal narrative functions: it generates future conflicts within *Hervis de Mes*, and also produces offspring whose exploits furnish the subject matter of subsequent epics in the cycle. Finally, the attempted kidnapping of Biatris provides the hero with the first of many opportunities to distinguish himself in battle. The intervals as a group thus expand

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13 Stage 9 of the Provins episode, the "épreuve" of the hero's hunting animals, presents general thematic parallels with this segment. Assuming a role similar to that of Enide, Biatris warns Hervis of approaching danger and thus proves to be a "valuable" purchase in the hero's eyes.
the narrative to include simultaneous or subsequent conflicts; they serve to advance and amplify narrative movement in the text.

The parallels and repetitions, on the other hand, fulfill quite different functions, which correspond in many ways to those of *laissez parallèles*. These functions include an increase in lyric quality, the reciprocal interpretation of two parallel events, and delay or obscuring of narrative progress. Let us consider each of these three functions separately:

First of all, the regular return of the identical units of content and formal expression confers a lyric dimension upon the account of the fairs. These repetitions do not, however, produce the same effects of pathos evoked by parallel structures in certain early epics; on the contrary, the litany of commercial transgressions and reprimands serves both a comic and a didactic function. Hervis is trapped by his mixed heritage into a mechanical repetition of the same behavior patterns; as Alfred Adler once put it, "The nobleman in Hervis absurdly handicaps the businessman, and vice versa; this at a time and in a locality where noblemen and businessmen needed as well as hampered each other."[^14]

Secondly, the extraordinary symmetry of the two sequences highlights the similarity of the hero’s successive purchases. In Provins, his noble instincts guide him to buy a horse and hunting animals which ultimately prove to be worth their weight in gold. The same instincts govern his purchase of Biatris in Lagny: although he does not know that she is a princess, he senses her aristocratic birth, and indeed it is Biatris who will confer upon the Loherain lineage a superior strain of nobility. In both instances, the hero’s innate sense of true worth contrasts with the petty values of his bourgeois father: Thieri ridicules the extravagant sum spent on hunting animals and insists that Biatris is nothing but a prostitute. Thus the double sequence encourages us to interpret one episode on the basis of the other; the combined result distinctly favors noble over merchant values.

[^14]: Alfred Adler, "Hervis de Mes and the Matrilineal Nobility of Champagne," *Romanic Review* 37 (1946): 155. Note also that Rupert Pickens has analyzed the potential for comedy inherent in earlier epic parallelism: in the *Cournonnement de Louis*, the pope becomes "trapped in the automatism of the ... jongleur's parallel structuring." See Pickens 214.
Finally, the parallelism of the two fair episodes creates a bridge that ultimately acts to decelerate and even obscure narrative progress. Although the time lapse between the two fairs is very clearly indicated in Laisse 9, the events in Provins and Lagny tend to blend into each other with the multiplication of parallels. While the two episodes never merge completely, the manuscripts eventually begin to confuse them, attributing the purchase of Biatris to the fair in Provins or the purchase of the horse to the fair in Lagny (MS E, v. 863; MS V, folio 12a). The separate fairs seem almost to fuse into a single episode with two different conclusions, much like bifurcated structures; this phenomenon has also been observed in certain consecutive parallel scenes of earlier epics.15

Thus dispersed parallelism retains some of the techniques and effects of consecutive parallelism, but adapts them to the exigencies of story-telling. While intervals permit the expansion and progression of the narrative, repeated elements open the text to its lyric dimension.

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This mechanism of dispersion is most conspicuous in the episodes of Provins and Lagny. Nevertheless, it does appear in a less-developed form in a later episode, namely the fair in Tyre. It is Biatris who sends Hervis on this commercial expedition, for the extravagant hero has reduced his family to poverty. Biatris devises a scheme that will make them all rich again: she embroiders a silk cloth with portraits of herself and her family and instructs Hervis to sell the cloth in her native city of Tyre for an exorbitant sum. Since she knows that her father will pay any price for his lost daughter's handiwork, she directs Hervis to double the price each time it is refused. Hervis reluctantly agrees to the plan and succeeds in selling the cloth to Biatris's family for a sum of 32,000 marks (vv. 2904-3765).

It is the bargaining session in Tyre that resembles the previous technique of dispersed parallelism. The following diagram illustrates the structure of this two-phase episode:

15 Pickens 212-16.
When Hervis displays the embroidered cloth, his first customer is Floire, brother of Biatris. The encounter between Hervis and Floire proceeds according to the following pattern: 1. Floire examines the cloth and faints (vv. 3479-97). 2. He then begins to interrogate Hervis as to the whereabouts of Biatris (vv. 3498-99). 3. Hervis feigns ignorance, suggesting that a Syrian woman embroidered the cloth (vv. 3500-05). 4. Floire refuses this explanation and offers a reward (vv. 3506-14). 5. The crafty hero, however, maintains his story (vv. 3515-21). 6-10. Hervis then proceeds to bargain with Floire according to Biatris's instructions, doubling the price each time it is refused (vv. 3522-74). 11. The outraged Floire eventually gives up and terminates the transaction (vv. 3575-77). These events are recounted at the end of laisse 35 and the beginning of laisse 36.

Within this sequence, the repeated demands and refusals punctuate the narrative with the insistence (if not the regularity) of a refrain. In addition, a parallel bargaining session involving Biatris's father, King Uistasse, appears in the middle of the following laisse (vv. 3670-3765); the two sessions are separated by an interval of nearly one hundred lines, and the last three parallel components are
separated from the others by an interval of two laisses for a total of sixty lines. This dispersion of parallel components is present only in the later manuscripts N and T, which add the 60-line interval to the more concise fair sequence represented by MS E.\footnote{Stengel places this interpolation in his second Appendix, pp. 430-32.}

Once again, the intervals contribute to narrative progression and motivation: between bargaining sessions, we move from the fair to the castle, where the queen offers her entire treasure to procure her daughter's embroidery (vv. 3586-3656). It is the queen's initiative that will permit the purchase of the cloth; furthermore, this scene prepares a later episode in which she insists that Hervis must know the whereabouts of her daughter (vv. 3887-3938); her demands lead to the eventual recapture of Biatris in the second half of the story.

The interval between parallel components plays a similar role. This sixty-line interlude involves a discussion between Hervis and Uistasse over the safety of merchants and their wares. When King Uistasse suggests that it is in his power to appropriate the silk cloth, Hervis insists that Tyre is known for its king's goodwill toward merchants. This conversation prepares a later episode, in which the king (influenced by the queen) tries to capture Hervis and force him to reveal information about Biatris; it is the merchants of Tyre who come to the hero's rescue by citing the standards of justice that have always prevailed in that city (vv. 3837-70). Both intervals, therefore, lay a narrative foundation for future events, increasing the number of logical indicators that link different events in the story.

The dispersed "refrains" of the bargaining process, on the other hand, transform this commercial transaction into an amusing and instructive chant. The hero's repeated price increases—stimulated by Biatris's instructions—reverse his previous behavior patterns and signal a unique mastery of commercial practices. While his adventures in Provins and Lagny were characterized by mechanical spending, his business venture in Tyre is marked by mechanical accumulation. This third fair sequence reverses the flow of gold into the hero's pocket, suggesting that the influence of
Biatris allows him to integrate the merchant and noble functions he has inherited.\textsuperscript{17}

Thus dispersed parallelism once again tempers narrative progression with lyric effects. The intervals between parallel scenes and their components look forward to later events, while the repetitions recall and echo previous occurrences. This second example of dispersion is significant in that the narrative interpolations are present only in the later manuscripts; the intervals represent later additions to an originally consecutive chain. The interruption of parallel laisses reflects a general tendency on the part of MSS N and T to furnish additional motivation, thereby attenuating the occasionally paratactic narrative movement of earlier manuscripts.

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Although the preceding examples of parallelism demonstrate the continuity of epic tradition in \textit{Hervis de Mes}, it must be recognized that dispersion does represent a departure from earlier forms of parallel structuring. For example, the shorter, consecutive \textit{laisse paralleles} found in the Oxford \textit{Roland} coordinate parallel scenes having distinct strophic boundaries. The related laisses differ in form by a change of assonance that obliges the jongleur to express similar units of content in different closing hemistichs. Moreover, it is widely believed that parallel laisses and other strophic links served a utilitarian purpose: these techniques facilitated improvisation and were thus originally linked to an oral mode of production.\textsuperscript{18}

In early epics with longer laisses, such as the \textit{Couronnement de Louis} and \textit{Garin le Loherain}, parallel and similar scenes do not always occupy complete strophes; occasionally, the symmetrical sequences involve parts of the same laisse or parts of two consecutive laisses.\textsuperscript{19} Although brief intervals sometimes occur

\textsuperscript{17} Adler 155-58.

\textsuperscript{18} See, for example, Rychner 76.

\textsuperscript{19} Pickens 207 and Anne Iker Gittleman, \textit{Le Style épique dans Garin le Loherain} (Geneva: Droz, 1967) 98-100.
between these sequences, their parallel components are generally not scattered over several strophes. The links between parallel and similar scenes thus remain fairly immediate; even if strophic boundaries are not highlighted, the proximity of repeated elements heightens the lyricism of these passages.

As we have seen, the parallel scenes in the first half of *Hervis de Mes* are composed with little regard for consecution or strophic boundaries. Intervening laisses permit an harmonious return to the same assonance, and narrative intervals delay the lyric effects of repetition. The presence of these intervals also diminishes the possibility that dispersed parallel structures are linked to oral improvisation; in fact, my second example indicates that they may be linked to the revisions of later redactors.

Nevertheless, even this altered form of parallelism links the fair episodes with compositional strategies of the epic tradition. The regular return of identical units of content in similar formulaic configurations brings a measure of epic tonality even to the affairs of the marketplace. By interspersing narrative advance and fragmented repetition, this thirteenth-century text exploits possibilities inherent in the dual nature of the chanson de geste tradition. Dispersion thus represents a process of re-generation rather than de-generation: *Hervis de Mes* rejuvenates epic form, weaving the dimensions of story and song into a lyrico-didactic prehistory of the first Loherain hero.

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