Dialogue of Laughter: Bakhtin’s Theory of Carnival and the Charroi de Nîmes

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The comic exploits of Guillaume and his men have long charmed readers and students of the Charroi de Nîmes. Few scholars, however, have tried to explain how the work’s comic elements function within the artistic and thematic structure of the epic as a whole. This neglect may be explained, in part, by the predominant concern for the work’s more serious themes, such as feudal ideology, geographical realism, or the relationship to other epics of the Guillaume cycle. The common-sense approach to the comic as simply whatever makes us laugh has also contributed to the neglect of the comic processes at work in the epic. Scholars such as Lynette Muir speak affectionately of the “rambunctious humour and almost Rabelaisian gusto” of the epic’s characters, but without a view to understanding the place of such humor in the epic (xv). Other scholars share this appreciation of the epic as a reflection of the “esprit gaulois,” particularly in the character of Guillaume, a jolly fellow of “bonne humeur, jovialité” (Ménard 15), a “caractère plein de vitalité, de brutalité même, avec une gaieté tirant sur la ruse” (Poirion 71). These scholars have been right to emphasize the merry and slightly mischievous aspect of Guillaume’s character, but they have seen it largely as a more “realistic” portrait of the epic hero. While Guillaume may seem more human than Roland to modern readers, explaining the comic as a reflection of realism does not take into account the role the comic might have had for medieval audiences.

The most significant obstacle to taking the Charroi’s humor seriously concerns the work’s epic genre. Traditionally, the epic has been seen as a serious, ideologically-motivated genre, although of course meant for entertainment as well. Scholars have thus had trouble classifying comic works such as the Charroi where the comic dominates, for they consider comic episodes to be ill-befitting the dignified matter and style of the epic. Let us consider a reaction to one such comic episode in the Charroi.

1 Adapted from a paper given at the joint meeting of the Virginia Medieval Symposium and the Eighteenth Annual Southeastern Medieval Association at Williamsburg, Virginia, September, 1992.
Guillaume, while discussing grave matters with King Louis, clumsily breaks his bow, a piece of which nearly hits the king on his nose. Jean-Charles Payen considers this event a “mélange des genres” (893). As a result, he searches for a generic term which will better describe the Charroi, since he believes that a pure epic cannot include such comic moments. He suggests the term “comédie épique.” As justification of the term, he suggests that whereas the Chanson de Roland could be the tragedy of the Middle Ages, the Charroi could be its finest comedy (902). Payen attempts to fit the medieval epic into the classical genres of tragedy and comedy and to use Aristotelian definitions inappropriate to medieval aesthetics. Thus, he explains that the Charroi de Nîmes must be a comedy since it portrays characters of the lower classes (the merchants and the peasant) who do not belong to the serious and dignified epic genre. Moreover, since Payen sees the Charroi as a comedy, he continually minimizes the serious themes of the work.

Whereas Payen sees the Charroi as something other than a true epic, emphasizing the comic moments and neglecting any larger meaning in the work, other scholars take the opposite position, considering the Charroi an essentially serious work spiced with a few delightful comic moments. Mario Mancini, for example, has considered the comic episodes to be at odds with the serious themes of the epic, themes which nonetheless are strong enough to resist complete “comic corrosion”:

Même la continuelle corrosion comique exercée par la verve stylistiquement si épaisse de la version D n'arrive pas à briser l’arc de l’action épique positive— la conquête de Nîmes— action épique positive que

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2 For a discussion of the frequent mingling of serious and comic in medieval literature, see Curtius' essay "Jest and Earnest in Medieval Literature." Curtius observes that "the Middle Ages loved all kinds of crossings and mixtures of stylistic genres. And in fact we find in the Middle Ages ludicra within domains and genres which, to our modern taste, schooled by classicistic aesthetics, absolutely exclude any such mixtures" (424). The prejudices of classicist aesthetics frequently interfere with an appropriate understanding of the place of the comic in medieval works.

3 Daniel Poirion also makes questionable connections between social class and comic literature, stating that since Guillaume is not the typical serious and noble hero, the audience of the Charroi de Nîmes must have been of a less serious caliber (72). Again, he bases his conclusion on Aristotelian definitions inappropriate to medieval aesthetics.
quelquefois on réussit à peine à entrevoir dans le jeu bizarre des coups et contrecoups burlesques, mais qui est toujours saisissable, si on la cherche, et qui n’est jamais niée explicitement. (212)

Clearly not satisfied with Payen’s view of the Charroi as intended for laughter alone, he suggests the term “épique comique” instead of Payen’s “comédie épique.” The comic elements, for him, do not place the Charroi in a different genre, nor do they have any bearing on the essentially ideological function and impetus of the work. Neither Mancini’s “épique comique” nor Payen’s “comédie épique” allows the possibility that the comic might be integrally connected to the work’s serious message or function.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of carnival, elaborated in his Rabelais and His World, does help us to integrate the work’s comic processes with its greater thematic and artistic structures. Bakhtin used medieval carnival rituals such as Mardi Gras, the feast of fools, and other holiday ceremonies, to explain the curious blend of seriousness and humor in Rabelais. Bakhtin saw Rabelais as the culmination of a tradition of unofficial folk culture subverting official and authoritarian culture—represented by the Church and by the feudal system. The carnival spirit parodied official genres and thus entered into a “dialogue” with them. Such a dialogue served as a temporary release from the oppressiveness of social structures. Unofficial folk laughter liberated because it reaffirmed the lower bodily stratum, the here-and-now pleasures of the body, in defiance of the morbid gravity of official culture. Bakhtin used the term “grotesque degradation” to describe this process of parody—the material level bringing the abstract level down to earth. The paradox of carnival (and one not sufficiently acknowledged in Bakhtin’s study) is that it both tears down and reaffirms the official structure, so that any given work could provide a temporary release from official norms by laughing at them, but without essentially challenging them. If comic texts did not actually challenge official orthodoxy, they did enable a

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4 Jean Frappier shares Mancini’s opinion that the comic intrudes on the epic’s serious themes without altering them too significantly, remarking “la verve et le comique n’altèrent pas trop l’énergie de l’inspiration” (252-253).
process of dynamic cultural renewal, so that the unofficial realm of folk culture could continually force interaction with the otherwise static world of official ideology. It was to capture this spirit of renewal that Bakhtin chose to speak of carnival rather than parody or satire, for unlike the merely negating impulse of modern parody or satire, carnival described the joyful, playful, and renewing spirit of medieval laughter (21). Guy Mermier has said that the Charroi de Nîmes “illustrates the natural bent of medieval literature to mix the serious with the humorous or the burlesque without losing effectiveness” (111). Using Bakhtin, we might find that the comic actually increases the Charroi’s effectiveness as a serious work by engaging in a comic dialogue with the official ideology traditionally represented in the medieval French epic. Thus, the comic is not on the margin of the work, but rather belongs to the central dialogic foundation of the work and enables one to understand more fully the work’s “serious” thematic core.

Since scholars frequently approach the comic of the Charroi as comic of character (those rambunctious Rabelaisian rascals cited above) it will be useful to take a look at Guillaume’s character to see how the theory of carnival can bind together his epic and comic function. Scholars have pointed to the contradictions of his character: he is both a valorous French warrior and a bumbling clown. How can we explain these contradictions? Some scholars have attributed them to the intrusion of realism into the epic. Guillaume’s bumbling and clowning makes him more “realistic,” or human. D. D. R. Owen, for example, asserts that Guillaume is “a well-rounded human being, a man of great virtues tempered by small, appealing human weaknesses” (60). Owen’s adjective “well-rounded,” rather than describing the work’s supposed realism, might better be used to suggest his role as a carnival figure; that is, he is not a merely one-sided representation of official epic ideology. Alvaro Galmés de Fuentes has argued that Guillaume is half-heroic and half anti-heroic, a mixture he attributes to the mingling of the “mythic mode” of representation in European medieval literature with the “mimetic mode” of Arabic medieval literature (134). While there may well be significant Arab influences on the text and on Guillaume’s character, the qualities assumed to be realistic, imitating life, are not simply realistic details told for their own sake. They actually parallel and counter the aspects which establish Guillaume’s heroic identity in the text. Thus, the question to ask is what might be the result of a simultaneous heroic and anti-heroic identity. Using the concept of
carnival, with its emphasis on the two-way “dialogue” of interrelated opposites, we find that Guillaume’s anti-heroic status actually evokes and reasserts his heroic status.

To see how this might work, let us look at Guillaume’s clothing. One of the trademarks of the epic hero is his impenetrable shining armor. When the French are about to enter and conquer Nîmes, Guillaume must don his armor:

Li cuens Guillelmes vesti une gonnele
Det tel burel com il ot en la terre
Et en ses jambes unes granz chauces perces,
Sollers de buef qui la chauce li serrent;
Ceint un baudré un borjois de la terre,
Pent un coutel et gaine molt bele,
Et chevaucha une jument molt foible;
Ssx viez estriers ot pendu a sa sele;
Si esperon ne furent pas novele,
Trente anz avoit que il porent bien estre;
Un chapel ot de bonet en sa teste.  (1036-1046)

Down to his boots and even his horse, Guillaume looks much more like a peasant than like a noble warrior. He is indeed a parody of the epic hero, a parody which, as Jean Frappier remarks, would not have been lost on an audience in a time when social classes were clearly demarcated (241).

Yet this very disguise, while degrading Guillaume’s epic identity, helps to reaffirm it. For despite Guillaume’s elaborate disguise, the Saracens recognize him by his famed short nose (“cort nés”) and his hearty laugh. Indeed, that Guillaume is known for his hearty laugh suggests his identity as a sort of champion of folk laughter. Even in peasant’s garb, Guillaume’s epic identity cannot be hidden. As François Suard comments, “le motif du déguisement apparaît donc lié à la manifestation du héro, au sens où il permet au poète de dire ce qui, à ses yeux, est caractéristique du personnage épique” (349). Thus, the lowly and ridiculous clothing, rather than detracting from Guillaume’s epic status, brings it out more strikingly, so that, as Suard says, Guillaume shines: “Guillaume éclate dans son habit de marchand” (358). Guillaume’s dual heroic/ anti-heroic identity comes out clearly in his
confrontation with the Saracen king Harpin. At the very moment when Harpin pulls Guillaume's beard, Guillaume springs out of his merchant's dress to proclaim his true heroic identity, exclaiming:

Felon paien, toz vos confonde Deus!
Tant m'avez hui escharni et gabé,
Et marcheant et vilain apelé;
Ge ne sui mie marcheant par verté,
Raol de Macre ne sui mes apelé;
Que, par l'apostre qu'en quiert en Noiron pré,
Encui savroiz quel avoir j'ai mené. (1360-1366)

Note here Guillaume's ironic use of the word “avoir,” since his goods are not merchant's goods, but rather the weapons which will destroy his Saracen hosts. The ironic commercial interpretation of the “goods” draws attention to the warrior (thus, epic) function the objects have. We should also note here that whereas before Guillaume had used simple peasant's speech, he now assumes proper Christian heroic rhetoric when he cries “Felon paien, toz vos confonde Deus!” Guillaume is thus restored to his proper epic function of hero-warrior. But it is the comic disguise that brings attention to his epic identity and lets it shine through. The comic, rather than taking away from Guillaume's status as an epic hero, actually reinforces it.

Bakhtin’s concept of carnivalesque degradation provides a useful way of examining the processes which connect the comic scenes to the serious themes of the work. According to Bakhtin, comic effects are achieved when the formal official codes of the epic/chivalric ethos are breached by an intrusion of the material realm (20). Guillaume, although an ideal, highly successful French warrior, often encounters resistance from the material realm, usually manifested in his own physical clumsiness. Early on in the epic, Guillaume, upon hearing that he has not been awarded a fief, rushes off to Louis' court to demand his rights, with comic results:

Li cuens Guillelmes fu molt gentix et ber:
Trusqu'au palés ne se volt arester;
A pié descent soz l'olivier ramé,
Puis en monta tot le marbrin degré.
Par tel vertu a le planchié passé
Rompent les hueses del cordoan soller;
N’i ot baron qui n’en fust effraez. (51-57)

Here the serious formal level (Guillaume, noble and valorous, seeks audience with the king) is degraded by the material event (Guillaume trips and breaks the laces of his boots). We should note the reaction of the other noblemen at the court. They are shocked (“effrayez”) at Guillaume’s breach of social norms. The comic action, in fact, brings attention to the “relativity” or arbitrariness of social codes. We recognize that Guillaume has demonstrated inappropriate behavior, yet this behavior is not due to any deliberate intent to revolt against etiquette on his part, but rather to the unavoidable interference of his material body; despite himself, Guillaume has violated court etiquette. Thus, the very independence of formal behavior from ethical concerns is accentuated by the comic event. In this way, the comic event makes us more aware of the formal codes that govern epic (and all social) behavior while simultaneously pointing to the relativity of these codes.

Another similar event of comic degradation may be found in the bow scene, mentioned above. Guillaume has just ordered his men to prepare to leave court because King Louis is unworthy of their service. After his dignified, formal speech ensues the following:

Sor un foier est Guillelmes montez;
Sor l’arc d’aubor s’est un pou acoutez
Que il avoit aporté de berser,
Par tel vertu que par mi est froez,
Que les tronçons en volent tresqu’as trez;
Li tronçon chïent au roi devant le nés. (123-128)

Here the elevated position— both physical because Guillaume is mounted on a platform, and formal in that he is making a serious declaration— is degraded to the material level of the object. The assault on Louis on ethical grounds (denying Guillaume the fief) is transposed to the material assault of the shattered bow on the king’s very nose! When we consider this scene in terms of the formal dissolution of vasselage, the degradation suggests even more intriguing interpretations. According to Marc Bloch, one of the rituals to mark the dissolution of feudal vasselage in northern France was to break a twig and hurl it to the ground (351).
Might it then be possible to read this scene as a parody of the dissolution ceremony? If so, would not the parody underline Guillaume's epic role as a feudal vassal with certain rights, since his feudal rights have been clearly denied? In other words, the parody of the dissolution ritual would bring attention to the serious theme being suggested: the importance of adherence to feudal obligations.

The principle of degradation of the high formal level to the physical material level helps as well to explain the comic effect of epic-formulaic speech. Much of the speech in epic is clichéd speech whose purpose is not so much to communicate information as to accord with the character's status and to fill out patterns of rime and meter. Comic degradation of speech brings attention to its status as form rather than meaning. For example, in the passage cited above, where Guillaume trips over his shoelaces, the king responds “Guillelmes, quar seez” (59). His speech accords with his dignified status as the king who greets those who seek audience with him, but appears somewhat incongruous given the bumbling entrance of his subject. Other scenes also juxtapose grave rituals with incongruous material events. Towards the beginning of the epic, Guillaume is looking for recruits to assist him in his conquest of Nîmes. His nephews Bertrand and Guielins refuse on the ground that they are too young to suffer. Their father, Bernard, is so enraged at their lack of valor that he threatens them with a sword to accept the glove of allegiance. Upon this threat, the youths jump up on a table and proclaim: “Mes, par l'apostre que quierent peneant, / Ce comparront Sarrazin et Persant. / Bien puéent dire entré sont en mal an; / Il en morront a milliers et a cenz” (631-634). This epic cliché (particularly about the large numbers of Saracens who will die) by itself is not comic. It is rather the material context, represented by the menacing sword and the cowardly nephews, that brings attention to the formulaic nature of the speech and mocks it. The bravery and valor of the youths, while perhaps not explicitly denied, are at least put into question here. Charles Knudson has seen in the chanson de geste a polarity in epic speech between the "serment téméraire" and the gab. But the young nobles' declaration is at once threatening speech and comic speech, for it subverts the intimidating speech by pointing to its formulaic status. One might also see the action of jumping on the table as an attempt to gain topographically high, official space, an indication that the youths are learning to use social codes to their advantage. In fact, as Mancini suggests, there is the suggestion that the youths here mimic their uncle
by jumping on the table and declaring “voiz dere” their warrior intent (208). In other words, they borrow the official, warrior voice of their uncle. As Bakhtin has said, language itself becomes the subject of literature rather than simply the vehicle for transmitting it. Another example of such ridiculing of clichéd speech occurs later with the Saracen peasant. Upon meeting him, the Frenchmen proclaim

Or as que bris parlé
Quant tu ce croiz que Mahomez soit Dé,
Que par lui aies richece ne planté,
Froit en yver ne chalor en esté.
L’en te devroit toz les membres coper” (895-899).

In response to their blustering, antagonistic rhetoric, Guillaume replies “Baron, lessiez ester. / D’un autre afere vorrai a lui parler” (900-901). He then interrogates the peasant about conditions in Nîmes. Thus, the formal anti-Saracen rhetoric is degraded by Guillaume’s more practical concern with information. His interjection deflates the epic speech and brings attention to its status as formula.

Even more conscious attention to language as the subject of literary discourse may be found in the narrator’s speech. For example, the narrator twice describes Guillaume and his men getting in the casks:

Qui dont veïst les vilains del regné
Tonneaus loier, refere et enfoncer,
Et ces granz chars retourner et verser,
Dedenz les tonnes les chevaliers entrer,
De grant barnage li peüst remenbrer....5 (983-987)

The praising of the knights’ “grant barnage” appears somewhat incongruous given their less than dignified position in the casks. Much of why the comic is lost on modern readers (particularly in translations) has to do with the resonance of these epic formulas. Clichés such as “De grant barnage li peüst remenbrer” occur frequently in Old French epics. Translations miss the humor because they treat such speech as

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5 Almost identical passage at 964-969.
information, when it is really the status of the speech as cliché, as formula that is highlighted. While this line undoubtedly serves to fill out metrical patterns, we should at least admit the possibility that the line was intended to be ironic. Could the cliché perhaps be seen as an open invitation to compare the official status of the Frenchmen to their current, degraded situation as peasants loaded into casks? An even stronger suggestion of the narrator’s playing with epic formulas may be seen in the description of Guillaume’s outfit. Using a typical epic invocation to the audience he says: “Des or devons de Guillelme chanter, / Com fetement il se fu atornez” (1034-1035). This cliché typically introduces the elaborate description of the knight’s splendid, unparallelled armor. What follows, however, is a description of Guillaume in peasant’s garb (hardly suitable attire for a knight!). Additionally, towards the beginning of the epic the narrator uses the standard cliché “molt gentix et ber,” but the next few lines describe Guillaume breaking his shoelaces and making a fool of himself in front of the king! Some scholars have seen the narrator’s use of epic clichés as simple naïveté. Why couldn’t we see this as the narrator playing with the epic genre? And in this sense, the Charroi de Nîmes works within the standards of epic, not outside them.

Bakhtin continually emphasizes that carnivalesque texts enact a dialogue between different, opposing voices, particularly voices of different social classes. The Charroi, too, seems to delight in highlighting opposing world-views of different classes by playing with their contrasting uses of language. When Guillaume asks the peasant about the “estres de la vile,” meaning the rulers of Nîmes, the peasant tells him the price of bread, which he claims is much better than in other towns. Guillaume exclaims in a fury of frustration:

“Fous, dit Guillelmes, ce ne demant je mie,
Mes des paiens chevaliers de la vile,
Del roi Otrant et de sa compagnie.
Dit li vilains: ‘De ce ne sai ge mie,
Ne ja par moi n’en iert mençonge dite.” (913-917).

Guillaume calls the peasant crazy (“fous”) for not accepting his speech as he meant or intended it. The misunderstanding comes from the conflicting social backgrounds which determine the meaning of words, for the word “estres” is ambiguous and its meaning will be shaped
according to the perspective of the individual. Anna Drzewicka has, in fact, pointed to the comic brought out by the difference in social classes in this scene, asserting that the humor comes from the fact that the peasant has a different “mentality” (98). Although the peasant’s concern for everyday matters does create a misunderstanding between himself and Guillaume, it is more precisely the confrontation of contrasting voices which creates the humor of the scene. We laugh not so much at the peasant as at the failure of language itself. Although no doubt many of the audience, if asked, would inform us that they are simply laughing at the naïve peasant, the humor of the scene goes a level beyond this, challenging the assumption societies live by— that language has intrinsic meaning and that communication is a matter simply of saying what one means. And of course another serious function of this comic episode is to emphasize the ideology of Guillaume’s discourse by showing his thoroughly aristocratic and warrior world-view. This view shines through precisely because of the comic juxtaposition with another, non-heroic voice.

The ambiguity of language plays a key role in reaffirming epic ideology in other scenes as well. When the Saracens ask Guillaume about the contents of his casks, he replies:

“Nos, syglatons et dras porpres et paires
Et escarlates et vert et brun proisiable,
Tranchanz espiez et hauberz et verz heaumes,
Escus pesanz et espees qui tallent.”
Dîent paien: “Ici a grant menaie.
Or alez donques au mestre guionnage.” (1064-1069)

The Saracens interpret Guillaume’s speech as he has intended they should: they focus on the commercial context and suggest the French take their wares to market. Yet “tranchanz espiez” and “espees qui tallient” have another meaning in this context, as the French intend to use these “wares” to kill the very Saracens who have let them into the city and who are potential buyers of the goods that will destroy them. The weapons have thus performed a double function: as wares, they authenticate Guillaume’s identity as a merchant, facilitating his entrance into the city; and as weapons they strengthen the identity of Guillaume as a warrior and make possible the conquest which will reaffirm his
status as epic hero. Given that the audience knows the concealed purpose of these goods, we can assume that they would have responded to Guillaume's clever double entendre with at least a slight smile if not with hearty laughter. Indeed, the narrator seems to build on this irony when he continues to describe in detail his wares to the unknowing Saracens. As if to convince them of his honest commercial intentions, Guillaume adds that the most important wares are yet to come:

Baron, soffrez a tant;
Derrière viennent li plus chier garnement.
— Que est ce donc? — El premier chef devant
Encres et soffres, encens et vis argent,
A lun et graine et poivres et safran,
Peleterie, bazenne et cordoan
Et peaux de martre, qui bones sont en tens” (1145-1151).

Guillaume’s detailed listing of his hypothetical wares as well as his conversational remark about market fluctuations (“bones sont en tens”) suggest that he can use the speech of his enemy for his own purposes. Although he stands before the Saracens in merchant’s clothing, his clever use of merchant’s language to serve his own ends reaffirms his epic role in the eyes of the epic’s audience.

Not only does Guillaume adopt the speech of others, but he actually appears to enjoy doing so enormously. Bakhtin emphasizes that carnival texts reflect the powerful and regenerative impulse to play— to assume other identities, to turn things upside down for a while. This is quite evident in Guillaume’s eagerness to assume his merchant’s disguise. When he presents himself to the Saracens at Nîmes, he does not simply state his business, but talks at length about his fictional past as a merchant from Canterbury, explaining that he had lost his nose because it was cut off when he was caught thieving (1190-1242). While the story clearly serves as a strategy for escaping detection— thus serving a very serious epic function— its elaboration of details and its attention to Guillaume’s supposed merchant identity indicate the fun to be had in telling stories. Guillaume delights in playing his new role. And it is important to note that part of the pleasure of the lie rests on the audience’s knowledge of Guillaume’s true identity as a famous noble warrior. In particular, the “true” account of the nose had been given at the beginning of the epic:
De son brant nu me dona un cop tel
Desor le heaume que oï a or gené
Que le cristal en fist jus avaler.
Devant le nes me copa le nasel;
Tresqu’as narilles me fist son brant coler;
A mes dos mains le m’estut relever;
Grant fu la boce qui fu au renoier. (139-145)

Guillaume's valorous loss of his nose in battle with Saracens, along with all the battle details that are de rigueur in epic, would be recalled upon the recitation of the other, comic, story of the nose. Thus, the storytelling and playing with identities, rather than being gratuitous anomalies in the text, reinforce the epic identity of the hero.

The best example of playing with other identities occurs with the scenes where the French knights dress up as peasants. In such scenes, the knights clearly have a good time “playing” at being something they normally aren’t, just as a commoner was elected king of fools for a day. Bertrand, Guillaume’s nephew, dresses up as a cattleherd and in trying to move the cattle forward gets the wagon stuck in the mud. There results a brilliant comic exchange between uncle and nephew:

“Deus, dit Bertrans, beau rois de majesté,
Cist m’avront sempres trestoz les piez froé.”
Ot le Guillelmes, s’en a un ris gité.
“Niés, dit li cuens, envers moi entendez.
Fetes ces bués trestot cel val aler.”
Et dit Bertran: “Por neant en parlez.
Ge ne sai tant ne poindre ne bouter
Que je les puisse de lor pas remuer.”
Ot le Guillelmes, s’en a un ris gité.
Mes a Bertran est molt mal encontrado,
Qu’il ne fu mie del mestier doctriné,

Camoisié ot et la bouche et le nés.
Voit le Guillelmes, si le prist a gaber:
“Beau niés, dist il, envers moi entendez
De tel mestier vos estes or meliez
First, we might note that this scene is “degrading” in Bakhtin’s sense of the word. Bertrand, noble knight and conqueror of Saracens, is degraded into the role of cattleherd and literally dragged down into the mud. This is truly “earthy” humor! Furthermore, the narrator’s twice commenting on Guillaume’s laughing reaction to his nephew’s somewhat inept adoption of his cattleherd role indicates the fun the nobles have in playing at being other. The word *gaber* might recall the similar pleasure with *gabs* in the *Pèlerinage de Charlemagne*. Such jokes convey a joyful playfulness suggested as well by other moments in the *Charroi* where Guillaume lets out his hearty laugh.

Furthermore, the words *mestier*, *doctriné*, and *savez* highlight the difference between the noble warrior class and the peasant cattleherd class. Bertrand does not know the cattleherd’s trade and his lack of knowledge causes him to look ridiculous, while simultaneously reinforcing his “bred-in-the-bone” warrior identity. This playing with social identities might be an example of what Michael Holquist, a Bakhtin scholar, means when he suggests that carnival is

an exploration of alterity in social, political and religious mechanisms, a celebration that nurtures the liminality needed to keep such institutions from dying of a structural hardening of the arteries.... Carnival, in other words, is a way cultural systems come to know themselves by playing at being different. (230)

So perhaps dressing up as cattleherds, like so many other instances of dressing up and disguising in medieval texts, or fabricating a checkered past as a thief, is one way of loosening otherwise rigid social structures, and with the pleasurable result of laughter.

This brings us to the question of what function a comic epic (or epic comedy) might have had for a medieval audience. Many scholars have felt that the *Charroi* supported a pro-monarchial feudal system and was intended for the restless, troublesome elements of twelfth-century France, namely the landless “bachelors” (Mancini 210; Hunt 591). The work does indeed contain an abundance of feudal rituals and feudal themes such as the duty of vassal to lord and vice versa, the right to
payment and the desire to spread the glory of France through the acquisition of foreign territories. However, scholars have tended to valorize this didactic message above all others, and have not attempted to accommodate the comic aspects of the work to this didactic function. One problem concerning the feudal message is that critics have tended to see the work as disunited: the first part as the serious feudal part, and the second part as the adventure part, told simply for amusement. Jean Rychner, clearly troubled by what he sees as a lack of artistic vision in the work, has explained this supposed disunity to the errors of careless scribes, a charge leveled at other troublesome comic works of a supposedly serious nature. (44). Owen, in an attempt to justify the apparent disunity of the work, proposes that the epic’s author has simply followed the common medieval practice of juxtaposing the sublime and the base: “Is this the key to the work’s apparent disunity? In the first half he has presented a serious, elevated confrontation between vassal and king, and then he has juxtaposed a balancing series of extravagant events centering round a grotesque ruse and featuring a good measure of comedy” (59).

While Owen rightly identifies the artistic importance of the grotesque elements in the work’s comic effect, he still does not suggest that the two halves might be working in conjunction. Could it not be possible to see the second, more comic, half as a response, or dialogue with the first “serious” half? Whereas the first half of the story sets up the feudal theme of the work and establishes the epic identity of the heroes, the second half plays with these serious elements. The ideal conquest of Nîmes as a holy war against Saracens and the extension of the French realm are brought down to the material level of finding enough casks to sneak into Nîmes, dressing up as peasants, and attempting to be cattle herds. This degradation in the second half might call into question the idealism of the feudal system by introducing mundane, everyday concerns, and yet the feudal ideals are accomplished. While the final message of the work might indeed be to encourage youths to be true to their king and uphold feudal values,

6 Oscar Mandel, for example, explains the presence of the comic in medieval drama as the result of mischievous scribes who smuggled “low comedy into religious drama” (15).
difficulties in the feudal system are clearly shown. We learn, if nothing else, that obtaining a fief in the Middle Ages could require elaborate solutions indeed! The comic in the text could perhaps have a therapeutic function that would liberate from feudal anxieties. Bakhtin has noted that the majority of carnivalesque texts in the Middle Ages are those which “present the droll aspect of the feudal system” (15), which might suggest medieval society’s need for liberation from feudal cares. Such a liberation seems to be suggested by Guillaume’s laughter of relief when Bertrand comes up with the idea of seeking his fief through the conquest of Saracen lands (459). The characters’ desire to play with their new peasant identities could furthermore be seen as a desire to liberate themselves from the anxieties brought on by their feudal roles.

Likewise, we might wonder whether a noble audience of 12th-century France listening to the Charroi might have appreciated the difficulties of being a knight, of needing always to follow social formulas of dress, speech, and ritual ceremony. Perhaps through the comic exploits of Guillaume and his men they, too, could play at being other than they were and enjoy a temporary release from anxiety through laughter. Carnival, as a temporary “safety-valve,” can express subversiveness while still preserving order. Perhaps the comic of the Charroi, by bringing out the problems of feudalism and painting a more rounded, many-voiced, or dialogic view of feudal society, could both let off a little steam and yet reaffirm that society, since order is restored at the end and Guillaume’s epic character shines through.7 Thus, while Ménard claims that epic laughter is a sign of the robust self-assurance of the heroes who “ne se maîtrisent pas leurs nerfs comme nous” (34), the Charroi, seen from the perspective of carnival, suggests that perhaps comic texts of the Middle Ages enabled their audience to find their place in society while laughing at the very difficulty of doing so, so that the

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7 One of the weaknesses of Bakhtin’s analysis of carnival is that while he acknowledges its paradoxical aspect of being both subversive and conservative, he tends to emphasize the subversiveness, so that laughter is associated with the oppressed masses who revolt against the humorless powers that be. The greatest contribution of the Charroi to an appreciation of carnival as an approach to medieval comic texts is that it provides a perfect example of the simultaneous conservative and liberating functions of comic texts. It is likely, in fact, that those most likely to laugh at Guillaume’s exploits would be those who believed strongly in feudal ideals and who had an idealized conception of the Christian knight.
comic text is, itself, a way for the medieval community to “control their nerves.”

Bakhtin’s theory of carnival proves to be a more useful approach to the comic of the Charroi de Nîmes. First, it provides a structure (the material bringing down the abstract) which can show how the comic is functioning. Although a description of the “esprit gaulois” or of rambunctious heroes may accurately convey the feeling we have when reading the work, it does little to explain how the comic episodes would have affected medieval audiences. By seeing Guillaume’s comic bumbling as a bringing down of traditional standards (standards both of feudal ritual and of the epic genre) we can better imagine medieval audiences laughing at the playing with those standard forms. Carnival also suggests a function for the comic in the work, so that we may understand why a comic epic like the Charroi might have needed to exist. The work could make people laugh in a time when defending feudal lands was grave business indeed. The poet’s seeming irreverence toward the epic universe does not negate feudal values, but only provides an outlet to express anxiety about their efficacy. Most of all, carnival enables us to see the comic as integrated into the structure and function of the work as a whole. Rather than separating the ridiculous dressing-up and charading of the knights from the serious grantings of fiefs and killing of Saracens, carnival shows how the comic moments themselves reinforce the serious feudal themes at the center of the work. That the various aspects of the comic— the deflation of epic formula, the incompetent role playing, the miscommunication between Guillaume and the vilain— do reinforce these feudal themes is a tribute to the work’s artistry. Thus, whether one chooses to call the work a comic epic or an epic comedy is less important than understanding how the “serious” themes of the text are actually illuminated by engaging in a dialogue with laughter.

Works Cited


