The Moralités légendaires and a Theory of Parody

Introduction

In June of 1886, Jules Laforgue wrote to his friend, Gustave Kahn: “Mon volume de nouvelles, tu en connais le principe: de vieux canevas brodés d’âmes à la mode.”1 In these terms, he described his only collection of stories, the Moralités légendaires, one of the two great products of his last years, and one of the most ingenious prose creations of the late nineteenth century. In particular, he here identifies the controlling principle of the tales—introducing a modern spirit into established stories of literary tradition, a major device of parody. Indeed, the Moralités are parodies that freely modernize major stories of literary history, giving them new meaning according to the spirit, tastes, and characteristics of contemporary life. They take as their model a specific work, myth, legend, or group of works, and refashion it in accordance with the preoccupations of the time, particularly those that Laforgue associated with Decadence in its 1880s sense, the avant-garde movement of which he felt himself a part. There has never been a study of the Moralités, yet they offer at once a brilliant analysis, critique, and example of Decadent writing which can enhance our conception of that movement. (I shall discuss the characteristics of 1880s Decadence in chapter two.) Moreover, they have considerable implications for our understanding of parody itself in both theory and practice. In reworking and modernizing well-known stories in this way, the
Moralités realize the anachronistic and intertextual principle of parody: they contain the essential elements of the genre, employ its characteristic devices and narrative techniques, and perform its distinctive critical and self-reflexive functions.

Much work has been done in recent years to elaborate a theory of parody adequate to the history of the term's usage and the variety of particular examples. These studies have usefully concentrated on parody as a metafictional form, that is, containing a commentary on fiction from within a fiction, exposing the processes of artistic creation as it realizes them. However, in probing the question, they also raise problems which a study of the Moralités as parodies can help to resolve. Laforgue's stories shed light on such issues as the nature of the parody's target, the role of humor, the relation of the parody to the work parodied, the function of parody in the avant-garde, the relation between it and an aesthetic of originality and genius, the self-sufficiency of a form customarily considered dependent, and the reflexive action of the parody upon itself. Even more importantly, they bring to light features of the genre that have not previously been identified or formulated, such as the creative implications of parody, its self-critical aspects and its intelligibility in the absence of the original. They thus provide a solid basis for investigating the procedures of parody and for developing a theory sufficiently general and flexible to account for the diversity of its forms over time, but precise enough to have useful meaning in defining a single genre.

Any genuine theory is an abstraction from practical usage. The one presented here comes from a study of many parodies but derives particularly from the Moralités, which offer some unusual and illuminating features; in them, Laforgue exploits the creative implications of the genre to the full. Some aspects of the theory manifest themselves conspicuously in Laforgue's volume and are formulated here for the first time; nevertheless, in retrospect we can see them at work in other parodies, as I shall indicate accordingly. Implied by the genre's definition, consistent with its inner logic, and realized in its practice, they legitimately take their place as features of the genre, to be drawn upon or not, according to the parodist's purposes. Thus the theory that follows applies to parody
overall, not merely to its Laforguian, or even Decadent, variety. As will become clear, it is radical in several respects. But while theory, being an abstraction, is usually radical, by the same token it necessarily benefits from a certain indulgence: it need not, indeed cannot, describe works of art in their complexity but only articulates general rules and their implications, which the individual artist inherits in choosing a particular form. These allow a certain choice: not every potential aspect of parody, for instance, will appear in a given example. From the highly innovative and creative parody of the Moralités, we can derive a theory that revises and enhances our understanding of the genre and is valid for parody as a whole.

With respect to method, my analysis of parody refers frequently to an intertextual, and specifically Riffaterrean, model of literary theory. This does not simply reflect a critical ideology but is proposed by the nature of the subject itself: parody is overtly and, by its very definition, necessarily intertextual. Like any literary theory, this one can be adequately demonstrated and tested only in the context of a complete (or at least extended) work, not merely, as is frequently the case, applied to the idea behind the work or to particular moments in it. The Moralités suit this task especially well because a parodic structure fully informs each of the stories and is responsible for its sense. Laforgue’s tales are disconnected, allusive, and difficult to interpret (or even, sometimes, to follow). In analyzing them, I present them in a perhaps deceptively coherent narrative in order to bring out the relations of significance, but try to preserve his deliberate narrative structure as well. Thus I proceed according to the plot whenever possible and reconstruct it when necessary for comprehension. Every page of his volume contains some element relevant to the parody—a pun, an incongruity, an anachronism; it is impossible and unnecessary to include them all. Instead I concentrate on those aspects which are particularly important for the working of parody in the story and the sense deriving from it, and for our understanding of the features and possibilities of parody in general.

Before I proceed to the theory proper, the place of parody in Laforgue’s œuvre as a whole deserves some consideration. Although he frequently described the Moralités as a modern rewriting
of old and familiar stories, he never once referred to them as parodies but consistently called them nouvelles. This neglect is significant, because it suggests to what extent the idea of modernization governing the Moralités dominates his art and his aesthetic thought overall. For Laforgue, modernization applies not exclusively to parody, but to literature and art in general. It motivates his work from the very beginning and is one of the most central and persistent concerns of his imagination: the relation of a past tradition to a modern, original creation. Moreover, the formula of reworking art of the past according to the present articulates the conception of modern art put forward in his essays on aesthetics. This has not received adequate attention, for his emphasis on the new and the original would seem rather to discredit works of the tradition and place all aesthetic value in a negation of the past. I have argued elsewhere, however, that such a view is erroneous; his poetic and critical works provide ample evidence to disprove it. The important concept in his aesthetics is not revolution but evolution, which the philosophical readings of his twentieth year had firmly implanted in his mind. The idea and the term itself recur constantly in his criticism, notes, and private journals, most notably in the theory and defense of modern art contained in his essay on Impressionism and L'Art moderne en Allemagne. Only one other concept is as prevalent as evolution and far from being a rival it is on the contrary its necessary companion—originality. Indeed, Laforgue defines originality within the context of an evolving history of art in which certain received and sometimes inescapable conventions are variously maintained, neglected, subverted, or, most often, transformed. He emphasizes the important role played by works of the past in the development of man's aesthetic sensibility and thus their significance in the ongoing process of artistic creation.

Laforgue's belief in the necessity of this process, however, removes from evolution any sense of ameliorative progress. In refuting the notion of a fixed standard of beauty and a scale of artistic value over the ages, he insists, in his aesthetic essays, on the variety of forms and manners, all necessary and valuable, that constitute the history of art. Modern forms could not have arisen without what preceded them, and thus the more recent should not be re-
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garded as superior to the past; the new is merely the most appropriate creation for the contemporary world. Even Laforgue's most formally radical poetic work, the free verse Derniers Vers, must be read against a background of existing lyric poetry, from specific allusions to Heine and Baudelaire to more general Romantic conventions, which Laforgue revises to serve his particular purpose: to make the Derniers Vers a truly modern love poem, expressing the problems, and the few pleasures, of love in the pessimistic world of the 1880s.

The anachronistic principle of modernization informs Laforgue's work from the beginning. For example, his earliest surviving composition, the two-act play Tessa (1877), transports stereotypical concerns of the late nineteenth century, notably Schopenhauerian pessimism and misogyny, into the Italian Renaissance. The allusions are explicit and, in a manner typical of the later Moralités, freely drawn from a variety of sources of different periods, including Dante, Le Barbier de Séville, and Schopenhauer. Using a more orthodox method of parody, the trivialization of heroic figures, a prose piece of 1879 entitled "Chronique stygianopolitaine" depicts everyday life in the underworld among the greats of history and legend, in the manner of Lucian's Dialogues of the Dead, and, like Tessa, anachronistically refers to the contemporary world. Proserpine, Pluto, Isocrates, Cicero, Aeneas, Mohammed, François Ier, Napoleon, Madame de Pompadour, Baudelaire, and others live side by side; the 1879 war between England and Zululand is re-enacted in Charon's boat as he transports a cargo of quarreling Englishmen and Zulus across the river into the underworld; Proserpine reads the novels of the popular nineteenth-century sentimental novelist Xavier de Montépin; and all is recounted in the colloquial schoolboy language of 1879.

Even in Laforgue's less explicitly anachronistic works, the principle of modernization plays a significant role. For instance, however little the Complaintes resemble medieval complaintes, as a volume they are based on the union of an old poetic form (and its connotations) and specifically modern themes. The title of his collection of poems, L'Imitation de Notre-Dame la Lune presents a new Imitation de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ; moreover it ironically
transforms one chaste lady into another, the Virgin Mary into Da­iana the moon, and substitutes a cult of the moon and a religion of Decadence for Christianity. Similarly, Des Fleurs de Bonne Volonté plays on Les Fleurs du mal and the biblical “hommes de bonne volon­té,” with a quiet reminder of the most famous, though hardly good, Volonté of the nineteenth century, Schopenhauer’s Will. This title too is ironic (some flowers rather than Baudelaire’s general les), specifically regarding the indecisive and irresolute speaker of the poems, whose good will is called into question by the pessimistic Schopenhauerian sense of the term. The speaker’s volonté may in fact produce a few flowers, but in matters of love it definitely cannot bring him the peace that men of good will are supposed to deserve.¹¹

Laforgue’s long-held taste for using the device of modernization in his poems, and his theoretical defense of an evolutionary history of art, help to explain why, after many unsuccessful attempts to write prose throughout his career, he produced his tales in the form of parodies.¹² The Moralités are the logical outcome of two of his oldest aesthetic concerns: the relation between a received tradition and an aesthetic of originality, and the role of modern art within the entire, ongoing history of art. Parody incorporates the evolution and modernization that he sought in all artistic creation, as well as the ironic humor characteristic of his work generally; by writing parodies, Laforgue fulfilled his stated objective of creating a set of distinctively modern stories. The title itself, while not playing on a specific work, directly conveys the idea of legendary stories retold according to the modern sensibility, for both of its terms reflect the importance of the past to the present.¹³ It calls attention to the “moralité,” or general moral lesson, to be derived from them, and thus to their universal, timeless applicability, including their relevance to the contemporary world—an idea implicit in légendaires itself. Since it is also a medieval theatrical form, moralité is anachronistic in the title of a modern work and suggests the anachronism on which the parodies will depend. More specifically, the title topically plays on the pervasive use, and abuse, of legendary subjects in the arts of this period; thus it contains a veiled allu­sion to the parody’s target, Decadence.¹⁴
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It is significant in this context that two of the stories (Persee et Andromède and Pan et la Syrinx) take as their original a work renowned for its parody, Ovid’s Metamorphoses, which like them freely reenacts famous legends of antiquity with humor and irony, gives them a new interpretation, places them in a different context, and highlights the theme of love. Laforgue alludes to Ovid’s poem elsewhere in the Moralités as well, thus paying direct tribute to a great predecessor in the genre and suggesting the relation of his own work to it. Moreover, the Moralités frequently refer to the opéra-comique (Persée is an “opéra-comique” hero, a “phare d’opéra-comique” lights up the sea in Salomé, the town of Le Miracle des Roses has an “opéra-comique” atmosphere, etc.), thereby evoking specifically the modern retelling of legend, as in the works of Offenbach, and more generally the parodic status of the opéra-comique with respect to the opéra.

The relevance of parody for Laforgue’s aesthetic of the modern raises two points important for a theory of the genre. First, it undermines the claim that parody, when applied to contemporary works or conventions, is inherently conservative, criticizing its modern object and seeking thereby to return to more traditional norms and values. The Moralités provide an effective counter to this, for Laforgue, in mocking the modern artistic sensibility and its conventions of expression, cannot in any way be seen as advocating a return to earlier ones; rather, his parody makes fun of contemporary art in order to advance it beyond itself to even newer forms. Significantly, the most frequent object of his parody is also that which he considered the newest of creations, namely his own work. In Laforgue’s hands, parody becomes a vehicle for the most forward avant-garde and takes its place at the very head of the creative line. This function of parody is implied by its essential self-reflexivity, which I shall discuss more fully later; in mocking a target, contemporary or otherwise, parody must also mock itself, and in proposing something different, it must, by the logic of its own structure, allow for the reworking, reinterpretation, or even parody, of what it has itself proposed. Parody lets nothing rest secure, including what it seems to endorse, and thus is theoretically inconsistent with conservatism.
Second, Laforgue’s aesthetic demonstrates that parody is fully compatible with a “Romantic” aesthetic of genius and originality, despite assertions to the contrary. His evolutionary theory of art sought to justify genius and originality precisely in terms of a continuous but everchanging process, realized and represented in the history of art. According to this view, genius is a manifestation in the individual of the law that governs all aspects of the universe, including the evolution of artistic forms and manners; the artist of genius is the one who is original, reveals something new within this process, and thereby takes a step forward in the aesthetic evolution of man. There is no conflict in Laforgue between parody and originality; both entail a reusage and transformation of existing art and a redefinition of the conventions established by it. It is not surprising that the great originality of his own parodies was recognized in all contemporary accounts of the book.

Originality was in fact one of Laforgue’s most urgent concerns in writing the *Moralités*, as many of his letters attest. He resolved to make the tales different from those of the two major short-story writers of the period, Villiers and Maupassant. The *nouvelle*, conducive in its brevity to a poetic prose and an aesthetic of the ephemeral, suited his formal needs well. The principle of modernization and the comic element necessary for parody allowed him to realize his customary humor and self-irony in a thoroughly novel form, in keeping with his philosophy of artistic creation, and to produce a prose work consistent with his theory of the modern. The *Moralités* represent Laforgue’s latest—and, as history determined, final—response to the aesthetic and formal challenge posed by his own theory of modern art.

The order of the stories has provoked some discussion because Edouard Dujardin, who brought out the first edition shortly after Laforgue’s death, reversed the last two, placing *Pan et la Syrinx* before *Persee et Andromède*. Why he did this is unknown; modern editors have rightly restored Laforgue’s original order. This follows exactly the order of composition, except that *Salomé*, the first one written, is placed fourth, a detail explained by the fact that Laforgue revised it considerably in 1886, between *Lohengrin* and *Persee et Andromède*, precisely in the place it now occupies. Thus
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The "architecture" of the Moralités seems to follow the rather prosaic plan of chronology. The stories are written in an unusually complicated prose, marked by allusions, puns, anachronism, syntactical obscurities, sound play, hermetic imagery, incongruous juxtapositions, a consistently bewildering association of ideas, unexpected authorial asides, an uncertain point of view, and an inconsistent time scheme—hence their difficulty but also their brilliance. Laforgue creates a subjective narrative which communicates the characters' thoughts and attitudes through an ostensibly objective, third-person one, but he interrupts it constantly with authorial asides, apostrophes, and ironic commentary. Reading the tales in terms of the features of parody will explain many of these difficulties and help us to understand them not only as parodies of other works, but also as coherent and significant works in themselves which exploit other texts for their own creative ends. It will emerge that these apparent eccentricities are far from gratuitous and are actually vital sources of the parody and its effects—its humor, its criticism, and its self-criticism. They belong among the special devices of the genre and function as signals, warning the reader that the work in general, or a particular moment in it, should be read as parody. This approach will also account for one of the main themes of the Moralités, inherent in their form as parodies: the intrusion of illusion into reality, or art into life.

History and Theory

The long and protean history of parody complicates the effort to define it adequately, to embrace the many works exemplifying it and yet describe a single, distinct phenomenon. The divergent conclusions of those studies which have attempted this, and the contradictions which they contain, bear witness to the problem. Various solutions have been proposed from the history of parody, but none provides a comprehensive formula: transposition of a serious text into a low style, application of a noble style to a low subject, application of a serious text, either verbatim or transformed, to a low subject, imitation of a text's general thought and style with exaggeration of its characteristics, and quotation or im-
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22 Even the status of parody as a genre has been challenged, and “mode” preferred instead. T. Shlonsky, for example, argues that parody is in one sense generically neutral, since, as an imitation, it takes its generic characteristics from the genre of its object; and that it is in another sense antigeneric, in so far as it distorts its object and thereby aims to “disrealize” the norms which the original tries to realize. 23 While I would agree with this, it does not account for parodies that use a different genre from their original, a frequent phenomenon in the modern period especially; “genre” would include such cases. This study will retain “genre,” understood as designating a literary category that has identifiable characteristics and follows given rules of operation. 24

In addition, the profusion of terms commonly associated and indeed confused with parody—travesty, pastiche, burlesque, caricature, satire, even forgery—further crowds the picture and complicates the theorist’s task. The distinctions among these have elicited much commentary, for usage is inconsistent; the terms derive from different traditions and periods, and in casual contexts are often used interchangeably. G. Genette, for example, proposes a schema of categories based on the function of the new text (playful, satirical, serious) and the relation of the new text to the old (transformation or imitation), but these break down when he applies them to existing works; L. Hutcheon distinguishes travesty and burlesque from parody by their element of ridicule, but parody can surely contain ridicule also, as we shall see; M. Rose points out where the terms overlap. 25 The problems are real and extremely difficult to resolve, especially since the methods of one form may legitimately be applied to the purposes of another: for example, parody may be used in pastiche or satire, and vice versa. To differentiate all of these rigorously would overextend this study, although I shall discuss satire below since it has particular significance for the theory of parody. 26 I shall use the term parody to denote the comical reworking and transformation of another text by distortion of its characteristic features. 27 The *Moralités* in particular belong to the type described earlier which involve the modernization of well-known stories. Their comic aspect derives from the
disjunction between the seriousness of the original and the highly exaggerated contemporary context into which it is reworked.

Although the early history of the word should not necessarily carry final authority in the dispute over what parody is, it can nevertheless indicate some basic features of its practice. The connotations ascribed in antiquity to parody as a generic term can provide a useful point of departure from which to trace its various later applications. Ancient usage is only sparsely documented but suggests that parody meant, literally, an imitative song, and, functionally, mock-heroic poetry. Aristotle uses *parodia* in this latter sense at *Poetics* 2.1448a13, where he cites Hegemon of Thasos as the first parodist. With Hegemon he pairs Nicochares, author of a mock-epic poem, the *Deilaid*, an *Iliad* of cowards. There Aristotle makes parody one of the forms of mimesis and distinguishes it with respect to the object that it represents; parody, like comedy, represents men as worse than those we know in life, whereas epic, like tragedy, represents them as better. Parody would thus belong, for him, in the realm of the comic.

This point is significant, for it provides strong evidence against the view that *parodia* did not originally imply a comic element. To maintain that the word had no comic implications until the scholiasts of later antiquity gave it one, as has been suggested, is to ignore the relation between parody and comedy signalled here, by the first literary theorist, at the earliest appearance of the term. Athenaeus' use of *parodia* supports Aristotle's. Originally, then, the term designated a mock epic, a poem in hexameter verse, employing epic diction and style but comically applied to a trivial subject or set of circumstances, as in the Hellenistic *Battle of the Frogs and Mice*. Although the etymology of a term is often misleading or meaningless in defining the genre that it denotes, the components of *parodia* convey to some degree its practical sense, as others have observed, that is, something sung in imitation but with a difference: from *ode*, singing, and *para*, meaning, on the one hand, nearness, consonance, derivation, imitation, and resemblance, and, on the other, transgression, opposition, and difference.

Even more significantly, *parodia* may have originated as a parodic transformation of the word designating the epic performance
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itself, rhapsodia. Genette proposes that, because of its formulaic style, epic necessarily leaves itself open to parody and contains inherently the possibility and materials of self-parody, which occurs if the poet involuntarily causes laughter; formulaic composition operates according to the same principle as parody, that is, reusage and repetition, or one text applied to different objects, contexts, or intentions. "En vérité, le style épique . . . est constamment en instance, voire en position d'autopastiche et d'autoparodie involontaires. Le pastiche et la parodie sont inscrits dans le texte même de l'épopée". But this view is highly questionable. Formulaic epic such as Homer's certainly lends itself to parody, since the mechanization of its style is, as it were, already provided by the repetition of formulae. However, parody is not "toujours déjà présente et vivante" in it any more than in any other work of art; the repetition of epic formulae does not in itself have a comic element, voluntary or involuntary, for it is the normal (and thus expected) means of composition. Repetition is only remarkable, and ludicrous, in a text where it is not a generic convention. A formulaic text may be easily parodied by others but is no more susceptible to involuntary self-parody than any other work of art.

The association of parodia with mock-epic—the comic imitation and distortion of epic style by its application to a low subject—suggests that parody, in its earliest use, already possessed the characteristics now considered essential to it: imitation, transformation or distortion, and a comic element. Although this last was not included in the etymology of the word, it nevertheless belonged to it in its Aristotelian use as mock-epic, and, as others have noted, was later emphasized by the Romans. In his section on wit, Quintilian cites parody specifically as a comic procedure ("verses resembling well-known lines, called parody"). Cicero, following Demetrius, makes the insertion of verses and proverbs, as they are or slightly changed, a device of wit, though he does not call this parody. In the Rhetoric, Aristotle had described the alteration of verses as a device of wit and given as an example a parody of an epic hexameter. The comic element did not necessarily imply criticism, although parody could act as a form of criticism through its humor or be used for satirical purposes, as sometimes
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in the plays of Aristophanes. In sum, a basic definition of parody, consistent with ancient and modern usage, includes the imitation and distortion, or transformation, of a well-known work with comic effect and critical purposes of some kind, even if only self-critical ones. (I shall discuss the critical purposes of parody in some detail shortly.) For now, let it suffice to say that the criticism need not aim at the work parodied but may rather target the distortion itself. The object of the parody can be one text, a school, a manner, a genre, a group of works on the same theme, an author’s entire corpus, and so on. So, although in the following discussion I shall refer, for the sake of convenience, to one work only as the object of the parody, it is frequently less definite than this practice would imply.

As essential features of the genre, parodic imitation and its comic element deserve clarification, particularly in view of the position recently adopted by Hutcheon, who challenges the comic element and criticizes the notion of parody as a kind of quotation. Parody imitates, “quotes,” or alludes to another work to such an extent as to raise expectations in the reader, but by its distortion it disappoints those expectations, usually quite pointedly, and thereby produces a comic effect. The “quotation” is clearly not verbatim, nor the imitation exact, due to the essential transformation involved in parody—distortion of stylistic traits, inversion of values, transposition into a new, incongruous, and frequently trivial, context, and so on. Moreover this difference between the original work and the parody, between the expectations raised for a work and the disappointment of those expectations, ensures the presence of a comic element, which may imply satire, derision, or simply humor, for which the deception of expectations has always been, as Aristotle formulated it, a basic rhetorical device.

The Moralités confirm this aspect of the theory. Some form of the comic, from playfulness to ridicule, is a necessary element of all parody and is implied by its basic structure of contra expectationem. Hutcheon has challenged the “stubborn retention of . . . ridicule or of the comic” as elements in the definition of parody, in favor of a more neutral irony which she considers less “restrictive” and more appropriate to the relation of twentieth-century art forms
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to their models. But this argument seems to me to contain serious flaws. First, irony is a form of the comic, a species within a larger genus, and does not alone suffice to describe the range and effects of parody. Second, it is equally misleading to equate the comic with ridicule and derision, which are, rather, varieties of it; the comic understood broadly includes also the neutrally playful attitude that she does allow for parody, the “zero degree of aggressivity,” the “lightest of mockeries.” Parody need not ridicule either its model or its target, and in fact frequently does not, as a survey of examples reveals, but it must have a comic component. The Moralités, as we shall see, provide a clear example of parodies that display no aggression toward either the works parodied or their more contemporary Decadent target but rather treat them with humor and irony. Here Bakhtin’s analysis of the various forms of “carnivalesque literature” is especially useful, for he attributes a wide range to the comic, from the harsher “retentissant” to the attenuated “résorbé,” with humor and irony belonging to the latter. A definition of parody as simply the remodeling of familiar forms to say something serious, that is, emptied of its comic element, as Hutcheon holds, is inconsistent with the origin and history of both the term and the genre. Moreover, it allows parody to apply to inappropriate forms, such as purely deferential or reverential homage. The comic element of parody usually involves a certain sympathy, in keeping, as we shall see, with the parodist’s ambivalent attitude toward the parodied work, implied by the form itself; it need not contain any cynicism or envy at all. As D. Baguley notes, the degree of “comic incongruity” ranges “from flagrant travesty to effects of debased recontextualization,” the latter bordering on neutral intertextuality. Its comic effect depends on our recognition of the distortion or transformation, and our pleasure in it on our perception of the relative justice of the mockery toward its object.

The nature of the comic element is important, for it clarifies the status of the parody’s target. Although the target has normally been equated with the work parodied, some theorists have suggested otherwise. F. Lelièvre, for example, points out that many outstanding parodies take as their target something other than the
work parodied, notably something contemporary; H. Marckiewicz documents the seventeenth-century practice of recasting a serious work in order to ridicule contemporary customs or politics; Hutcheon remarks that Pope’s *Dunciad* does not mock the *Iliad*, nor does the mock-epic usually target the epic at all; J. Priestman traces an eighteenth-century tradition, following Pope, of parody with no derision implied toward the parodied work. In such cases, the parody actually has a tripartite structure, involving three texts—the parody itself, the original and the target—or else two texts and a nonliterary target (when the parody is used for satirical purposes). The target is thus deflected: the parodist distorts the original in order to mock something closer to home, frequently the distortion itself.

The *Moralités* illustrate this triple structure perfectly, for they do not target the originals on which they are based but on the contrary attest a reverence for these (Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Flaubert’s *Hérodias*, Wagner’s *Lohengrin*), while distorting them playfully. Laforgue’s mockery acts rather upon the distortion, the modern Decadent heroes and heroines into which the originals have been transformed—with their metaphysical concerns and their confusion about love—and the forms of expression proper to them. Both the original (or model) and the target are parodied, though in different ways, the originals by the alterations they undergo, the target by the exaggeration of its features. Cervantes does likewise in *Don Quixote*, in parodying romances of chivalry; he aims not at the “authentic” ones, but at the popular ones of his own period in which the conventions of romance became clichés and were mechanized in the Formalist sense. *Amadis of Gaul* is thus saved from the pyre during the book-burning episode of 1,6 for being “the best of all the books of its kind ever written,” despite the fact that, as the first of its kind in Spain, it gave birth to all the subsequent, pernicious books of chivalry. In Laforgue’s case, targeting the distortion—contemporary Decadence—means targeting his own work as well, which uses Decadent forms, themes, and images to an extreme, albeit with irony; the mockery becomes blatant self-mockery.

Although using an older work to target something contempo-
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rary might suggest a conservative ideology behind the parody, as Hutcheon maintains, this need not be so. In fact, as I argued earlier, parody is theoretically inconsistent with conservatism. The charge of conservatism may apply in cases where the original is held up as an ideal form from which the target has degenerated and which the parodist wishes to revive. However, a deflected target does not always use the original in this way but frequently, rather, as a vehicle for the parody, an authorized and intelligible form against which to read the distortion. Once again, the Moralités furnish enlightening examples: Laforgue's Hamlet does not propose a return to Shakespeare; this would be no less anachronistic than the parody, and indeed no less comical. But the Decadent Hamlet is mocked by his contrast with the earlier one, and with him the specific problems of the 1880s literary sensibility, above all those of the Laforguian persona itself.

Because the parodist conspicuously uses another work, and is obliged by the nature of his art to do so, he holds the position not only of author (of the parody) but also of reader (of the original). Rose has described him specifically as a critical reader who from his "reading" creates his own revisionary work. The parodist does not accept the original unquestioningly by adopting its methods, subject-matter, style, or ideology; instead he distorts it comically, rewrites it, interprets it for a new age, sensibility, and readership. This critical function of parody was described and analyzed in the Formalist theory of its metalinguistic character, one text's commentary on another within one and the same work. The parodist's dual status as reader and writer accounts for his essentially ambivalent attitude toward the parodied work, which is an object of his comical transformation, or, in the case of the target, his mockery, yet is also the material of his own creation. More than any other author, he is dependent upon the text that he undermines, because it provides him with the fundamental elements of his parody. With respect to the parodied work, he is necessarily both irreverent and admiring, daring to alter an established text and revising it so as to serve his purposes; the parody must both play with it and reaffirm it, "destroy" it in its original form and renew and revitalize it in another one. Tynjanov's radical concept of destruction—"une fil-
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... est avant tout combat, destruction de l'ensemble ancien et nouvelle construction des anciens éléments... might be tempered so as to fit parody in its many forms; it should be understood neutrally, both because the destruction which parody effects cannot be total (for parody depends on the materials and even structure of the original), and also because it may consist simply of a comic reworking of material.

I insist on this point because it constitutes a major distinction between parody and satire. The parodied work is indeed an object of play, mockery, or criticism, but by providing the parodist with his materials it is also a model and constituent of the parody itself. Satire displays no such ambivalence; it merely criticizes its object without transforming it. It is an object of attack only, whereas that of parody is an object of mockery and admiration, becoming the material and model for the parody itself. Parody is potentially both destructive and creative, critical and constructive; although it operates directly upon a work of art or specialized language, its critical function, as Rose has argued, can extend as far as that of the most biting social satire, to the attitudes and values that the work may represent and the public to which it may have appealed. Unlike satire, it also contributes to the ongoing history and tradition of literature by reworking the original into a new form. In this respect, it may be usefully compared to Bakhtin’s concept of genre, which conserves the past precisely by renewing itself, making itself contemporary, and being reborn in each new work which uses it; the past, or “archaism,” thus preserved in genre is eternally alive and capable of renewal. Like genre as Bakhtin describes it, parody is a present reminder of the past; it possesses the memory of literature and thus guarantees both the unity and the continuity of the process of literary history.

Although parody may, by its comic element, criticize the parodied work, it differs from satire by the self-criticism implied in its definition. In studying parody as a metafictional form, Rose has argued, rightly, that parody possesses inherently a self-reflexive quality due to the dual function of the parodist as reader and author. By showing the parodist’s interpretation and use of other material, literally of his reading, parody gives us as readers a model...
The analogy between the parodist as a reader and the reader of the parody ensures that the parody's effect will turn upon itself; the parodist's relation to the parodied work is transferred to ourselves reading the parody. Its very form presents us with an example of a critical reading and thereby suggests a similar reading of itself.

The self-reflexivity described by Rose, however, has more significant implications than even her analysis allows, implications which are in fact borne out by the *Moralités*. The parody does not merely provide for a critical reading of itself as a fixed work by demonstrating the mechanics of art; rather, parodic reflexivity becomes a more direct form of self-criticism. In comically reworking another text, the parody leaves itself, as a text, open to the same playful or critical action that it performs on the original and thus suggests its own potential to be altered, or even parodied, in its turn. Parody's basic definition as a comical rewriting of another work prevents it from proposing itself as definitive. Implicating itself in its challenge to the parodied work, it suggests its own potential as a target or model text. From a theoretical perspective, it suffers from no self-delusion but rather flaunts the fact that it is as vulnerable and tenuous as the parodied work. It necessarily provides for a critique of itself and does not, as Barthes charged, neglect to call itself into question.

The *Moralités* are especially useful for examining this self-critical aspect of parody, which, though inherent in the logic of the genre, has hitherto passed unnoticed. They provide excellent and explicit examples of three important self-critical techniques. First, the parody may overtly discredit its own story, as in the epilogue to *Persee et Andromède*, in which one of the speakers challenges the veracity of the parodic version just told; or the final line of *Hamlet*, which mocks the preceding story as arbitrary and unimportant. Second, the parody may openly evoke other existing or future versions of the same story (most of the *Moralités* do this) and even, as we shall see in *Hamlet*, propose ways in which the alternative ones might differ.

In these first two cases, a theoretical point implied by the definition of parody and conspicuously realized in the *Moralités* can, with
hindsight, be found in other examples and should be admitted as a prominent feature of the genre. Cervantes, for example, exploits both techniques at the end of part 2. Having completed his narrative, the Arab Cide Hamete Benengeli defends his account as the only genuine one and puts a curse on anyone who might be tempted to revive Don Quixote's story. By doing so, however, he in fact suggests that this may happen: "For myself alone was Don Quixote born, and I for him; he knew how to act and I to write; we two alone are one, despite that false Tordesil[ Kescan writer who has dared, and may dare again, to write with his coarse and ill-trimmed ostrich quill of the exploits of my valorous knight" (emphasis mine). In this way, Cervantes ironically makes Cide Hamete's claims to absolute authority the vehicle of parodic relativism, calling his own version into question by acknowledging other, competing ones. As elsewhere, Cervantes here brilliantly integrates his direct attack upon Avellaneda's apocryphal Don Quixote, part 2, into the parody; thus Cide Hamete alludes not only to Avellaneda's existing version but also to a possible future one. Cervantes makes Cide Hamete's claims all the more questionable because the historian is an Arab, and we are told repeatedly in the story that Arabs are untrustworthy and unreliable; the other version, or the future one, may actually be the more authentic. Thus parody provides a new version of an old story but, as it always involves self-parody to some extent, it cannot propose itself as the true one. It follows from this that the parody does not claim for itself higher authority or value than either the parodied work or the target. It is different, and new, but it carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction as well as of its regeneration in yet a new form.

A third self-critical technique, the most revolutionary of the three, consists of challenging the very message of parody, the scepticism that it develops in the reader by transforming allegedly fixed works and exposing the methods of art. Parody not only makes us beware of taking works of art as true, real, or definitive, but also, in a radical self-reflexive move, can make us doubt the warning itself. This is logically implied by the definition and structure of parody but is not often realized overtly. However, as we shall see in detail in chapter seven, Laforgue's Persée et Andromède provides a rare and
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enlightening example which allows us to examine and describe this feature at work for the first time: the epilogue undermines the very moral of parody as stated openly by the narrator. Parody may teach us that stories are merely fictions, but that message must be questioned too.

The definition of parody as a comical rewriting of another work makes it especially relevant to the theory of intertextuality, which considers texts an absorption and transformation of other ones. Parody is deliberately intertextual, conspicuously referring to another work as it distorts and transforms it, recalling the original and-or target precisely in altering it. Thus M. Riffaterre sees parody as an example of intratextual intertextuality, where the intertext is partly encoded within the text but conflicts with it: "... la trace, bien qu'elle appartiènne à l'intertexte, se trouve insérée ou enkystée dans le texte—corps étranger dont l'assimilation signalera le remplacement du sens par la signifiance." Parody signals to the reader that it refers to some other work located ostensibly outside itself, whose traces remain within it. The particular sense of the parody derives from the difference between it and the parodied work, a difference defined and communicated by the distortion.

The intertextual nature of parody raises two points particularly important for a theory of the genre. First, in relating the principle of parody to that of literary creation generally, it suggests how a parody may be understood as a creative work with literary meaning, rather than as merely a critical commentary on another work or its values. It provides a method of reading parody as a literary form. Traditional notions of parody as parasitic must be revised in the light of intertextual theory, according to which all works are understood in terms of other ones and the conventions established and realized in them.

Second, intertextuality suggests an answer to a problem raised in almost every discussion of parody, that of the reader's competence: to what extent is prior knowledge of the original necessary for the reader's perception of the parody? This has been a considerable stumbling block for theorists, for if knowledge of the original is required parody becomes subject to charges of elitism and narrowness; only the reader whose background allows him to grasp the allusions will be capable of perceiving the parody. Parody is derivative and secondary since, if the original
disappears or is unidentified, the parody cannot be understood, and so on. 69 This view seems at first reasonable; if the meaning and effect of the parody derive from the difference between itself, as a distortion, and the original, how could a work without a perceptible original be seen and interpreted as a parody? Even Formalist and Structuralist theorists have evoked the problem: in Tynjanov’s terms, if the parodied work is forgotten, the parody will be perceived only on a single rather than a double plane, that is, as an ordinary work. 70

But here the theory of intertextuality as referred to above offers a ready solution, in the vestiges of the intertext present within the text. Parody by nature preserves the original in itself and is therefore self-sufficient, capable of being understood even when the details of the parodied work (original or target, when these are distinct) are lost or unknown. In practical terms, identification of the model may certainly clarify aspects of the parody and enhance our appreciation of the distortion, but is not essential to an understanding of it. By certain noticeable devices, usually those of humor, we are made to see that the text is transforming another 71 and to identify the objects of its transformation. Therefore in theory we do not need to know the original in order to understand the parody, which retains of the original what is relevant to itself. This raises two points which demand clarification. First, the self-sufficiency of parody does not mean that we can (or should) reconstruct the original from the parody’s distortion, but merely that we can discern from it those aspects of the original which are mocked by the parody. Second, it does not follow that knowledge of the original is useless; on the contrary, this may facilitate understanding, especially of details, as experience attests. But this point in no way contradicts the theory; the parody may be understood as a parody, and its object perceived, without knowledge of the original. One does not need to be familiar with the contemporary romances of chivalry which Cervantes parodies in Don Quixote in order to grasp either that the novel is a parody, or what it parodies. The text provides what we need, notably the formulas and clichés of romance, and signals them by a variety of means, such as conspicuous archaism, level of diction, and repetition. 72

On this point the Moralités are particularly illuminating. Le Mi-
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rack des Roses provides an excellent example, for the original on which it is based has never been recognized and has usually been presumed not to exist, while the story was thought to be otherwise consistent with the rest. As I will show in detail in chapter 4, Le Miracle des Roses confirms that the original, even if lost or unknown, will be contained within the parody itself as the basis of its essential distortion, and can be grasped by the reader as such from the parodic signals offered in the text. Thus when I succeeded in identifying the original (a piece of music), this knowledge did not substantially alter my understanding of the parody; significantly, it did explain certain of the story's problematic aspects which had thus functioned as clues. It is in the nature of parody to set the reader on a quest for the original, only to reveal, once found, that he did not really need it anyway. This does not mean that it has nothing to do with the parody; on the contrary, the parody is a retelling and, in the process, a telling too. In a sense, it creates the original in the reader's mind, constructing it in the very act of transforming it. This aspect of parody suggests yet another way in which it differs from satire, which does not preserve its object within itself and thus cannot be properly understood without reference to the exterior object or situation satirized.

As others have remarked, the importance of imitation in the structure of parody (as a rewriting, or imitation with a difference) is reflected in its prominence as a major theme of the genre. Don Quixote provides the standard model for this observation, since the theme informs the entire novel. It constitutes the hero's famous problem, a slavish and unproductive notion of imitation: he imitates to the letter the romances of chivalry, seeking in doing so to prove the reality of the fictions he has read. In fact he confuses the two, taking his readings as real, and reality, which impertinently asserts itself at every turn, as the fictional creation of some sage enchanter. The parody challenges this view of imitation in two ways: first, through its form (in particular, having the characters in part 2 read about themselves, i.e., what we have experienced as part 1, and to criticize the published account as inaccurate) and, second, through its comical treatment of the theme—the ridiculous misfortunes into which imitation leads the hero, and his ultimate recognition of failure.
The theme of imitation is particularly relevant to the main target of the *Moralités*, Decadence. In mocking the confusion of art and life, and working against it, parody well suits a movement dedicated to leading a life of art, a movement in which everything—nature, society, human psychology—is seen and presented as theater. Laforgue's characters try to live in the fictional world of their imagination; having read and dreamt too much, they are incapable of functioning within the prosaic world of men, or—as is usually the case—women. The Decadent's emphasis on artifice, symbol, dream, and a rejection of the world makes him, in the words of one critic, an "être de fiction," defined by his refusal to live otherwise than in fictions and fantasies, and by his desire to make the world a book and substitute art for life. Hamlet, Ruth, Lohengrin, Salomé, Andromède, and Pan all try to lead their lives according to an artificial ideal, and either fail utterly or are saved in the nick of time by another character's good sense. They seek to make reality conform to their dreams and are tormented by their constant failure to do so. Laforgue saw this desire and its frustration as a basic aspect of Decadence, a consequence of the effort to introduce art into life and the pessimistic conviction that the effort was futile.

From a formal perspective too, parody poses a challenge to imitation. In exposing the methods, effects, presuppositions, and processes of art (including its own), it leads the reader to take fictions not as realities, or even as images of reality, but rather as interpretations of it. As Shlonsky has argued, it exposes the illusory nature of literature, reveals its conventions and devices, and prevents the reader from taking it as true or real. Parody proposes a radical view of art as interpretation rather than as imitation in the strict sense, as Rose has observed; it holds a mirror not up to life, in the traditional formula, but up to art, and the mirror is a distorting one. By conspicuously signalling the distortion, it also calls attention to the circumstances (frequently contemporary ones) that affect the interpretation it offers. Parody is imitation that transforms and ultimately reveals. Cervantes dramatized this in the Prologue to part 1, by applying to his parodic hero a deformed version of a standard chivalric cliché, "flower and mirror": Don Quixote is, rather, the "light and mirror of knight errantry," a mirror
that also illuminates, at once reflecting and exposing knight errantry, revealing to us his self-deception and the possibility of our own.  

While parody’s emphasis on interpretation has been noted, the important implications of this have not been fully appreciated. It suggests a relativist ideology, which accords with the self-critical aspect of parody described earlier. In uncovering the methods—and dangers—of works of art, and revising artistic imitation to mean interpretation, parody implies the possibility of other interpretations, other results, and other stories, depending on more or less different conditions. An interpretation may always be challenged, and even superseded, by another. In moral terms such pluralism could, by questioning the truth of the “image,” be disturbing; in aesthetic terms it is reassuring, since it provides for the continuation of art. The parody calls into question the original and the target by playing with them but simultaneously revives them for further use. Laforgue’s Salomé does not kill her biblical ancestor, or Flaubert’s, or even the contemporary creations of Huysmans and Gustave Moreau, but rather perpetuates their tradition in a radically new form. Moreover, in rebounding upon itself, leaving room for subsequent versions or even suggesting the forms these might take (as I discussed earlier), parody ensures that the tradition which it revises will continue even beyond itself.

This last point reveals an important aspect of parody, first elaborated systematically in Formalist theory: the development of new literary forms. Parody operates especially when the procedures of a tradition become mechanized; although by mocking the tradition, parody brings it to an end, it also regenerates it, altering its course rather than terminating it altogether. The Moralités confirm this and in addition suggest that neither the parodied work nor the target need be in decline. Indeed, the parody itself frequently fixes the conventions that it targets, precisely by exaggerating them. Such is the case, for example, with the Déliquescences d’Adoré Floupette of 1885, which defined the clichés of Decadence in the very act of ridiculing them. Parody thus may flourish at the height of a formal tradition and confer upon it a unified and consistent identity; it is a storehouse for the conventions of a genre, which, ab-
extracted and exaggerated, become recognizable as they are transformed. The *Moralités* are an outstanding example of this, but it is true of other parodies as well; the conventions of the gothic novel are apparent from *Northanger Abbey*, those of the chivalric romances from *Don Quixote*, those of Roman love elegy from Ovid’s *Amores*. The analogy between parody and periods of historical decadence has often been made; research into the latter has suggested that decadence coincides not with the decline of a civilization, but rather with the forms that it acquires at its culmination. This same principle applies to parody too, which frequently brings to its height the tradition that it parodies, while redirecting it toward the future.

Although other functions of parody have been identified and described, notably by Rose, these are not, like literary evolution, inherent in the genre itself, and they may even contradict its implications. For example, parody may be used as a way around censorship, but many other forms have been employed for this purpose, such as satire, allegory, and the *roman à clef*. Those parodies which criticize a past work may be the expression of a present overburdened by the past, but this contradicts parody’s essential ambivalence toward its object—mocking and admiring, destructive and regenerative. Parody implies a desire not to annihilate the past but to revise it into an appropriate creation for the contemporary world; hence the Formalist conception of parody as a motor for the evolution of literary forms, altering, but therein renewing, a tradition that it helps to mechanize. *Don Quixote* is again the standard example, transforming the romance into the “modern” novel of realism; Rose argues that *Tristram Shandy* transformed the Cervantian novel into the eighteenth-century novel of idealism in which the imagination becomes the principle that structures meaning; Priestman suggests that Fielding’s *Shamela*, parodying Richardson’s *Pamela*, assisted the development from the sentimental to the realist novel, notably, as Baguley argues, *Joseph Andrews*. While such neat patterns (indeed the categories too) leave themselves open to challenge, it is undeniable that the dual capacity of parody to close and renew a tradition or form ensures for it a catalytic function. The *Moralités* constitute a fine example, giving their
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originals a new and special significance in modern literature and aiding the passage of Decadence into modernism.

Features of Parodic Narrative

Parody has a number of characteristic ways of signalling that it is a comic rewriting of another work. For the most part, these can be arranged into three groups, corresponding to three major aspects of the genre: the comic element, imitation and transformation, and the analogy between the parody and the experience of the reader. Since the comic is essential to parody, the narrative relies on the numerous devices of humor, many of which effect some kind of distortion and deception of expectations (e.g., substitution, exaggeration, incongruity and anachronism, condensation, displacement, puns, sound play, repetition, cataloguing, neologism, periphrasis, and allusion). Laforgue relies particularly on anachronism and incongruity, freely recycling and mingling stories from various periods and traditions in a single work, and modernizing the characters. The most obvious anachronism lies in his language: in every story, regardless of the original, the characters speak the same 1880s language and use the clichés and formulas associated with Decadence. This not only identifies the target but, by its consistency over the six stories, reflects the principle of modernization which governs them all. Laforgue’s parodies immediately identify themselves as such because they use a recognizably personal style for subjects ostensibly taken from a variety of sources distant in time. We expect a distinct form, genre, style, or vocabulary for each story, and we get only the same one, six times over. His prose also relies heavily on word and sound play, and his repetition serves humorous and ironic purposes rather than the allegedly poetic ones being introduced at the time. As Riffaterre has shown about intertextual humor in general, humor that is not initially obvious will be signalled by a seeming gratuitousness which arrests the reader’s attention on the vehicle of the humor until he recognizes the joke or the allusion. The Moralités contain instances of all these devices, on levels ranging from individual words and expressions to whole portions of the plot. I shall call attention to them in my discussion of the individual stories to follow.
The theme of imitation inherent in the structure of parody accounts for its many reflexive devices, which work to persuade the reader that it is an imitation of something else and, more precisely, a retelling of an earlier story. The most direct means of accomplishing this consists of providing an interpretative situation within the parody which functions as a model for reading the larger story, much like a play within a play. Attention has been drawn to these by Rose.\textsuperscript{89} Although such reflexive devices should not be equated with parodic signals, they frequently function as such. Clearly a parody within the parody achieves this end most efficiently; if we recognize a parody within the text, we are encouraged to read the text itself as one. The \textit{Moralités} present several instances of this, such as the recitation of Salomé, Hamlet's play, and the bull-fight and procession of \textit{Le Miracle des Roses}, all of which reflect comically on the larger story. Any interpretative situation, parodic or not, will call attention to the status of the text as an imitation and will usually offer us another reader in the story itself with whom we can identify; but it will specifically indicate parody only if it meets the other criteria of the genre, notably the comic element.

Making writing or interpretation an explicit issue in the story also highlights the theme of imitation. With the hero's literary concerns and anxieties over producing an original work, Laforgue's \textit{Hamlet} provides a splendid illustration of this, but the other \textit{Moralités} contain allusions to it as well. Nearly every story includes an artist of some kind; the ending of \textit{Perse et Andromède} openly addresses the issue of interpretation, and at some length; the theme of artistic creation dominates \textit{Pan et la Syrinx}. The intervention of the parodist in the narrative constitutes a third model for the parody; it provides a commentary on the text from within and, when ironic, is particularly appropriate. Laforgue constantly breaks his narrative with parenthetical asides, direct commentary, apostrophe, suspension points, and etceteras. Switching from subjective narration to authorial intervention and back, the narrative focuses attention on its artifice and prevents us from taking it as true, in accordance with the purposes of parody. Finally, a pretension to displaced authorship, creating the illusion that the story is told at a number of removes, operates on a larger scale like a story within the story,
furnishing within the work a retelling (and possibly an inaccurate one) like the parody's. *Don Quixote* is celebrated for its three removes: the Arab historian Cide Hamete Benengeli, the Moor who translated his text, and the author who edits it. In Laforgue, the epilogue to *Persée et Andromède* and the flashback structure of *Lohengrin* and *Le Miracle des Roses* are examples of this device.

The analogy between the parody, as a reading and interpretation, and the experience of the reader himself accounts for a number of typical devices. As Borges notes with respect to *Don Quixote*, these implicate the reader in the parody by confusing the fictional with the real and challenging the distinction between them. For example, the narrator's intervention, so frequent in parody, allegedly distances him from the text but, by allying us with him, it actually incorporates us into the narrative. Moreover, in commenting openly on the story from within, such intervention reflects the metalinguistic character of the parody itself, as I have said above. In Laforgue, the narrator's recurrent intrusions make him simultaneously part of the fiction and part of our own world, whereby we are led to question the status of our reading. Incorporating one of the parodist's own works into the parody, either merely in quotation or, more importantly, as a target text, likewise breaks down the barrier between fiction and reality by placing the author—someone whom we thought to be outside the narrative—inside the fiction; having considered ourselves safely outside it with him, we are consequently led to see that we may be implicated too, as he is. When the author's own work is included as a parodied text, we reason by analogy that the parody itself may at some time receive the same treatment. In *Don Quixote*, for example, Cervantes makes his own *Galatea* one of the books happily saved from the pyre (1, 6). In all the *Moralités*, Laforgue exploits this feature by including verses from his own poems, easily recognizable by their distinctive Laforgueian character (as embodied in the stories themselves) and, in the case of *Pan et la Syrinx*, their free verse.

By the extreme freedom of their adaptations, the *Moralités* provide an outstanding case for an analysis and defense of parody as a creative form in the fullest sense. The metaphor of the parasite, which with its negative connotations has so often been applied to this genre, is decidedly inapposite, for although parody requires
an original text, it does not merely feed on it at the original's expense; rather, in taking the original as its own material, it actually renews it in a different form, perpetuating it instead of depriving it of life. Moreover, in leaving room for, and sometimes even suggesting, subsequent versions within itself, parody directly ensures the continuation of art. It may be preferable to think of it in terms of the old cliché of the book as a child, as did Cervantes in the Prologue to his own great parody. Modifying the cliché, he described his book not as the traditional “child of his brain,” but more precisely as his stepchild, and himself, the editor and parodist, as its stepfather, a father at one remove. To modify this comparison in its turn, we could call parody the child not of an author at all but of a book; we would thus consider the original text a parent and the parody its spirited child, who, in altering and revising the parent's values according to the sensibility of its own generation, nevertheless perpetuates them in a new form, thereby assuring the vitality and viability of a family, or literary, tradition.

The epigraph to the Moralités légendaires as a whole bears witness to the function of parody as revising and renewing such a tradition, for it comes from La Tentation de Saint Antoine of Flaubert:

La reine de Saba à Saint Antoine:
— Ris donc, bel ermite! Ris donc, je suis très gai, tu verras! Je pince de la lyre, je danse comme une abeille et je sais une foule d'histoires toutes à raconter plus divertissantes les unes que les autres.

Gustave Flaubert

An epigraph is particularly appropriate to parody, for it functions in a similar way; it too quotes another work in a different context and gives to the quotation a new meaning, one relevant to the story that it introduces. Separated from the text, and singled out conspicuously at the very beginning, an epigraph signals the incongruity between the literary authority cited and the work to follow, while it simultaneously implies a relation between them, just as the parody does with respect to the parodied work. Moreover, an epigraph calls attention to the reusability of a work for purposes other than its original ones, the very principle on which parody depends. And, as with parody, the particular sense of the quotation as an epigraph derives from its relation to the new context.91
By its privileged position, an epigraph carries considerable authority and claims to have special importance for the work to follow. In the epigraph that introduces the *Moralités*, the obvious allusions to art and, in particular, to storytelling make the Queen of Sheba a figure for the parodist who, literally like her, "knows a host of stories each one more amusing than the other." Her reference to laughter carries the likeness further, as the parodist too will elicit laughter from the reader. But the significance of the epigraph for the volume lies in the fact that, in its new context, it is an inversion of the original situation and is thus ironic; the Queen of Sheba is the arch-temptress and a favorite Decadent image of the Eternal Feminine, to whom the heroes of the *Moralités* can never reconcile themselves. Laforgue thus uses the standard Decadent figure of the *femme fatale*, luring the resistant man to his doom, to represent the parodist in his relation to the reader: art is deception, and storytelling the poet's equivalent to the much-berated deception of the Eternal Feminine. In using the figure parodically, Laforgue makes the epigraph a model for the stories that follow.

Furthermore, since *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* is one of the sacred works of the Decadent canon, Laforgue reveals pointedly both the target of the parody and the parodic process by which it will be transformed. In relating himself to the Queen of Sheba, in particular, the parodist travesties himself according to one of the oldest of comic devices, putting himself in a woman's dress, and thus signals the self-parody that dominates the volume. Finally, this self-parody communicates an essential, unrelenting self-mockery, as Laforgue hereby suggests that he may have no more success with winning the reader, or even entertaining him, than the Queen of Sheba had with her notoriously unresponsive hermit. The epigraph demonstrates some of the most important aspects of parody, and so provides a guide to reading the entire volume.