Conclusion

A study of the *Moralités légendaires* in terms of the theory and conventions of parody has a reciprocally beneficial effect: it elucidates the individual tales and also contributes to the theory itself. In comically transposing legendary and canonical stories into the contemporary world and modernizing them according to the tenets of 1880s Decadence, the *Moralités*, as we have seen, represent the anachronistic and intertextual principle of parody. The typical devices of this genre figure throughout the tales and provide the basis for interpreting them most effectively and comprehensively. Moreover, the *Moralités* are superb examples of the genre, for they realize many of its possibilities and implications, and thus enhance our understanding of parody itself.

The object of Laforgue's parody is modern art of the 1880s, and the ideas, themes, forms, and sensibility associated with it, known to him and his contemporaries as *décadence*. The reexamination of this term in chapter two yields a broader and yet more accurate notion of Decadence than is usually acknowledged. This revised conception has obvious importance in interpreting the *Moralités*, which play freely with the clichés and conventions of Decadence, and in doing so identify them, but it also matters for our understanding of modernism and its late-nineteenth-century origins. From such a study, Decadence emerges as the primary manifestation of the avant-garde during the 1880s, which had begun in the work of Baudelaire and continued in that of Verlaine and Mallarmé. The countless contemporary essays and articles on the
movement attribute to it a number of common themes such as pessimism, individualism, artifice, evasion, mysticism, the unconscious, and an emphasis on stylistic innovation. Significantly, an examination of this material also reveals that parody played an important, and thus far unrecognized, role in the movement, and with reason: it achieves one of the principal objectives of Decadence by realizing its fundamental aesthetic of modernity.

A study of the *Moralités* as parodies contributes much to our understanding of the genre overall and produces especially important, indeed revolutionary, findings in a number of specific areas. First, Laforgue’s stories clarify the relation of the parody to the work parodied: the latter is at once the object of the parody’s distortion and transformation, and the basic constituent of the parody itself. The parodist depends for his own creation on the very work that he alters, and therefore must display toward it an attitude both irreverent and admiring. The *Moralités* indeed express a definite sympathy for the originals with which they play and the Decadence which they mock. They also point up an important qualification about the parody’s target, which need not be the parodied work; the original may be simply a vehicle for the parody, rather than an object of its mockery, and the target something altogether different. Laforgue rewrites a well-known original in order to target contemporary Decadence, including his own work. In most cases, he chooses an original that has some relevance to the Decadent target to make the parody all the more acute. His legendary subjects (Lohengrin, Perseus and Andromeda, Pan and Syrinx, even the medieval story of St. Elizabeth) are appropriate to the rampant use of legend in art of the period and as Dottin has noted, can be found in the work of Gustave Moreau;¹ *Hamlet* plays on the importance of the Hamlet figure and *hamletisme* for the entire nineteenth century; and *Salomé* fits the vogue for Salomés and other *femmes fatales*. In a manner wholly appropriate to parody, Laforgue treats subjects with obvious or potential Decadent associations in order to make fun of Decadence itself.

A second principle of the theory confirmed by the *Moralités* is that a comic element, present in the concept of parody from its first usage, is implied by the distortion essential to it and the deception
of expectations by which it operates. The comic element may vary in degree, but it is nevertheless an essential aspect of the genre. It may imply derision or ridicule, but frequently does not, this effect being weakened constantly by the parody's reliance on the object of its mockery; it more often involves irony, or simply humor and playfulness. The *Moralités* follow the latter pattern, generally treating the Decadent target with irony and the canonical original as an object of parodic play.

Third, the dual status of the parodist as reader and author guarantees a self-reflexive and self-critical aspect to parody. The analogy between the parodist (as a reader) and the reader of the parody ensures that the parody's effect will rebound upon itself: the parodist's treatment of his own reading suggests to us that we treat our reading, the parody, similarly. The *Moralités* call frequent attention to the analogy between parodist and reader by various means, particularly authorial asides. In addition, the tales bring out a formerly unidentified consequence of the self-reflexivity of parody, namely the expressed anticipation, within the parody, of other versions of its story and even the features that these may have. Examples exist in all the tales, evoking other Hamlets, other Salomés, recurrent feasts of the Assumption in *Lohengrin*, a sequel to *Le Miracle des Roses*, and, for Pan, countless future disappointed loves, endless rounds of pursuit and frustration. A more radical consequence of self-reflexivity occurs, as we have seen, in *Persée et Andromède*, with the frame provided by the epilogue, which calls into question not only the preceding story, but also the content of the epilogue itself, and with it the very message of parody as a genre. Parody implies the possibility of self-parody, and by its own logic necessarily calls itself into question. In proposing something new, it must also allow for a rewriting, even a parody, of itself.

Fourth, the theme of imitation central to parody has particular relevance for Laforgue's Decadent target, where the confusion of art and life, or the attempt to make life an art, is a dominant characteristic. By its distortion and transformation of another work, parody calls strict imitation into question and constantly reminds the reader of its consequences. The characters of the *Moralités* all learn the dangers involved in living a life that imitates art, a Decadent life
of artifice. Only by abandoning the effort do they assure for themselves a future, as do the Monster and Andromède, who, in the manner of parody itself, choose not to follow the original story, but transform it and live happily ever after.

Fifth, the intertextual character of parody ensures the self-sufficiency of this genre, which has always been considered dependent on other ones for its interpretation. Parody retains within itself the original (and target) that it simultaneously transforms. The reader therefore does not need to know the parodied work in order to understand the distortion, which will be signalled in the text, usually by the devices of humor. Laforgue's *Miracle des Roses* provides a rare example by which to test this controversial point of the theory, for its model long remained unknown even while it was nevertheless perceived and understood as a parody. The elements of that story which ultimately led me to the discovery of its model actually function as guides to the parody, locating and identifying the distortion.

Lastly, in preserving the original within itself, and providing directly for future or alternative versions of their own stories, the *Moralités* clearly demonstrate that parody indeed fulfills the function first attributed to it by the Formalists: the continuation of literary history and the extension of literary traditions. Parody preserves and transforms, contains within one work both the old and the new, and thus represents in miniature the process of literary history. This suggests the crucial role of parody in the avant-garde: the *Moralités* prove that parody is far from being a conservative force; in mocking the avant-garde, parody makes it into the status quo and forces the creation of even newer forms. The process is consistent with Laforgue's expressed notion of modern art in general, a radical transformation of the past that produces something new, ultimately advancing the evolution of artistic forms and, consequently, the aesthetic sensibility. Along with the obvious case of the parodic *Moralités*, nearly all his other works reflect this aesthetic to some extent, transforming illustrious literary precedents according to the artist's new poetic purposes.

Unlike Laforgue's other works, the *Moralités* drew consistently high praise in the years following their publication in November
The reviews display a number of common themes: the originality and modernity of the book in both language and conception, its poetic quality, the underlying seriousness of its vision, its relation to the artistic sensibility of the 1880s, its gently mocking irony, its themes of love and metaphysical ennui, and its principle of modernization. The stories are labeled “original,” “incomparable,” “unprecedented,” “personal,” even “works of genius,” and are explicitly called “poèmes.”

They are seen as studies in the psychology of modern love, containing, in their irony and pessimism, a sustained philosophy toward life. The main themes of the *Moralités*—love and ennui—reflect the dilemma of the modern sensibility, the inability to escape from one’s solitude by either love or metaphysics, and the equally insistent compulsion to do so.

The modernizing aspect of the *Moralités* dominates the critical articles and constitutes for all reviewers the most original and distinctive feature of the volume. They are perceived to express ironically the sense of the futility of existence that haunts the modern literary imagination. Hamlet, in particular, represents the contemporary mind. He is a Baudelairean figure, with an ennui less royal than that of his Shakespearean predecessor but more significant to the modern reader: “un Hamlet français nettoyé de ses brumes saxonnnes, un Hamlet parisien même, moins déclamatoire, moins désorbité, moins épique que l’autre; par contre, plus aigu de volonté, plus ironique, plus spirituel, plus irrémédiablement et plus consciencieusement à vau-l’eau.”

Ironically, however, it is Camille Mauclair, editor of the first—imperfect—edition of Laforgue’s “complete” works, who probably summed up best the quality and effect of the *Moralités* as parodies:

Les *Moralités légendaires* demeurent un monument singulier et unique dans notre littérature . . . l’esprit philosophique de Jules Laforgue allait bien plus loin que le goût même de parodier . . . L’anachronisme appliqué à la légende en relie simplement le sens moral à notre vie; et la déformation n’en a pas lieu pour la seule facilitation du comique . . . elle commente, elle augmente, elle permet à l’écrivain une création originale.

Like the others, Mauclair calls attention to the function of anachronism and to the relation of the stories to modern life. But in
paying tribute to the transformative nature of Laforgue's parody, he also suggests the achievement of the *Moralités*, which indeed brilliantly realize the creative implications of parody, and affirm in this genre the originality that Laforgue required of all true art.