

The Owl in Winter: The Final *Tornada* of Marcabru's Pastourelle "L'autrier jost'una sebissa"*

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Marcabru's shepherdess in "L'autrier jost'una sebissa" ("The other day beside a hedge") ends her debate with the lecherous knight by offering a cryptic sentence about manna, an owl, and a person with a painting — topics which appear to have nothing to do with the logical sequence of the debate:

“Don, lo cavecs nos aüra
que tals bad'en la penchura —
qu'autre n'espera la mayna.”

[“Sir, the owl shows us
That some people gape at a painting —
While others hope for manna from heaven.”]¹

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1 Marcabru, song XXX: "L'autrier," 88-90. Unless otherwise noted, the text and translation are taken from Paden, *The Medieval Pastourelle*, 36-41, which was chosen mainly on the strength of his translation. Paden follows the practice of most editors in basing his text on the manuscripts of the CR tradition. In contrast, *Marcabru: A Critical Edition* by Gaunt, Harvey, and Paterson departs from precedent and chooses MS a¹ as the base text for song XXX. The editors propose that a¹ represents an "early stage in the poem's transmission," though their evidence for this assumption is slim; Gaunt et al., eds., *Marcabru: A Critical Edition*, 375. (Franchi's version in *Pastorelle occitane* follows Gaunt's edition, but with modifications.) The argument presented here would be substantially the same had I followed Gaunt et al., as I do when citing Marcabru's other songs. For bibliographical details on all *chansonniers* manuscripts containing poems attributed to Marcabru, see Gaunt et al., eds., *Marcabru: A Critical Edition*, 6-8.

Formally, her speech is a *tornada*, a shorter stanza that repeats the metrical scheme of the last part (*cauda*) of the previous stanza (*cobla*). The shepherdess fulfils the metrical expectations perfectly, but the strong sense of formal closure creates some tension with the enigma she seems to introduce suddenly at the end. Rhetorically, a *tornada* is supposed to artfully reveal the rest of the poem, not to introduce new problems: normally, “it was here that the whole song, with its numerous diversions and digressions, was finally pulled into focus.”² Two *tornadas*, one for each speaker, conclude “L’autrier.” The knight’s, a final abrupt turn from false praise to blame, presents no obvious interpretive difficulties. The knight brings his narrative into focus with sour grapes — the shepherdess is worthless, and good riddance:

“Belha, de vostra figura
non vi outra pus tafura
ni de son cor pus trefayna.”

[“Pretty one, I have never seen
A more rascally girl with a face like yours,
Or with a more faithless heart.”]³

The shepherdess’s *tornada*, as obscure as the knight’s is straightforward, concludes the closing arguments and leaves the audience to decide who won. The verdict offered here finds for the shepherdess.

The cryptic surface of the shepherdess’s *tornada* conceals a cohesive and intricately figurative *sententia* that binds up the poem. The prophetic owl, entirely at home in the physical and rhetorical setting of the poem, aligns with both the shepherdess and Marcabru when it speaks with final authority about *manna* and *penchura*, terms fraught with symbolic instruction for the knight and others like him. This reading of the shepherdess’s *tornada* provides further support for the view that Marcabru is speaking through the shepherdess, not the knight,⁴ and confirms the more general

2 Levin, “Sweet, New Endings,” 297. For a general discussion of the pastourelle *tornada*, see Franchi, *Trobei pastora*, 234-37.

3 Marcabru, “L’autrier,” 85-87.

4 Argued notably by Fantazzi, “Marcabru’s *Pastourelle*”; and Pasero, “Pastora contro cavaliere.” On the other hand, the contrast between the shepherdess’s obscurity and the knight’s clarity convinces Cholakian that Marcabru gives the shepherdess a display of female obscurity as a foil for the privileged rational discourse of the male knight, whose oppressive behaviour aligns with the male poet’s position; Cholakian, *The Troubadour Lyric*, 66-75. Léglu, however, notes that “It could be argued that this genre owes its success to the very task of identifying who the *pastora* [...] is, and who is speaking through her”; Léglu, “Identifying the *toza*,” 139.

claim that "the romantic love story [. . .] was in fact less rigidly gendered in its medieval beginnings than we have been led to believe."⁵ It is remarkable that already in the early twelfth century, in the first "classical pastourelle,"⁶ when the gendered stereotypes of pastourelle seduction had not yet become canonical and "quite insipid by comparison,"⁷ one finds a prophetic fictive heroine who encounters the idealized courtly world and unmasks the misogynistic and hierarchical paradigms behind a knight's polite but hypocritical speech to a peasant girl.

The knight's last words round back to his disparaging description of the shepherdess at the beginning of the poem, where with a few strokes Marcabru creates the ethical landscape in which the debate occurs.⁸ The most powerful detail, the curious word *sebissa* in the knight's first line, at once fixes the setting and discloses the knight's condescending view of the girl he meets there: "L'autrier jost'una sebissa / trobey pastora mestissa" (The other day beside a hedge / I found a half-breed shepherdess).⁹ *Sebissa*, attested only here in *Lexique roman*,¹⁰ has no exact translation into modern English. "Hedge" is too narrow; today the word commonly denotes a live planting, while *sebissa* is a more general term from Latin *saepes*, "anything planted or erected to form a surrounding barrier; a hedge, fence, etc."¹¹ A *sebissa* might denote any sort of rustic improvisation for confining animals; William Paden translates it as "hedge" but might just as well have used "fence" or "pen." Paden's choice may reflect the influence of later pastourelle, in which the shepherdess is usually found in an unambiguously green and leafy *locus amoenus*. Marcabru's less lovely *sebissa* is cognate to *sebenc*, "bastard" (from *saepes* + the Germanic suffix *-inc/-ing*, denoting origin or affiliation).¹² Thus, a bastard is a "hedgling," someone who came from where the livestock is kept.

5 Burns, "Courtly Love," 28.

6 For a definition of the classical pastourelle that Marcabru initiated with this song, see Paden, *The Medieval Pastourelle*, ix. For a full discussion of the various definitions of the pastourelle, see Franchi, *Pastourelle occitane*, 13-39. Lazzarini makes the intriguing suggestion that Marcabru's original conception was inspired by the Song of Songs and its allegorical interpretations; Lazzarini, "La trasmutazione insensibile," 362-63 n. 323.

7 Fantazzi, "Marcabru's Pastourelle," 401.

8 For more on ethical place descriptions, see Koelb, *The Poetics of Description*, 36-42.

9 Marcabru, "L'autrier," 1-2.

10 That *sebissa* is a hapax legomenon is confirmed by Ricketts, *Concordance (COM1)*.

11 *Oxford Latin Dictionary*.

12 Cf. Paden, *Introduction*, 315. Adams discusses the *-enc* suffix in detail, paying particular attention to the suggestion that in some words *-enc* may derive from pre-Germanic *-inco* rather than Germanic *-ing*; he does not mention *sebenc*. Adams, *Word Formation*, 178-80.

Accordingly, the knight later tries to impress the girl by suggesting that she is the illegitimate daughter of a fine knight like himself. By translating *mestissa* as “half-breed,” Paden adroitly conveys the knight’s crude insinuation about her parentage: where else but near a *sebissa* would one find a half-breed *sebenc* like her? The unexpected rhyme — ordinary *mestissa* with a word perhaps coined for the occasion — heavily marks the opening description. If *sebissa* is as rare as the evidence suggests, the knight’s clever jingle on *-issa* produces the first off-colour joke in the song. The joke turns out to be at his own expense, for by the time the debaters deliver their final *tornadas*, the shepherdess has manoeuvred the knight into clearly exposing his rhetorical and moral pretensions to the discerning members of the audience, while he himself remains unaware of the ways in which his words have both revealed his character and cost him the debate.

Just as the knight’s *tornada* displays his character so the girl’s reply displays hers. Paden’s translation of the shepherdess’s *tornada*, though it communicates the basic point with admirable concision, obscures some of the more subtle features of Marcabru’s rhetoric. It is significant, for example, that Marcabru’s song ends simply with “mayna,” not “manna from heaven” (as in the translation), and that in the last two lines both “mayna” and “penchura” are given a definite article. It is not *a* painting that is gaped at but *the* painting.¹³ The distinction matters because the definite article helps point up the contrast between the painted surface decoration of a thing (one meaning of Latin *pictura*) and the spiritual or carnal “mayna” that it might contain. The word *tals* could indeed be translated as “some people,” but it is worth noting that it refers quite specifically to “such a one,” with the implication “such a one as you, Sir.” The pronoun *nos* in the first line is of course “us,” but in this case it would probably not be appropriate to assume the impersonal “us” that Marcabru occasionally employs in other songs, with its implication of “the community at large.” It is more common for *nos* to refer to the speaker and the listener, and the *tornada* actually has far more bite if the audience understands the girl to be drawing particular attention to the two persons of the colloquy, “you, the knight, and me, the shepherdess.” Even the apparently straightforward *aiura* implies more than the modern English verb “augurs,” which has come to mean little more than “signals” or (as in Paden’s translation) “shows.” As used here, the word stresses the owl’s vatic function and actually warns

13 For a discussion of the use and function of the article in Old Occitan, see Jensen, *The Syntax of Medieval Occitan*, 61-82.

the reader that the owl's prophetic utterances, like those of the ancient oracles, are likely to be cryptic. One can expect the discourse of a prophetic bird to have the tone of a proverb or a figurative *sententia* that demands interpretation and application.

The sources of Marcabru's obscurity are daunting: innovative and idiosyncratic language (including many hapax legomena such as *sebissa*) and "words drawn from an enormous variety of fields: religious, courtly, scholastic, popular, proverbial and others."¹⁴ The basic lexical problems are difficult enough, but Marcabru's proverbial discourse poses even greater interpretive challenges since proverbs can be notoriously difficult to detect, let alone interpret, even by native speakers of the language.¹⁵ Medieval writers further challenge their audiences by using "proverb' indiscriminately to refer to any *sententia* from the Classics, the Bible, the Church Fathers," and even to refer to axioms invented by themselves.¹⁶ It is not surprising that some nine hundred years later, it is often impossible to decide whether Marcabru is quoting or alluding to a proverb or even writing a new one.

The pattern of citing, alluding to, or improvising proverbs is established very early in the poem. In nearly every interchange between the knight and the shepherdess, the knight conceals his sexual intentions under a cloak of courtly gallantry, and the shepherdess exposes his hypocrisy with a proverbial retort that plays on his (usually bungled) rhetoric. When the knight offers the girl his "companionship," for example, he employs language that he may intend as merely factual but that Marcabru's audience would understand as courtly, even piously sententious: "destouz me suy de la via" (I have turned off the road [or, from the way]), he says to her, intending to present himself as a good Samaritan, but unaware that he has also alluded to the familiar biblical *topos* of turning away from the spiritual path. An Old Occitan pun on *via*, meaning both "way" and "life," strengthens the potential metaphor of eternal life. He completes this "good Samaritan" turn with yet another unintended comment on his carnality when he suggests that she cannot "pasturgar tanta bestia" (pasture so much

14 Harvey, *The Troubadour Marcabru*, 2, citing Roncaglia, "Per un'edizione," 48.

15 Pfeffer, *Proverbs*, 1.

16 Goddard, "Marcabru," 55-56. For the impact of Marcabru's elementary Latin schooling on his proverbial discourse, see Goddard, "Marcabru," 64-65. Paraphrasing and illustrating proverbs had been an elementary exercise since antiquity. When Quintilian refers to the Greek exercise called *gnome* ("common saying" or "aphorism"), he translates it as *sententia*; Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 1.9.3.

livestock) without “pareil-paria” (suitable companionship).¹⁷ The knight’s near-rhyme *bestia* (literally “livestock”) rhymes as *ía*, an abstract suffix.¹⁸ Neologistic *bestía* thus sounds like an abstract noun meaning something like “beastliness” and creates an ironically paronomastic play on *bestia/bestía*, just when the knight offers his dubious companionship.

Addressing him with undeserved respect as “Senher,” the shepherdess replies, “La vostra parelhairia, / [. . .] / lay on se tanh si s’estia” (As for your companionship, / [. . .] / Let it stay where it belongs).¹⁹ Her neologistic *parelhairia* mimics and mocks the ungrammatical combination of masculine *pareil* with feminine *paria* in the “pareil-paria” of his illicit proposal. Several critics have discussed *pareil-paria* as a clumsily figurative “let’s get together” insinuation,²⁰ but the inappropriate grammatical conjunction of masculine and feminine also parodies union: the broken grammatical rule, an emblem of the knight’s false companionship, figures his broken thinking and broken moral code.²¹ In lines that sound proverbial but do not appear in any of the standard proverb collections,²² the shepherdess treats his “companionship” as an unwelcome physical thing that must stay where it belongs, in the “bailia” (bailiwick) of his only outwardly noble mistress: “que tals la cuj’en bailia / tener, no n’a mas l’ufayna” (For someone thinks she has it / In her power who only has the show).²³

17 Marcabru, “L’autrier,” 16 and 20-21; my translation. For “pareil-paria” I follow Gaunt et al., eds., *Marcabru: A Critical Edition*, which offers the more frequently attested reading. Paden subsequently adopted essentially this reading in the version he included in *Introduction*, 116-22. See commentary on Marcabru, “L’autrier,” 19, in Gaunt et al., eds., *Marcabru: A Critical Edition*, 385.

18 Paden, *Introduction*, 120.

19 Marcabru, “L’autrier,” 24-26.

20 See commentary on Marcabru, “L’autrier,” 24, in Gaunt et al., eds., *Marcabru: A Critical Edition*, 385.

21 Marcabru’s grammatical figuration is akin to the rhetorical practice of using “grammatical terms to express sexual ideas [. . .] Grammar was very much to the fore in the twelfth century and attempts were made to use it in the interpretation of Scripture and the explanation of the theology”; Sheridan, trans., *The Plaint of Nature* by Alan of Lille, 68 n. 3. In *De planctu naturae* “grammatical constructions, gender and agreement, are pressed into service to reflect the pervading abnormality. [. . .] Sexual abuses are depicted [. . .] in terms of grammatical and rhetorical indecorum”; Piehler, *The Visionary Landscape*, 63-64.

22 Pfeffer, *Proverbs*, 38.

23 Marcabru, “L’autrier,” 27-28. The translation of these lines by Gaunt et al. in *Marcabru: A Critical Edition* brings out more clearly that the feudal rhetoric of “bailia” and “tener” implies a noble “tals” (“someone”): “for she who thinks she is the mistress of it has nothing more than the vain illusion of it.”

The shepherdess's improvised proverb parodies lines from Guilhem de Peitieu's "Ab la dolchor," a licentious poem which Marcabru would have particularly scorned: "Que tal se van d'amor gaban; / Nos n'avem la pessa e-l coutel" (That such people are [just] bragging about love; / We have the piece [of bread or meat?] and the knife for it).²⁴ As in Guilhem's lines, the knight's metaphor of sex as bread or food becomes linked to the opposition between appearance and reality figured by the contrast between the painting and the manna in the final *tornada*. This rhetorical strategy, founded on actual and improvised proverbs, provides the shepherdess with access to a valuable store of authoritative discourse that equalizes the otherwise vastly unequal power relation between her and the knight. Her creative improvisation carries that discourse forward and makes it concretely effective in the here and now.

By voicing "his doctrinal convictions in the *persona* of the shepherdess,"²⁵ Marcabru contributes to the tradition of the wise and authoritative medieval lady-rhetorician exemplified by Boethius's Lady Philosophy and Alan of Lille's Lady Nature. Unlike her allegorical analogues, however, Marcabru's "lady" is as human and vulnerable as she is wise.²⁶ Because Marcabru opposes a courtly society that invokes the authority of natural processes and the positive rhetoric of *cortezia*, *pretz*, *valor* and so forth to travesty the moral order governed by true love, "de joi cima e rracina [*sic*]" (the root and branch of joy),²⁷ the pastora who speaks "segon natura" (according to nature) is necessarily not of that decadent world.

Marcabru's *trobar naturau* (natural poetry), "the art of composing according to an understanding of what is natural and unnatural"²⁸ — that is, what is (or is not) in harmony with nature, "segon natura et estiers"²⁹ — follows the Augustinian tradition.

24 Guilhem, "Ab la dolchor," 29-30.

25 Fantazzi, "Marcabru's *Pastourelle*," 388. See also Topsfield, *Troubadours and Love*, 91; Harvey, *The Troubadour Marcabru*, 125-26. For a detailed argument aligning the knight of the poem with Guilhem, see Pasero, "Pastora contro cavaliere."

26 In this respect, the fully human pastora is closer to Alan's Lady Nature, who, as Piehler notes, "does not merely represent or teach a system of abstract ideals, but becomes something more [...] Christ-like in conception [than Lady Philosophy]: one who comes down to earth, rebukes and pleads with sinners, suffers ignominy at the hands of wicked men, as the torn robe bears witness"; Piehler, *The Visionary Landscape*, 55.

27 Marcabru, XXXVII.27; my translation.

28 Paterson, *Troubadours and Eloquence*, 40-41. The phrase "trobar naturau" occurs at Marcabru, XXXIII.7.

29 Marcabru, XLI.5.

The two poles of Augustine's rhetorical system, *caritas*, "the motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of God," and *cupiditas*, "the motion of the soul toward the enjoyment, not on account of God, of [. . .] any corporal thing,"³⁰ provide the intellectual orientation for Marcabru's dialectical poetics of true and false love, whole and broken thinking, chaste winter and licentious spring.³¹ Natural poetry is as rhetorically whole as nature is physically whole: nobody "pot un mot raire" (can erase a word), says Marcabru.³²

Every word counts, each carrying an exceptionally heavy burden of significance. Hence, "obscure" remains one of the adjectives most frequently used to describe Marcabru's dense and hermetic compositions. Marcabru, however, "did not seek obscurity for its own sake but rather called upon and counted upon the exegetical abilities of an alert, attentive and knowledgeable public."³³ He considers "savi" (wise) "celui qu'e mon chan devina / cho que chascus moz declina" (the man who can divine in my song what each word means).³⁴ His unfolding *razos* (theme) is inherently complex; he cannot make it clearer: "qu'eu meteis sui en erranza / d'esclazir paraula escura" (for I myself have difficulty clarifying an obscure parable).³⁵ The use of the word *paraula* — a late popular Latin form of *parabola*,³⁶ whose semantic field includes not only "parable" but also "word," "speech," and "discourse" — suggests that Marcabru's writing has the polysemantic texture and rich figuration of a biblical parable, the favoured genre of Christ's sermons and of much medieval devotional literature. The larger rhetorical pattern (*savi, divina, paraula*) drives home the point that meaning is not transparent; wise readers divine it.

With all these considerations in mind, then, one might translate (and thereby begin to interpret) the shepherdess's *tornada* this way: "Sir, the owl [cryptically]

30 "motum animi ad fruendum Deo" and "motum animi ad fruendum [. . .] quolibet corpore non propter Deum"; Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 3.10; my translation. See Spence, "Rhetoric and Hermeneutics," 166; and Harvey, *The Troubadour Marcabru*, 23. The *Doctrina Christiana* provides "a model for the communication of all textual truths — profane as well as sublime — throughout the Middle Ages"; Spence, *Rhetorics of Reason*, 95.

31 In song XIX, Marcabru aligns the two ways, the whole and the broken, with true and false love. In song XXXIII, he sets natural poetry against the corrupt production of others by contrasting spring with winter. For Marcabru's seasonal topics, see Topsfield, *Troubadours and Love*, 75-77.

32 Marcabru, IX.4.

33 Harvey, *The Troubadour Marcabru*, 3.

34 Marcabru, XXXVII.2-3.

35 Marcabru, XXXVII.5-6; my translation.

36 *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis*, s.v. "paraula."

augurs to [the two of] us that such a person [as you] gapes at the [mere] painted [surface], while another [one of us, namely, me] hopes for the [genuine] manna [hidden underneath]." Such a translation, though admittedly far less graceful than Paden's, indicates the intellectual affiliation of the shepherdess with a well established Latin *parabola* of spiritual sustenance and of the hermeneutic labour required to uncover it, specifically Augustine's similitude of the kernel and the husk, which occurs in his commentary on the miracle of the loaves and fishes:³⁷

You know that barley is formed in such a way that it is very difficult to get at its kernel; for the kernel [*medulla*] is covered in a coating of husk [*tegmine paleae*], with the husk itself adhering tenaciously, so that it can be stripped off only with labour. Such is the letter of the Old Testament, shut up in a covering of carnal sacraments [*vestita tegminibus carnalium sacramentorum*]: and yet, once we get at its kernel, it feeds and satisfies us.³⁸

Augustine's "medulla" (kernel) is a version of manna because it spiritually feeds and satisfies the members of God's community, just as the manna of Exodus physically sustained the children of Israel in the Sinai desert. Jesus retold the story of the manna in the desert when he explained the miracle of the loaves and identified himself as the bread of eternal life, "ego sum panis vitae."³⁹ Though the knight carefully manipulates his rhetoric to cloak his intention, he is bent on purely carnal pursuits. His entire discourse is essentially shut up in a covering of "carnal sacraments" (as Augustine put it), whereas the lowly *vilayna* can see through to the manna, the genuine kernel of the matter.

At first glance, however, the reader may have trouble seeing the kernel. The owl, the person gaping at the painting, and the manna appear unconnected. A manuscript

37 John 6:1-14. Marcabru and his audience could have become acquainted with the figure of the kernel and the husk from the pulpit, if not directly from its source in Augustine. Thousands of clerics needed to offer homilies following the reading of the gospel of John, and Augustine's commentary provided excellent source material. That the figure was well established by the mid-twelfth century is suggested by a passage in Alan of Lille's *De planctu naturae*: "Quamuis enim plerique auctores sub integumentali inuolucro aenigmatum, eius [Cupidinis] naturam depinxerint, tamen nulla certitudinis nobis reliquere uestigia" (VIII.252-54); "Although many authors have given an outline, concealed in symbols, of his [Desire's] enigmatic nature, yet they have left us nothing that we can follow with certainty" (*The Complaint of Nature*, trans. Sheridan, 147).

38 Augustine, *In Evangelium Ioannis*, Tractatus 24. I thank Clayton Koelb for the use of his unpublished translation.

39 John 6:31-35.

preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale (T) has two additional lines at the end, possibly added by a helpful scribe: “Gies non gara la pintura / cel ce n’espera la mana” (the one who hopes for the manna doesn’t pay attention to the painting at all).⁴⁰ Since the additional lines stand apart from the formal structure of the song and add nothing substantive, most editors reject them; but if indeed they are a kind of scribal gloss, they give evidence of the *tornada*’s complexity. Apparently even early readers felt the need for some supplementary information in order to grasp the shepherdess’s daunting references to the painting and manna and to grasp the relationship between them.

The final *tornada*, a *paraula escura* in every sense, binds up the poem with an improvised proverb whose key terms — the owl, the manna, and the painting — are all polysemantic. In the phrase “bad’en la penchura,” for example, the shepherdess puns on the two meanings of *penchura/peintura* (both “painting” and “hair”)⁴¹ and thus circles back to a passage early in the poem in which she referred not merely to her hair but to its rearrangement by the wind (through the verb *erissar*, “to dishevel”): “pauc m’o pretz si-l vens m’erissa, / qu’alegreta suy e sayna” (I don’t really care if the wind blows my hair, / For I am cheerful and healthy).⁴² A parallel instance occurs in “Auias de chan” (“Hear how this song”), where Marcabru explicitly uses *penchura* in both senses; both times the word, whether “hair” or “painting,” is a metaphor for an attractive illusion. The first “penchura” means “painting.” It occurs in a proverbial expression similar to the shepherdess’s: “e li meillor badon ves la penchura” (and the best gapw at a vain semblance).⁴³ Roncaglia “links this proverbial expression [. . .] with ecclesiastical disapproval of the popular tendency to consider pictorial representations

40 Paden, *Introduction*, 120; my translation. Given that all the other witnesses agree on their absence, it seems unlikely that these lines from T were copied from a very early manuscript and thus reflect Marcabru’s original intention. Gaunt calls T “too corrupt to be useful”; Gaunt et al., eds., *Marcabru: A Critical Edition*, 375. Although such a high degree of corruption undermines any claim to authenticity which this manuscript may have, it renders more plausible the assumption of scribal intervention to explain the obscurity.

41 *Penchura* (“picture”) derives from the Latin *pictura*, by way of the intermediate *pinctura*, while the exactly homophonic *penchura* (“head of hair”) is formed on the Occitan noun *penche* (“comb”); Adams, *Word-Formation*, 263. The details of the derivation are less important here than the existence of the homophones.

42 Marcabru, “L’autrier,” 13-14.

43 Marcabru, IX.10. The translations provided by Gaunt et al. in *Marcabru: A Critical Edition* often efface Marcabru’s concrete diction, as in this interpretation of “penchura” as “vain semblance.”

as magical equivalents of reality, and [. . .] points to the contemporary Cistercian debate on this issue."⁴⁴ Augustine also contrasts pictures and words in the same tractate which includes his commentary on the miracle of the loaves cited above: "Aliter enim videtur pictura, aliter videntur litterae" (To look at a picture is not the same as to look at letters).⁴⁵ He argues that seeing a picture brings an immediate understanding of all there is, but seeing letters still leaves much work to be done before their import is fully understood. Augustine explicitly contrasts the process of extracting the nourishment contained in barley/bread/manna/scripture through the difficult labour of interpretation with what he takes to be a simple act of looking at a painting. It is this very same contrast between painting and manna that informs the climax of the shepherdess's *tornada*.

Equally important, however, is "hair," the other meaning of *penchura* (sometimes spelled *peintura*): "De malvestat los gart Sanct' Escriptura / que no lur fassa *cuf*, floquet ni *peintura*" (May the Holy Scripture protect them from evil, that it may not lead them to affect quiffs, fancy curls [spikes, tufts?] and artful combing).⁴⁶ When the shepherdess, whose wind-blown hair attracted the knight's attention, speaks of "penchura," the pun gives her image-worship proverb the same double significance that the word carries in song IX. Her "penchura," with its mimicking *-ura* rhyme, comprehensively counters the "figura" of the knight's *tornada*. His "figura" refers to her deceptive appearance. Significantly, the only verb in his *tornada* is "to see": after studiously gaping at the shepherdess, the knight is shocked to discover at last that a beautiful "figura" masks a "tafura,"⁴⁷ a female crook. Yet his ironically misguided revelation concerning the mismatch of appearance and reality actually precipitates *his* unmasking, not hers. For *figura* not only means "figure," "body," or "manner" but is, of course, a venerable Latin rhetorical and aesthetic term. The Old Occitan verb *figurar* means "to form, figure, represent, depict," and the adjective *figurat* means "allegorical." The shepherdess recognizes that the physical *figura* perceived and desired by the knight — her face, hair, body, and joyful manner — is illusory and idolatrous *penchura* in an abstract, rhetorical sense.

44 Cited by Gaunt et al., eds., *Marcabru: A Critical Edition*, 139, in their commentary on IX.10.

45 Augustine, *In Evangelium Ioannis*, Tractatus 24; my translation.

46 Marcabru, IX.33-34.

47 The manuscripts differ on whether he calls her "toza" or "belha" in his *tornada*. Paden chooses "belha," which increases the irony of the appearance vs. reality insult.

The painting/hair expression has the same proverbial feel as “qu’autre n’espera la mayna.”⁴⁸ Manna — God’s gift of food to the Israelites in the desert, typologically prefiguring the bread of eternal life — became among the troubadours a metaphor for carnal delight.⁴⁹ But Marcabru understands this carnal bread as a reading *in malo*, as Augustine teaches with regard to reading the bread of scripture: “In bono panis: *Ego sum panis vivus qui de caelo descendi*, in malo panis: *Panes occultos libenter edite*” (Bread is used in a good sense in ‘I am the living bread which came down from heaven,’ but in a bad sense in ‘hidden bread is more pleasant’).⁵⁰ Just as he does with many other conventions of troubadour poetry, Marcabru plays allusively and ironically on the conventional troubadour association of bread with sex. The shepherdess’s “mayna” thus echoes and simultaneously undercuts a similar metaphor of sex as food that was implicit in one of her earlier rejoinders. She had rebuked the knight in a well attested Occitan proverb:⁵¹

“per so n’auretz per soudada
al partir ‘Bada, folh, bada!’
e la muz’a meliayna!”

[“That you will get in recompense
When you depart, ‘Gape, fool, gape!’
And an idle wait at noon!”]⁵²

If it were not clear from other sources that “Bada, folh, bada!’ / e la muz’a meliayna” is proverbial, these lines might well seem cryptic; the diction seems too obliquely related to the dialogue and does not translate smoothly into an equivalent modern proverb. *Meliayna* probably implies the midday meal, as well as the siesta that follows; the gist of the proverb is that a fool indulges unwarranted expectations, like someone waiting for a meal (or manna) when plainly none is on offer. The shepherdess’s particular application of the proverb implies a metonymy of food, siesta, and sex in the word *meliayna*. Rhetorically, the issues are joined early on: the shepherdess

48 Marcabru, “L’autrier,” 90. Cnyrim regards lines 89-90 as proverbial; see Pfeffer, *Proverbs*, 40, citing Cnyrim, *Sprichwörter*, 494.

49 Gaunt et al., eds., *Marcabru: A Critical Edition*, 526-27.

50 Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 3.25; *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. Robertson, 100. The bread *in bono* is from John 6:51, and the bread *in malo* is the harlot’s solicitation at Proverbs 9:17.

51 Pfeffer, *Proverbs*, 38.

52 Marcabru, “L’autrier,” 54-56.

counters the knight, his immorality, and the poetic conventions that support it — his broken thinking — with the whole thinking of proverbial wisdom. The final line insinuates that the knight will get neither what he desires — illicit sex — nor the true manna that he *ought* to desire, the eternal life or "via" he has turned away from. He waits for both in vain.⁵³

The shepherdess attributes the augury concerning the *mayna* and the *penchura* to "lo cavecs," the owl. The bird is her third and last authority, after she has cited, in her final *cobla*, both the wisdom of *drechura* (righteousness) and that of the ancients. The owl's religious proverbs reprise and sum up the shepherdess's — and Marcabru's — argument against the knight; she quotes him to clinch her case. But the shepherdess's attribution suggests much more, for she invests the owl with vatic authority by having him not merely speak but augur ("aüra") the summation to the knight.

That the shepherdess should bring the love debate to an end by appealing to a vatic owl calls to mind the Middle English poem "The Owl and the Nightingale," where an owl with the gift of prophecy chastises a nightingale for encouraging lust and promiscuity. Nightingales often appear in love poetry as bearers of loving messages, and indeed the bird-messenger motif occurs in some of Marcabru's songs — the poet as the sweetly singing love-bird bearing an ardent message for the lady — but, as in the shepherdess's *tornada*, the bird and its message are never without irony, parody, or outright condemnation of the conventional erotic topics. In song XXVI, for example, a squawking starling tries to persuade a fickle lady to mend the error of her ways.⁵⁴ In "L'autrier," however, the message-bearing bird is neither a nightingale nor a starling but an owl.

As Karen Gasser explains in her study of "The Owl and the Nightingale," the owl is associated with both positive and negative values in European folklore, religion, and literature, which give it a wide potential range of moral significations: the owl can be a dirty bird of nasty habits and a portent of evil but also an emblem of wisdom and even a type of Christ. "In folklore, owls are decidedly negative," but literature represents the bird as "more complicated, even contradictory, in nature. Here [in "The Owl and the Nightingale"] the owl's reputed ill omen becomes offset by a renown for

53 Cf. the reference to manna in song XLII: the gentle breeze turns out to be a miasma produced by those who have corrupted "manna dreicha" (true manna, XLII.22). The same song contrasts manna and gaping at illusion (XLII.15-23), just as the shepherdess's *tornada* does.

54 For more on the *estornel* (starling) poems XXV and XXVI, see Harvey, *The Troubadour Marcabru*, 154-93.

wisdom.”⁵⁵ The shepherdess’s owl has been glossed as “a figure of folk wisdom,”⁵⁶ and this is certainly part of its significance. For quoting an auguring owl with approval and equanimity, as if the bird were her familiar, places the shepherdess in an iconographic tradition which links wisdom (and Sapiientia personified) to the owl, a tradition at least as old as ancient Greek coins with Athena on one side and the owl on the other. In painting, this association is often figured by an owl perched atop a stack of books.⁵⁷ Religious lore further complicates the contradiction found in folklore and literature:

The Bible [. . .] almost universally portrays owls as spiritually unclean because physically unclean, yet Psalm 101:7-8 likens owls to monks. The medieval theologian Hugh of St. Victor, who glosses that reference in Latin, extends the owl’s monkish traits to Christlike significance. [. . .] [The owl in “The Owl and the Nightingale” compares] herself with Christ: killed by those she seeks to help, hung upon a *rodde* (“rood,” or “cross” — 1646), and dying for the welfare of her attackers.⁵⁸

Marcabru, who was familiar with Hugh of St. Victor, would also have been familiar with the association of the owl with Jesus.⁵⁹

A glance at other Marcabrunian owls shows how Marcabru plays on the positive and negative traditions. In song XXI the owl appears in spring as an honest bird of “votz sana” (good, true voice).⁶⁰ Both the owl and the normally homely frog mate according to love and natural order. Marcabru affectionately introduces these unglamorous creatures, not the pretty birds of conventional reverdie, to make his moral point:

Sesta creatura vana
d’amor s’apareilla;
lor jois sec la via plana
e:l nostre bruzilla,

55 Gasser, *Resolution*, 11. For an interpretation based solely on the negative image in folklore, see Meneghetti, “Una *serrana*,” 189-91.

56 Paden, *Introduction*, 121.

57 Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects*, 231.

58 Gasser, *Resolution*, 12. The “motif of owl [*sic*] mobbed by little birds was a favourite with misericord carvers”; Hume, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, 19. Hume’s cover design is based on such a misericord from Norwich Cathedral.

59 See Fantazzi, “Marcabru’s *Pastourelle*,” 399 n. 26, citing Roncaglia, ““Trobar clus,”” 53-55.

60 Marcabru, XXI.7-12.

quar nos, qui plus pot, enguana,
per c'usquex buzilla.

[These simple creatures pair up for love; their joy follows the smooth path, while ours stumbles, for each one of us deceives as much as he can and gets in a mess.]⁶¹

Here the owl is a moral exemplum. When the dirty bird of folklore makes a mess, it accords with nature; the human moral mess does not.

The owl also appears in another spring song, a poem about poetry which plays on the idea of the poet himself as a self-contradictory owl: a dirty bird with perhaps some redeeming social value. After admitting that he enjoys the songbirds of spring, the poet dissociates himself from them — "mais eu trop miels qe negus" (but I compose [songs] better than any of them)⁶² — before fully deflating the spring *incipit* by turning to a serious meditation on morals. At first the poet claims that his learning distances him from the moral chaos. He has learned "contra musart no mus" (not to gape at the gapers),⁶³ those who succumb to love's illusions; attending too closely to wickedness may be self-polluting:

Car s'avole(n)za recoinda
a semblan del *porc-marín*;
per q'ieu seghoríu mo vezin,
e no vueil ges de mi bonda
so don hom m'apel caüs.

[For he lives [wallows] in his own ordure in the manner of the *porc-marín*; that is why I treat my neighbour with respect, and I do not want the gawper to murmur anything about me whereby people might call me an 'owl.']*⁶⁴

Gaunt, Harvey, and Paterson gloss these lines as referring to the negative tradition associated with the owl: "Marcabru [. . .] does not want to get a name as a lover of filth and a creature of ill-omen."⁶⁵ This reading suits the immediate context but stops short of providing the full significance of being called "owl" in this poem. For as soon

61 Marcabru, XXI.13-18.

62 Marcabru, XII.5.

63 Marcabru, XII.10; my translation.

64 Marcabru, XII.11-15. The *porc-marín* is a small cetacean reputed to burrow for food in the sea-bed; see Gaunt et al., eds., *Marcabru: A Critical Edition*, 172, commentary on line 12.

65 Gaunt et al., eds., *Marcabru: A Critical Edition*, 173-74.

as he disavows owliness, Marcabru observes that it is futile to try to hide filth; it exhibits itself: “Ni non cug mai qe-s resconda” (Nor do I think that wickedness will ever hide itself).⁶⁶ The futility of trying to hide wickedness gives the poet a pretext for vividly exposing it in an obscene tirade worthy of the dirtiest gaper.⁶⁷ Having openly disavowed his owl-avoidant stance in this signature performance — “lo ditz Marcabrus” (it’s Marcabru who says so)⁶⁸ — he admits that he cannot help muckraking: “E non puesc mudar non gronda / del vostre dan, moillerzin” (And I cannot stop myself from complaining about the harm you cause, / you womanisers).⁶⁹ Using the verb *grondir* — here translated as “complain” (literally, “make an animal sound”) — to describe the tone of his speech, the poet gives himself the hooting sound “grondilla” he gave the mating owl in “Bel m’es” discussed above.⁷⁰ Marcabru cannot help gaping at the womanizers and hooting about their wrongdoing. Disavowing the name “owl” turns out to have been an ironic pretense. In fact, he cannot help acting like an owl, a wise, wide-eyed muckraker righteously exposing decadence.⁷¹ Marcabru’s preoccupation with staring and gaping — here in song XII, in “L’autrier,” and elsewhere — suggests the owl’s most notable feature, the huge eyes which never seem to blink. As Edward Armstrong points out, “The Romans used representations of owls to combat the evil eye,”⁷² and if such a notion still persisted in the twelfth century,

66 Marcabru, XII.21.

67 Marcabru, XII.26-35.

68 Marcabru, XII.35.

69 Marcabru, XII.36-37.

70 Marcabru, XXI.12.

71 After commenting extensively on Marcabru’s ironic sexual metaphors, Gaunt speculates, “My impression is that the man behind the texts was simultaneously repelled and fascinated by illicit sex, torn between the condemnation of certain activities and a troubling obsession with describing them”; Gaunt, *Troubadours and Irony*, 51-60 at 60.

72 Armstrong, *The Folklore of Birds*, 118. Armstrong includes an image of a Roman design (p. 120, fig. 72) at whose centre is an open eye with an owl perched on its upper lashes; a spear and nine surrounding animals attack the eye. Elworthy provides an illustration of an engraved gem of similar design, a compound amulet that provides special protection for every day of the week. An owl perches atop the upper lashes of the central eye, as in Armstrong’s example, but here six obvious symbols for every day except Friday surround the eye. While Elworthy notes that “The owl, [...] sacred to Athene [...] must have been substituted as the symbol of *dies Veneris*, for Venus does not seem to have been regarded as a protectress against fascination,” unfortunately he provides no details concerning the amulet’s provenance: “its [iconographic?] origin was Graeco-Egyptian, though the work of a [more modern?] European hand”; Elworthy, *The Evil Eye*, 131-32 and fig. 19. The symbolic gesture of banishing Venus and substituting a gaping owl would have been intelligible to Marcabru.

Marcabru may have felt that his owlish and stridently obscene poetry inherited some of the apotropaic magic of the owl charm.⁷³ By creating a vivid image of the evil he wishes to shun — sexual immorality — he wards off the real thing. The owl's gaze trumps the knight's.

Marcabru's rummaging in filth turns out on closer inspection to be part of an enterprise intended to be morally therapeutic: the poet behaves badly in order to counter bad behaviour. In this project he follows the advice of Augustine, who recommended the occasional application of spiritual homeopathy:

And just as physicians when they bind up wounds do not do so haphazardly but neatly so that a certain beauty accompanies the utility of the bandages, so the medicine of Wisdom [. . .] is accommodated to our wounds, healing some by contraries and some by similar things. He who tends the wounds of the body sometimes applies contraries [. . .]; at other times he applies similar things, like a round bandage for a round wound or an oblong bandage for an oblong wound, not using the same bandage for all members but fitting similar things to similar.⁷⁴

Marcabru, like Boccaccio and certain other notoriously off-colour writers, wrote well crafted fictions of immoral behaviour in an effort to bind up the actual *fraitura* (brokenness). A certain beauty accompanies the utility of such bandages. Marcabru evidently thought that in his parodic efforts he seemed to others a distinctly dirty bird.

In song XII, Marcabru reinforces his identification with the owl's medicine of wisdom, not only by acting like a dirty bird and inserting "lo ditz Marcabrus" into the poem as author of a scurrilous observation but also by pointedly rhyming his verse. He chooses a word for owl, *caüs*, that rhymes with "Marcabrus" as well as a rhyming verb, *graiüs* (complain), that could apply to both the owl's sound and to the poet's

73 As Simpson notes, "There is such similarity between classical sources and recent folklore about the nature and effects of the evil eye, and even what amulets, words, and gestures to use against it, that one can safely assume continuity of tradition across the centuries"; Simpson, "Evil Eye," 286. Sütterlin argues that the world's repertoire of apotropaic sculpture is rigidly conservative in its form and expression because such artefacts ritualize universal patterns of human communication: threatening faces, obscene gestures, and the salient features thereof. Thus, it is not surprising that staring eyes are common apotropaic motifs throughout the world; Sütterlin, "Universals in Apotropaic Symbolism," 65 and 71.

74 Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 1.14; *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. Robertson, 14-15.

complaint. Each of these words, *caüs*, *graiüs*, and the name Marcabrus, ends a *cobla*.⁷⁵ Given the rhyme on “Marcabrus”/“caüs,” it is not inconceivable that the often sexually explicit poet actually did have the nickname Caüs and that the poem makes ironic reference to this nickname when claiming that he does not want to be called an owl. The nickname would suit a poet with a strong anti-nightingale persona who claims, as he does, to sing better than any of the broken-thinking celebrators of reverdie and lust. Significantly, the final *tornada* of the same song ends in the *-us* rhyme of “Jhezus,” suggesting that “Marcabrus” belongs properly to the long-established association of “caüs” with “Jhezus.”⁷⁶

Just as Marcabru, in “L’autrier,” foregrounds the ironically disreputable figure of the owl, so he sets the narrative in the harsh season of winter, not the gentle spring or summer typically associated with erotic encounters. The winter setting with its troubling vulnerabilities is an unconventional and certainly inauspicious time for an *al fresco* tryst with a shepherdess. In “L’autrier,” both owl and winter, like Marcabru and his rhetoric, are honest, chaste, and wise despite a rough appearance. Marcabru binds up his identification with the owl by having his shepherdess quote a fictive owl who literally weaves proverbial motifs from Marcabru’s other poetry into the *tornada*’s denunciation of vain illusion. But the owl accomplishes still more. In a further Marcabrunian gesture, the owl predicts the same punishment for one who blasphemes *fin’amor* that Marcabru outlines in song XL: he is made to “si en fol muzar” (so day-dream like a fool) that he perishes.⁷⁷ This slow spiritual starvation is what the owl’s “votz sana,” as articulated by the shepherdess, augurs for the hypocritical seducer.

The shepherdess exercises her pastoral vocation in spiritual rather than agricultural terms, as is appropriate for one of the *pastores* who, according to Luke 2:14-20, heard the *doxa*⁷⁸ proclaimed from heaven and who proclaimed it in turn to others. By quoting an owl who quotes Marcabru’s true voice, the shepherdess reinforces the poem’s theme of vain illusion and creates a strong sense of closure for an audience familiar with Marcabru’s persona and repertoire.⁷⁹ The failed knight, rhetorically inept and morally broken, is vanquished by the shared natural eloquence of the owl’s,

75 Marcabru, XII.15, 30, 35.

76 Cf. Hugh of St. Victor on the Christ-like owl; see Gasser, *Resolution*, 12.

77 Marcabru, XL.12-14.

78 Vulgate *gloria*.

79 As Léglu notes, the shepherdess in the unfinished song XXIX speaks “as Marcabru himself, distanced from the fictionalized setting”; Léglu, “Identifying the *toza*,” 135.

the pastora's, and Marcabru's "whole thinking." By calling on the doxical wisdom of "la gens ansiayna" (the ancient folk)⁸⁰ embodied in proverbs, a peasant girl marshals impressive rhetorical and ethical resources and creatively amplifies them to overcome the inherent disadvantage she faces in dealing with an adversary who seems far more powerful by virtue of his gender, his wealth, and his social standing. In the small world of the pastourelle, her proverbs "segon natura" are diminutive emblems of the poet's *trobar naturau*. In the final *tornada*, the wise and healthy shepherdess honours the voice of her owlshly disreputable creator.

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80 Marcabru, "L'autrier," 84.

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