Ruses, finesse, bons tours
Philippe de Vigneulles and the Narrative of Crimes and Misdemeanors

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Abstract: The Cent nouvelles nouvelles of Philippe de Vigneulles represent a narrative world in which crimes and misdemeanors play an important structuring role. The question as to whether these fictional actions correspond to actual legal transgressions in the real world of Metz in the XVIth century cannot be answered simply and unequivocally. Because of the conventions of « carnivalesque » literature according to which Vigneulles wrote his tales, actions that would normally be defined as crimes are tolerated and at times even valorized in the comical situations that he creates. Compared to the violent and punitive legal situation evoked in La Chronique de Philippe de Vigneulles and his Gedenkbuch or Journal, the idea of legality presented in his collection of tales is quite flexible, in accord with the conventions of narrative traditions that preceded Philippe’s work, including genres as varied as the exemplum, the fabliau, and earlier tale collections. Nevertheless, from numerous claims made in the work itself, it seems ironically as though many of these tales were in fact based on actual events that Philippe witnessed in his native city, or on stories that he heard from his contemporaries. The hybridity of this particular version of the Renaissance nouvelle hence combines testimonial accounts with fictive versions of real events, producing an ambivalent world that complicates the task of reading and interpreting these stories.

Résumé: Les Cent nouvelles nouvelles de Philippe de Vigneulles représentent un monde narratif dans lequel les crimes et les délits jouent un rôle structural très important. On ne peut pas répondre simplement et de manière univoque à la question de la correspondance entre ces actions fictives et des transgressions réelles dans le monde de Metz au XVIe siècle. À cause des conventions « carnavalesques » selon lesquelles Vigneulles a écrit ses nouvelles, des actes que l’on définirait normalement comme des crimes sont tolérés et même valorisés dans les situations comiques que l’auteur crée. Comparée à la situation légale punitive et violente évoquée dans La Chronique de Philippe de Vigneulles et son Gedenkbuch ou Journal, l’idée de la légalité présentée dans son recueil de nouvelles est très flexible, et s’accorde avec les conventions des traditions narratives qui ont précédé l’œuvre de Philippe, et qui incluent des genres aussi divers que l’exemple, le fabliau, et les recueils antérieurs de nouvelles. Pourtant, à partir d’affirmations nombreuses dans ce recueil, il semble ironiquement que beaucoup de ces nouvelles soient basées sur des événements dont Philippe a été le témoin dans sa ville natale, ou sur des récits que ses contemporains lui ont racontés. L’hybridité de cette version particulière de la nouvelle de la Renaissance combine donc des récits testimoniaux avec des versions fictives d’événements réels, produisant ainsi un monde ambivalent qui complique la lecture et l’interprétation de ces nouvelles.

Philippe de Vigneulles’s important and long-neglected collection of tales, Les Cent nouvelles nouvelles, represents a world in which crimes and misdemeanors were not always looked upon as evils to be avoided; rather, in the « carnivalesque » atmosphere of some of these tales, different kinds of transgressive acts were often required and valorized at certain collective functions. In the hybrid world of Philippe’s nouvelles, which seems to be partially imaginary and partially real,
factual, or testimonial – and part of our task here is to explicate the differences that separate and define these terms –, the definition of what constitutes a criminal offense is quite flexible, and often depends upon the social, cultural, or festive contexts in which actions are performed. For this reason, the narrator of the text has an ambivalent attitude toward the people and characters he describes, especially those figures who transgressed the rules that one would assume, somewhat erroneously, to be the foundation of the cultural order in which he lived; on the contrary, the paradoxical principles that govern the world represented in the Cent nouvelles nouvelles ought not to be understood as being entirely applicable to the actual world in which the author lived and wrote. If we were to judge only from these stories and to accept them as being «realistic», which was the criterion by which they were read in much of the scholarly literature on the subject1, we would have to conclude that a social order that seems incredibly rigid from other sources (memoirs, criminal registers, Philippe’s own Chronique) nonetheless accepted many different kinds of legal violations as part of its normal functioning. In these stories, every celebration required clowns or rogues who were called upon to break the law by stealing, befouling, defacing, slandering, and so on, acts for which they certainly would have been arrested and punished under normal conditions. Here every market is seemingly thick with thieves, every church is invaded by bogus sellers of relics, every wife is ready to cheat on her husband at the first opportunity, and every bar or tavern is crawling with con men waiting to swindle unsuspecting misers out of their cash. In fact, some unclassifiable characters in these tales, such as the protagonist of nouvelle 20, are constantly on the run from the seigneurs de la justice who are pursuing them. The text introduces this character as follows: «Cestuit Mannis etoit ung homme fallacieux et joyeux et faisoit beaucop de nouvelletez pour gens rire, pour lesquelles choses estoit souvent mandez en bonne compaignie»2. Later in the tale, however, when Mannis arrives at the marketplace, which is one of the focal points of both illicit activities and stories about them, he is recognized by the police: «[...] ung des seigneurs de la justice [...] congneut ledit Mannis pour ung mauvais garson, car ja autresfois avoit fait de grandes truffes contre la cité et n’y estoit point trop aymés » (p. 113). Despite the disapproval with which he is viewed by the city’s «authorities» in the public realm in which he operates, the trickster is nonetheless «sent for» whenever there are public festivities, especially since his actions and the stories that are told about them produce laughter and a festive atmosphere. What kinds of tricks or «novelties» does this character perform in order to be so in demand «in good company»?

Philippe’s multi-faceted response to this question, constituted by the story itself, leads the reader into the bizarre world of this tale collection. The character first decides to sell something in the marketplace at Metz, which in itself seems to be

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1 For a summary of the critical literature concerning the idea of «realism» and its application to Renaissance nouvelles, see E. Thompson, «‘Une merveilleuse espece d’animal’: Fable and Verisimilitude in Bonaventure des Périers’s Nouvelles récréations et joyeux devis», Narrative Worlds: Essays on the Nouvelle in Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century France, eds. G. Ferguson and D. LaGuardia, Tempe, Arizona, Arizona State University, 2005, p. 17-34.

2 Philippe de Vigneulles, Les Cent nouvelles nouvelles, ed. C. Livingston, Geneva, Droz, 1972, p. 112. All parenthetical references are to this edition.
an innocent act. The reader recognizes, however, that things are not going to be « normal » when he/she sees what the character’s « merchandise » is: « [Mannis] print une hotte sur son col et s’en vint à Mets et en passant qu’il faisoit parmy ung village, trouva beaucoup d’escaillles d’oeufz et en emplit sa hotte et pour tant qu’il avoit ouy dire en la compagnie devant dicte que toutes choses se vendoient à Mets, si se pensa, en soy truffant d’eulx, qu’il yroit vendre ses escaillles d’oeufz » (p. 113). As if the act of selling eggshells in the marketplace were not strange enough, Mannis takes with him a kind of buzzard (mirru) that he has captured on his property:

Or avoit ledit Mannis en sa maison plusieurs belles poules et chappons, sur lesquelles vint une fois frapper l’oiseau de proie que nous appellons mirru, qui luy estrangla ung de ses jeune poullet, dont il fut bien merris. Si fit tant ledit Manni [sic] par angiens qu’il print cestuit oyeau de proie tout vif sans le tuer et à icelluy creva les deux yeulx et luy penda une bourse au col et une cedule escripte dedans ladite bourse (p. 113).

This description of a captured and blinded bird of prey with a little pouch containing a written message hung around its neck is one of the most uncanny images to be found in all of the nouvelle literature, and could perhaps serve as an emblem of the at times incomprehensible procedures that define Philippe’s narrative world. One of the concerns of the critical literature on the nouvelle has been to recuperate these kinds of strange actions and plots into an overarching conception of realism that would make them comprehensible3. We learn only later in the tale that this seemingly gratuitous detail is what allows Mannis to hoodwink the police after he has sold his eggshells. He then befouls with feces the entire house of a tanner where he hides from the sergents, and finally poses as a dead man in order to be driven on the back of a cart full of provisions, which he promptly steals and then eats with the same men from whom he stole them. Philippe’s narrator comments on this last trick in the following way: « Et ainsi avés ouy comment Mannis fist grant chiere à ces gens de leurs biens mesmes, dont maintes fois en a esté ris depuis entre eulx quant la verité en fut congneue » (p. 118).

As unbelievable as it may seem to us, the narrator proclaims that in this historical and narrative context, a man who was guilty of selling trash, resisting arrest, defecating in unwanted places, and stealing the goods of some working men was considered to be funny and joyful in a transgressive way that was required at certain times and in certain places. Moreover, as the end of the tale makes clear, these kinds of actions served as the basis of the stories that circulated widely within the active oral culture that was one of the constitutive features of this era, provoking pleasure and laughter even when they were told to Mannis’s final victims, and ultimately resulting in the collection of stories that Philippe transcribed. Finally, this tale and many others in the work imply that these kinds of rogues were to be expected in almost every social context: at church, in the market, on the road, in taverns, in stores, and even in the private homes into which these stories sometimes

give us a glimpse. Does this mean that in the actual early-modern world in which Vigneulles lived and wrote, the status of crimes and misdemeanors was as fluid and contextually defined as it appears to be here? Were people such as Mannis actually sought after for their ability to transgress in collective spaces and at designated times of the year in celebrations that somehow included criminality within their conception of order?

Far from being bewildered by these kinds of plots, readers familiar with the Renaissance nouvelle immediately recognize the attributes that Mannis displays, and situate him within a narrative tradition that has been studied in detail by literary scholars since the XIXth century. This character is one of the « rogues, clowns, and fools » described by Bakhtin in a seminal essay in which he detailed the « chronotope » structured by these kinds of figures. His actions are « carnivalesque », and obey a « world-upside-down » logic that was tolerated and apparently even encouraged during certain times of the year. Mannis is one of a long list of characters in the Cent nouvelles nouvelles who roam in and around Metz in order to find victims for their schemes, often for the sheer fun of it: the jokers who make a priest lose his pants during the mass in tale 7; Rouse de Pleppeville, who tricks a guard into beating an innocent man in tale 19; the bogus priests known as quetteurs who fabricate relics and sell pardons in tales 33-37; the con man who tricks a miser into paying his bar bill in tale 53; the three commères who manage to eat everything in sight in a tavern and then get the cheapest of their husbands to pay the bill in tale 91; the spectacular grifters who cheat a pilgrim out of his money in tale 98; and the long line of cuckolds, adulterers, fornicators, and even rapists who are too numerous to count both in this collection and in its homonymous model.

An important element in our understanding of the conceptual world that Vigneulles presents to us is hence the complex idea of the real as it is mediated to us through a fictional text that often makes forays into the autobiographical and testimonial realms. How can readers know which events described in these stories might be understood as real, actual, or possible? As C. Livingston pointed out in his critical edition of the work, from a philological perspective many of the actions and characters described in the tales have to be read in relation to the narrative tradition that the writer inherited from his cultural context, which included the Italian tale collections that were known and read in France at the time, as well as the seminal Burgundian Cent nouvelles nouvelles published by Antoine Vérard in 1486, which

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1 M. Bakhtin, « Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel », The Dialogic Imagination, ed. M. Holquist, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981. See especially section VI, « The Functions of the Rogue, Clown, and Fool in the Novel », p. 158-167. The following passage seems directly applicable to Mannis: « Essential to these three figures is a distinctive feature that is as well a privilege – the right to be ‘other’ in this world, the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available; none of these categories quite suits them, they see the underside and falseness of every situation. Therefore, they can exploit any position they choose, but only as a mask […] These figures are laughed at by others, and themselves as well. Their laughter bears the stamp of the public square where the folk gather. They re-establish the public nature of the human figure: the entire being of characters such as these is, after all, utterly on the surface; everything is brought out on to the square […] » (p. 159-160).
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Philippe mentions in his own preface. While it would be naïve to assume that a fictional tale, embedded in a (mostly) comic narrative tradition, is a representation of a possibly « real » world, it is clear that Vigneulles often tells stories that are simple scenes and tricks that he himself witnessed in the city that he knew so well, which means that his narratives are quite often simple testimonial accounts as opposed to being literary tales of the kind that Boccaccio collected in the Decameron, which set the standard for nouvelles written in Europe from the XIVth century onward. Nevertheless, since the idea of what is worthy of being remembered and recalled in narrative form is so influenced by the dissemination of the relatively new genre of the nouvelle, we also have to assume that even anecdotes such as the account of the finesses of a presumably real person like Mannis in tale 20 are strongly influenced by narrative conventions that determine what can or should be retold and included within the larger project of a collection of tales. Hence the « true » stories included in the Cent nouvelles nouvelles might be thought of as belonging to a kind of enhanced or embellished reality that is deformed and denatured by the properties of the medium through which they are communicated to their readers.

Many scholars have sought to explicate the relation between the real world of XVth-XVIth century Metz and the fictional version of the city that Vigneulles transcribes in this collection. M.-T. Noiset described the difference between Philippe’s chronicles of real life crimes and his imaginary narratives in terms of a parodic displacement. In place of the horrific violence inherent to the actual legal system of the period, which Vigneulles evokes in painful detail, including executions by boiling oil and dismemberment, the nouvelles substitute scatological and obscene actions for crimes ranging from murder to counterfeiting and their punishments. It should be noted, of course, that La Chronique de Philippe de Vigneulles describes actual murders for which execution was a standard punishment, whereas the fictional text almost always recounts tales of theft or adultery, which Noiset separates into the categories of « duperie » and « érotisme ». Hence according to this scholar, the realism of the Cent nouvelles nouvelles is relative and has to be understood in relation to Philippe’s other writings. The world we see depicted in this collection is « real » in the sense that it describes actual people from Metz involved in everyday activities in recognizable or verifiable settings. It is also authentic in that the author provides testimony regarding scenes and events he has witnessed and people he has known. In some of these cases, Vigneulles was a kind of unwitting collaborator in the ruses he describes, as we will see in a moment in our analysis of the introduction to tale 53. In contrast, the work is not at all realistic in that it deflects the brutality of the real world of La Chronique into the realm of parody, as Noiset argues, which means that its anecdotes are stylized according to the generic and conceptual constraints of the nouvelle tradition. Hence our original questions concerning the nature of the real in this narrative world cannot be answered simply or categorically. Many of the people, places, and events depicted in the tales can probably be verified by other sources, while Vigneulles himself

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5 On the severity of the punishments meted out by the late-medieval legal system, see D. LaGuardia, « Interrogation and the Performance of Truth in the Registre Criminel du Châtelet de Paris, 1389-1392 », Yale French Studies 110, Fall, 2006, p. 152-162.
6 Noiset, op. cit., p. 112-113.
evidently collected anecdotes and stories from the oral culture in which he lived and participated. Both the crimes he describes and their insignificant punishments contradict, however, the more brutal accounts of *La Chronique*, in which even simple transgressions such as petty theft almost always resulted in severe punishments\(^7\). According to Noiset’s argument, then, crime is thus transformed in the world of the *nouvelles* into a plot device that has been disarmed of its violence, in terms of both its perpetration (e.g., murder in the real world becomes adultery in fiction), and its consequences (capital punishment becomes scatological fouling). This transposition might be understood in terms of an old critical metaphor: if narrative holds up a mirror to reality\(^8\), Philippe’s hybridized «fiction» is a carnival fun house mirror that reflects murder, forgery, theft, adultery and their punishments as swindling, inconsequential sex or «eroticism», and laughing thieves merely running away or sharing a good story with their victims in the local bar.

This relation of the work to the real world leads us back to its general conception as the author himself describes it in his preface. As C. Jones has remarked regarding Vigneulles’ prefaces to his prose translations of the *chansons de geste*, this liminal text contains a number of *topoi* that were common in dedicatory texts in general\(^9\). Discussing his primary model text, the Burgundian *Cent nouvelles nouvelles*, the author transcribes one of these *topoi* by considering the verisimilitude of the stories he is about to tell:

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[...]
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Despite his own claims that his manner of thinking is quite simple, Philippe condemns those simple-minded people who do not believe that the stories told in the Burgundian text are plausible and perhaps even «real». Faced with the decision of accepting the truth of what one has been told, or rejecting it as unbelievable, the author proposes an intermediate solution that views almost any anecdote from the past as possible, especially given the fact that the world in which he lived was full of so many incredible events and actions. Another solution to this dilemma that Vigneulles suggests here involves judging stories that one has heard to be true or credible as long as they instruct their readers regarding the moral dangers of living in a context such as Metz at the beginning of the XVI\(^{th}\) century. This insistence on the didactic function of storytelling, which is a commonplace of medieval literature in genres as diverse as sermons, collections of *exempla*, and even the bawdiest of the

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\(^7\) See Noiset, *op. cit.*, p. 111.
fabliaux, supplements a noteworthy lack of the earlier *Cent nouvelles nouvelles*, since the moralizing elements of exemplarity were almost completely absent from this earlier text, even if a large number of its plots were borrowed from didactic works such as the canonical *Disciplina clericalis*.

As proof of the verisimilitude of his stories, Philippe continues with a description of the circumstances that led him to compose his own collection of tales:

> Et aussi doncques, considerant leur folle opinion et en monstrant que on n’ait dit ni fait chose du passez qui semblable ne se puisse aujourd’hui faire ou dire, je Phelippe dessusnommez… me mis lors à escrire pluseurs adventures, advenues la pluspart tant à la noble cité de Metis comme au pays environ, comme moy mesme en a sceu et veu la plus grant partie ou du moins je les ouy dire et racompter à gens digne de foy et de creance (p. 57).

In contrast both to his model text and to the *Heptaméron*, most of Philippe’s tales are in fact based on his own witnessing of events, or upon accounts of tricks and ruses that had been perpetrated against people he knew. While the author never goes so far as to declare that he wishes to tell only « véritables histoires », as Parlamente requires of her fellow *devisants* in the *Heptaméron*, there are nonetheless enough autobiographical indices scattered throughout the text to make us believe that most of the charlatans, rogues, and fools who populate this strange world were actual individuals who were guilty of the crimes that Philippe describes, which often seem quite unbelievable, as in the case of Mannis. The incredulity with which readers might greet these tales is perhaps a function of their orality, which the narrator underlines throughout the text. Nevertheless, here as in the *Heptaméron*, the author proclaims that his stories should be believed because he has heard them from people who are « dignes de foi ». The truth, reality, or « believability » of stories are hence based not merely on their contents, but rather on the social circumstances in which their events took place, and above all on the character of the people who retold and circulated them in diverse contexts.

One of the most striking descriptions of this hybrid nature of these tales is found at the end of the preface, when Vigneulles speaks of the organization and production of his work, as well as of the manner in which such texts and their stories should be used and disseminated in the collective oral sphere:

> Lesquelles adventures et nouvelles ay depuis tousjours multipliez jusques au nombre de cent et dix et puis les ay mis en escript par ordre l’une après l’autre au moins mal que j’ay peu ou sceu, non pas les veuillant comparer à nulles de celles devantdictes du temps passés, mais les faiz seulement, comme j’ay dit dessus, pour passer mon temps en attendant santé et aussi pour monstrer que, se les aventures qui se font en divers lieux et que journellement adveniennent venoient à la congoissance d’aucun bon facteur, ilz en pourroient faire et composer ung livre aussi bon que ceulx qui ont esté faict devant, veu et consideré que seulement moy, qui n’as guieres veu ne hanté,

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10 For an idea of the itinerary that the *Disciplina*’s anecdotes followed through French collections of nouvelles, see D. LaGuardia, « Exemplarity as Misogyny: Variations on the Tale of the One-Eyed Cuckold », G. Ferguson and D. LaGuardia, *op. cit.* , p. 139-158.
vous en a trouvé cent et plus, la pluspart advenues de mon temps. Lesquelles vous seront icy racomptées, et les pourrés ouyr cy aprez se lire ou ouyr les voulés. Sy prie et supplye à tous ceux et celles qui les liront ou orront qu’ilz preignent le bien qu’ilz y verront et fuyent le mal qu’ilz y trouveront et qu’ilz me pardonnent les faultes qui y sont […] (p. 57-58).

This passage describes the widespread usage of texts in the public sphere that was crucial to the dissemination of ideas during this transitional period, before the full consequences of print culture had reached their apogee in the Reformation and the Wars of Religion. As R. Chartier has remarked in his voluminous work on early modern print culture, both manuscripts and printed texts were used for public readings and oral performances by diverse groups including artisans, preachers, and gathered confraternities of celebrants. This is precisely how Philippe instructs his readers to use and to process his text. Moreover, given the author’s apparent habits and tastes, the kind of reading he has in mind and the public to whom he addresses himself should both be situated in the collective and festive spaces (taverns, parties, marketplaces, urban fairs) in which he himself was actively engaged as an organizer of parties and festivals.

As is almost always the case in these collections, Philippe here invokes a number of topoi that were described succinctly by A. Kotin in the following manner: « 1) a statement of truth and authenticity or argument of authority; 2) an attempt to enlist the benevolent attention of the reader; 3) a modesty clause; 4) a substantive introduction of the nouvelles (i.e., themes, subject matter, summaries); and 5) a moral justification or a statement of the intention to please and instruct. » Hence one of the primary concerns of the nouvelistes in these prefatory statements is that of the reality or authenticity of the anecdotes that they are about to recount. From the careful framing of both Philippe’s translation of the chansons de geste and of his nouvelles, it seems as though transcribing oral stories judged to be unbelievable runs the risk of being a transgressive act itself if it does not place those stories within a proper didactic and self-effacing narrative frame.

12 In his Journal, Philippe describes the dedication of the parish church of St. Jacques, for which he himself organized the festivities: « […] moy Philippe de Vigneulle le muirchand […] fus inventeur de ceste feste. Et fut mise sus et ordonnée celle dite feste chiez moy et fut la plus belle feste, que jamais homme vivant avoit veu faire en Mets entre citains et bourgeois […] ». Philippe goes on to claim that more than five hundred people were present at the feast, and that « ne laissèrent les compagnons à faire la bonne chière et durait la feste iii jours tout entiers ». Philippe de Vigneulles, Gedenkbuch des Metzer Bürgers Philippe von Vigneulles aus den Jahren 1471 bis 1522, ed. H. Michelant, Stuttgart, Bibliothek des Litterarischen Vereins, 1852, p. 248-249.
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in-trade of tale collectors in all of the major European languages. As so often happens on the level of the tales themselves, the ruse of verisimilitude often tricks us as readers into buying a narrative merchandise that is far from being authentic or original, when stories that writers claim to have witnessed prove to be mere retellings of anecdotes borrowed from other texts. Consequently, the question as to whether or not the transgressions represented in these stories reveal something about the status of crime in the real world cannot be answered unequivocally, since the « real » of the nouvelle is always mediated to us through the artificial conventions of this genre.

This question might also be examined in relation to M. Bakhtin’s somewhat problematic notions of the « carnivalesque » and of « grotesque realism » that were discussed with remarkable subtlety by P. Stallybrass and A. White. Their *Politics and Poetics of Transgression* includes an examination of T. Eagleton’s critique of the carnivalesque, according to which carnival is merely a programmed period of transgression that is allowed by those in power, « a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art »).

As another scholar quoted by Stallybrass and White, G. Balandier, puts it even more succinctly, « The supreme ruse of power is to allow itself to be contested ritually in order to consolidate itself more effectively »). The idea of the carnivalesque as a set of public, collective, and festively hybrid rituals that undermine at the same time that they ultimately support hegemonic power structures helps to explicate the nature of crimes and misdemeanors in Philippe’s *Cent nouvelles nouvelles*. In this respect, early-modern power managed to include transgressions that bordered at times on being revolutionary within the working out of its own programmed procedures, hence disarming them. Another major critique leveled at Bakhtin was that his conception of the people and their role in carnival was nostalgic and utopian, since the kind of popular unity and the dissolution of individuals into the celebrating masses that he described did not change the social status of exploited workers, which remained the same even after the most orgiastic of feast days. Ultimately, however, these scholars sought to recuperate Bakhtin’s notion because it provided « a glimpse through the ideological constructs of dominance […] a temporary retextualizing of the social formation that exposes its ‘fictive’ foundations »). According to this view, then, since the real world of ideology is structured like a fiction, and the nouvelles share the ambivalent and hybrid characteristics of political structures that incorporate domains or periods of transgression into themselves, it should be no shock to us that the narrative world represented in Philippe’s tales has these same paradoxical features. This conception of an imaginary space based on the real ambiguities and paradoxes of the carnivalesque is useful for a reading of these at times baffling stories. From this perspective, as from that of the narrative tradition with which Vigneulles was familiar, the crimes and misdemeanors depicted in his stories both undermine and reinforce the extra-textual order of legality that makes these tales

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comprehensible. Since the injunction to transgress in programmed ways was part of the rule of the carnivalesque, almost anything that was written according to this comic code merely staged the overturning of a social order which it ultimately reinforced by highlighting the momentary, comic, and planned nature of such transgressions.

The hybrid world that Vigneulles describes in the *Cent nouvelles nouvelles*, composed in equal parts of stories he witnessed, anecdotes he heard and transcribed, and tales he imitated from other works, hence includes an irredicibly ambiguous understanding of criminal transgressions within it, since in most cases they seem to be programmed into the (imaginary) social structures and spaces that each text describes. It could even be said that the rule and its transgression, the social order and the crimes that undermine it, are in a « presuppositional » relationship of the kind that Rabelais remarked in the *Tiers Livre*, in which Rondibilis declares that marriage and cuckoldry are « natural » and complementary parts of the same institution17. In many cases, even if Vigneulles claims that the « true » stories he is adding to his collection are meant to serve a didactic purpose by informing readers of tricks that they should avoid, the enthusiasm with which he details the unfolding of a given *finesse* or *tromperie* leads us to believe that these transgressions were expected and even normal, at least within certain contexts that the work evokes repeatedly, such as taverns, public baths (* étuves *), bordellos, market places, and public festivals or feasts. These places in late-medieval urban geography that seemed to have criminality programmed into their very existence might serve as models of the ambivalent narrative world into which the *nouvelle* literature leads its readers, which is constructed according to a number of paradoxes: its property system apparently accepts and valorizes theft, larceny, trickery, extortion, and confidence schemes; its religious orders tolerate and at times even require the deadliest of sins, including fornication, rape, and gluttony, so that « memorable » stories can be told about these acts; within this conceptual context, as in Rabelais’s work some forty years later, marriage virtually entails the necessity of adultery and cuckoldry. From our perspective, then, how can a writer who insists upon the veracity of his stories and the moral, exemplary value of their telling take so much pleasure in laughing at the victims of the tricks he describes? How could such a paradoxical world be a narrative version of the « true » world that Vigneulles witnessed and in which he was an active participant?

In the opening to the longest tale in the collection, number 98, Philippe reveals his own complex understanding of the relation between certain kinds of

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17 In response to Panurge’s eternal question as to whether he will be cuckolded if he marries, Dr. Rondibilis offers the following comment: « Havre de Grâce (s’escria Rondibilis) que me demandez vous? Si serez coqu? Mon amy je suys marié, vous le serez par cy après. Mais escrivez ce mot en vostre cervelle avecques un style de fer, que tout homme marié, est en danger d’estre coqu. Coqüage est naturellement des apennages de mariage. L’umbre plus naturellement ne suyt le corps, que Coqüage suyt les gens mariiez. Et quand vous oirez dire de quelqu’un ces trois motz : ‘Il est marié’, si vous dictez : ‘Il est doncques, ou a esté, ou sera, ou peut estre coqu’ : vous ne serez dict imperit architecte de consequences naturelles ». F. Rabelais, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. M. Huchon, Paris, Gallimard, 1994, p. 452-453.
codified and conventional transgressions and the pleasure of telling stories, a relation that is at the heart of his narrative practices:

Nous avons parlez par cy devant de pluseurs bonnes adventures et dignes de memoire; les unes ont estez au proufict de aulcuns, les aultres à leurs dommages et deshonnerce; et aultres n’y ont eu profict ne dommaige, comme de celle icy devant recitee du bon homme atout son aisme. Mais maintenant vous veuez compter une adventure que jadis advint à messire Nicole, curé de Lessey devant Mets et archeprébtre du Vaulz. Laquelle adventure ne fut pas du tout à son profict, ains y print grant dommaige, combien qu’il en eust un peu de joie qui guiere ne durait, comme vous orrés se escouster le voullés (p. 387).

From its opening preface, the text insists repeatedly on the oral circulation of these tales and their effects on listeners and tellers alike. In this historical context, people could rarely resist the pleasure of listening to and telling stories that might eventually be included in tale collections of this kind, especially if those stories were humorous anecdotes about adultery, cuckoldry, petty thievery, and carousing in spaces reserved for the programmed debauchery of carnival. Similarly, in tale 37, which features a bogus preacher by the name of Jehan George who beguiles parishioners into giving him money, Philippe evokes the circulation of the story of his tricks in the following way:

Et après ce dit, ledit messire Jehan George leur dit encore pluseurs aultres choses toujours à son advenatige, lesquelles estoient toutes menteries et que je lesse ad cause de briefveté. Mais en presence y avoit aucun de Mets qu’il ne veoit pas lesquelz ouyrent et entendirent toutes les parolles, comme avés ouy, et les racomptrent en pluseurs lieux, dont il en fut bien rys, tellement que ledit messire Jehan George le scuet bien, et ne luy en chailloit et quant on luy disoit, s’en ryoit avec les aultres (p. 171).

In the collective oral domain of Metz as Vigneulles describes it, people were always ready either to tell someone else the stories they had heard, or to listen to anecdotes that they considered noteworthy or memorable for many different reasons. Shockingly from our perspective, this «memorableness» is often associated with the different kinds of fines ses, ruses, or bons tours that fascinated this author and the other novellistes, to such an extent that the genre itself might be identified simply with the act of cataloguing the minor crimes and misdemeanors that were apparently an integral part of the complex social order described in Philippe’s works. The repeated circulation and retelling of these kinds of stories is reproduced in a miniature form within the tale itself: «Et ainsi trouva ce maistre langair praticque d’avoir plus d’argent qu’il n’avoit faict à Sainct Suppllice, dont messire Jehan George, son compaignon, et luy en firent bonne chiere et en rierent assés quant il entendit la finesse» (p. 173-174). In this historical context, the idea of having a good time – «faire bonne chère» – is unthinkable without good stories about pranks and tricks that must be told and listened to.

The idea of orally told stories that are «worthy of being remembered» is a topos that traverses the entirety of XVIth century France, and appears in texts as
diverse as this one and S. Goulart’s monumental Mémoires de l’estat de France sous Charles IX of 1578, which contains a distant echo of Vigneulles’s claim here: «Et si les choses dignes de mémoire ne doivent estre desrobees à la posterité, ceux-là seroient louables en beaucoup de sortes qui à l’heure mesmes que cecy ou cela avient le publieroint par tout.»18. This repetition of the exact phrase «dignes de mémoire» in these radically different historical and generic contexts highlights an essential element of the public realm in XVIth century France. At the beginning of the century, in Philippe’s unpublished manuscript, that which is thought to be worthy of remembering circulates freely in an active oral culture, the extent and scope of which remain largely unexamined to this day. Moreover, the Cent nouvelles nouvelles are an oral compendium of types of stories that are worth remembering precisely because they describe transgressions of the ideas of profit and loss that have entertainment value in this context, meaning that their narrative worth is related to the cruel pleasure they evoke in listeners who laugh at their victims. In other words, for Vigneulles what is memorable and important to retell and circulate in tales written to be read aloud usually involves ingenious tricks devised by recognized members of the community or inflicted upon them. By the time of the Wars of Religion nearly two generations later, this notion of «memorableness» is transposed to a print culture that is much more concerned with a historical notion of events that must be recounted in order to instruct future generations, and which must be «published» in the multiple, archaic senses of this word: they must be spoken about actively in important circles, circulated in handwritten notes at court, printed and distributed either legally or illegally in pamphlets and books, read aloud on street corners, and proclaimed in public decrees. The historical situation in which Philippe’s Cent nouvelles nouvelles are written hence differs radically from that of the Mémoires de l’estat de France, and is organized around the incompatible notions of property, the pleasure in ingenious ruses that circumvent the property system, and the enjoyment that was to be had both by stealing what belonged to others within the stories themselves, and by recounting these stories of «profit and loss» as a «pastime» that is both memorable and pleasurable. The idea of historicity that is so thoroughly explored by numerous writers during the Wars of Religion seems wholly absent here, despite Philippe’s own remarkable ventures into the realm of historical writing.

What is important then in trying to sort out the real from the imaginary in these tales is an understanding of the narrative codes that Philippe inherited from his models and sources, which always inform his representations even of local events that he himself has witnessed, and which he recounts within the frame of his tale collection. Along with the recognition of the «carnivalesque» code and the conventions of the nouvelle tradition, another reflexive reaction that experienced readers might have to these kinds of anecdotes would be to situate them within the ancient tradition of exemplary narrative. Vigneulles explicitly refers to this practice at the beginning of a number of nouvelles, making us believe that, aside from their entertainment value, the catalogs of tricks he is collecting in and as his book are intended to educate the reader in the dangers of things that might happen in the real

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18 S. Goulart, Mémoires de l’estat de France sous Charles IX, Meidelbourg, Henry Wolf, 1578, ii v.
world of the Metz in which he lived, and about which he had an encyclopedic understanding ranging from the most serious historical knowledge to the most frivolous and comic insights into its local population. Philippe’s ambivalence concerning both his subject matter and his own position as narrator within the hybrid world that he creates is apparent even in the most minimal of introductory comments to his stories, as in the case of nouvelle 53: «Au temps passés l’on faisoit plusieurs tromperies et finesse comme l’en trouve par escript en plusieurs livres et histoires. Je croy que la coutume n’en est encor pas perdue et que à present s’en font toujours des nouvelles qui sont aucunes fois bonnes à oyr pour advertir ceulx qui rien n’en sceivent et pour les garder du dangier» (p. 224). One of the noteworthy elements of this passage is Philippe’s insistence that his own writing is a consequence of or a contribution to a lengthy intertextual tradition, while at the same time the story we are going to read is clearly derived not from any of the numerous textual models from which he often drew his inspiration, but from his own experience as a kind of flâneur avant la lettre who frequented the taverns of Metz and carefully took note of the anecdotes that he witnessed and heard in these hotbeds of oral narrative. As Livingston expressed this point concerning tale 53, «Cette ‘finesse’ a vraisemblablement été inspirée par un tour joué par quelque farceur dans une taverne. Apparemment Philippe faisait partie de la bande. Rien de traditionnel dans cette histoire» (p. 224). Despite Livingston’s claim that there is «nothing traditional» in the tale, Philippe’s introduction places this story within the tradition of exemplary literature that dominated the nouvelle in its later manifestations, while his most immediate model in French, the Burgundian Cent nouvelles nouvelles, largely ignored the didactic intentions of storytelling to concentrate on its entertainment value.

The author hence occupies a transitional position between the bawdy texts of the first collection of tales in French and the more ethical and moral concerns of the genre’s culmination in Marguerite de Navarre’s Heptaméron. This is true despite Philippe’s own quite forceful claims that he is collecting stories for the usual purpose of warning readers about the tricks that unscrupulous men and women may play on them, as in the opening of tale 28:

Affin de acroistre le nombre et pour multiplier et achever les centz nouvelles dernieres faictes, lesquelles j’ay deliberez, moyennant la grace de Dieu, de dire, compter et reciter tout du loing, je prie à icellui mon Dieu que ce soit sans pechier, car mon intencion n’est sinon, comme j’ay dit devant, affin de passer temps et pour eviter oisiveté, aussi affin que, s’il y a aucune tromperie ou finesse faicte, tant en luxure comme aultrement, que l’on s’en puisse garder, et non pas pour en user en mal (p. 136).

From this perspective, the idea that Vigneulles himself would be part of a group of «gentils compagnons» and con men who played tricks on unsuspecting victims in bars clashes strongly with the idea that the inclusion of the anecdote within the collection was meant to instruct readers on the dangers of such deceptions. Nevertheless, the oral source of this anecdote and Philippe’s presence as a witness among the group of tricksters are clear from tale 53’s opening lines: «[…] dernièrement je me trouvas [sic] en ung lieu là où estoient plusieurs bons
compaignons qui devisoient d’aller boire » (p. 224). Given the positive evaluation of stories of this type that we have already seen in nouvelle 20, it seems that the claim « it is sometimes good to hear new stories about tromperies » operates both on a didactic level – it is good to know what kinds of tricks these grifters play – and on an entertainment level, which is what most interests the narrator in many of the tales.

Beyond the ethical concern of exemplary narrative and the comic utility of any given anecdote, however, are the conceptions of the true, the real, and the believable that are implicitly presented here and in all of Philippe’s work. The truthfulness of these stories is almost always associated with the actual presence of the writer in his text and in his beloved city. C. Jones has detailed the complex maneuvers that Vigneulles performed when translating the Lorraine chanson de geste cycles into Middle French, when he insisted upon the veracity of these epic stories by comparing their unbelievable violence to the wars that both he and his readers experienced first-hand. This insistence echoes almost exactly Philippe’s proclamations concerning the verisimilitude of the tales contained in the Burgundian Cent nouvelles nouvelles that we examined earlier:

For Philippe, then, the truth of the Lorraine epic as history and story is not limited to the excellence of the source. Rather, the general content of the work (i.e. tales of horrific bloodshed) is authenticated by recent history as Philippe himself has recorded it. Specific incidents are supported by analogues from classical and Biblical texts. Above all, artifacts preserved in the urban space occupied by the author and his intended audience anchor the heroes and their surroundings in familiar territory. Philippe takes care to situate his writing endeavor in this same space when he attaches his name to the work19.

Throughout the nouvelle literature in French, the presence of the witness who has seen a given event, or who has heard a given story from others who are « dignes de foi », is a topos that appears repeatedly either in frame narratives or in introductory remarks to the tales themselves. Nevertheless, these truth claims are rendered problematic by their presence in stories that are clearly modeled on other sources, as often happens even in works as devoted to the « truth » as the Heptaméron, in the prologue of which Parlamente proclaims that the intention of the devisants should be « de n’escrire nouvelle, qui ne fust veritable histoire »20.

In the case of Philippe’s tale 53, then, when we read about a simple but effective con pulled off in one of the taverns of Metz that the author witnessed and tells us about – a miser is forced to pay the bar bill of his profligate companions essentially because he loses a bet – the authenticity of this story is derived from the presence of the author as a witness to the event, which he reports here in a kind of comic, narrative testimony. On the other hand, however, the insignificant transgression at the heart of this tale causes a « carnivalesque » redistribution of wealth that is a characteristic trait both of Philippe’s tales and of the « grotesque realism » that Bakhtin described. Similarly, one of the most elaborate of the work’s narrative inventions, tale 91, in which three commères – stereotypical figures in carnival celebrations to this day in

19 C. Jones, op. cit., p. 23.
Europe—finagle an enormous meal out of one of their miserly husbands, is structured around this same plot configuration, while wealthy misers are almost invariably the targets of the most cleverly contrived abuse to be found in the work, perhaps revealing something about the personal biases of the author. It could be that these redistributions of goods and property were brought about by petty criminals in the real world in which Philippe lived, but this possibility is consistently magnified and exaggerated in the immense imaginary universe left to us in the nouvelle literature. In contrast, if we are to judge from other documents, the actual world in which the author lived was characterized by the much harsher reality of the lethal punishments for minor crimes that Noiset highlighted in La Chronique, and which is also evident from a glance at almost any criminal register from the period.

To conclude, one might compare Vigneulles’s depiction of comic anecdotes and characters in the Cent nouvelles nouvelles to his treatment of historical events in the Journal. The opening of this text sends us crashing into the midst of real events that occurred around the moment of the author’s birth. After a brief genealogy of his family, Vigneulles describes the siege of the city of Metz by the forces of the Duc de Lorraine. In his introduction to this description, Philippe provides us with an important marker of «veracity» that is meant to underscore the accuracy of the following account: «Mais premier vous veulez dire et conter la manière comment et en brief; car j’ay recueilli de plusieurs traités et voullumes et en ait fait ung autre livre qui parle de la fondacion de la noble cité de Mets et de plusieurs aventures et advenues qui en ycelle noble cité ont este advenues […]»\(^{21}\). In response, then, to our initial questions, Vigneulles reveals that he was intimately acquainted with the rigors of historical writing, and that his accounts of his native city in both La Chronique and the Journal were composed on the basis of «treatises and volumes» that he consulted in order to construct his own version of events in both works. Vigneulles claims that the attempted siege of Metz that he describes took place on April 9, 1473, when he was not yet two years old, which confirms that the account of it that we read in the Journal was based on other written versions of these events, or on stories that he heard during his life. The vivid description of the siege places the reader right in the midst of violent action, including a popular uprising against the invading soldiers:

Et ce temps pendant le peuple se esmeut aux armes et sortissoient de leur maison sans tenir ordre ne mesure et comme gens de couraige, nus et deschaux comme ils estoient, avec pal et massue et avec bèche et howes ou aultres hutancilles, tel que chacun les powoit trower, se mirent au devant en deffandent leur corps et leurs biens et tinrent bon et tres virillement se deffendirent jusques tant que aulcuns hommes d’arme fussent armés et venus. Aussy le bouchiers de viez-boucheries ruoient par leurs fenestres pal, fuste, chayrs, taubles et tretiaulx pour empeschier la rue, et furent les annemis environ le nombre de v.c dedans la cité, jusques tout dedans la viez-boucherie. Mais quant ils virent que leurs gens ne venoient plus après, ils furent bien estonns et esbays et non sans cause, car ils ne powaient entrer, comme dit est, par

les pals ainsy cheus. Par quoy bien vite retournairent arrier et se salvoit qui pouvoit par dessoubz ycelluy pal qui estoit demouré à cheoir […] (ibid., p. 4-5).

Like the soldiers who sought to invade the city, readers of this passage are bombarded by material goods, which Philippe describes as if he had been a witness to the scene. The art of storytelling as entertainment, which requires that one present a vivid scene to readers and listeners so that they may feel as if they are witnessing these events themselves, seems to influence this version of events based on written accounts or stories heard from others who were present at the siege. In the defense of « their bodies and their goods », the common folk of the city throw masses of objects into the streets. In a first sequence, all of these objects are the implements of diverse forms of work that are here used as obstacles to impede the advancing soldiers; in the second sequence, household items like chairs, tables, and trestles are thrown in. It could be argued that in the presumably real world that this text describes from the once-removed position of a reader of documents or a listener of stories, the idea of property was highly developed and fiercely defended by merchants who belonged to the same class as Vigneulles himself. In his nouvelles as in his journals and chronicles, Philippe is hence largely concerned with transcribing an order of property and the constant threat of its violation or abrogation, which is equivalent to the « evils » that he claims to have elucidated in his collection of stories. His comic yet exemplary works thus include two kinds of warnings especially for his male readers: they are instructed in the multiple means by which thieves will try to rob them of their goods, or, in keeping with the ancient, misogynist tradition that informs the nouvelle, the means by which their wives will try to trick them by sleeping with other men. At the same time, however, these tales also celebrate the ingenuity of tricksters, including many wily women, who manage to entertain their victims and to keep goods and objects moving in the local economy by stealing things and even bodies that do not belong to them. On the level of the stories themselves, then, Philippe as narrator is a kind of rogue who hawks narrative goods to his readers that often are not exactly what he claims that he wants us to believe that they are. The Cent nouvelles nouvelles is hence itself a narrative compilation of the petty transgressions that probably occurred frequently in the actual markets and taverns of Metz, but these same legal violations, no doubt exaggerated according to narrative conventions, also delighted listeners on the street corners of the town who passed the time by telling, retelling, listening to, and circulating stories about these kinds of crimes and misdemeanors.

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