CHAPTER 6

THE AESTHETICS OF LAUGHTER

The game, one would like to say, has not only rules but also a point.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

*Humour is a phenomenon caused by sudden pouring of culture into Barbary.*

Ezra Pound, “D’artagnan Twenty Years After”

*As speech is the culmination of a mental activity, laughter is a culmination of a feeling—the crest of a wave of felt vitality.*

Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form*

*The world can never take a holiday from metaphysical first principles.*
*Even the raving, bolted in their cells, have not the files to file these chains away.*

Gladys Schmitt, *Sonnets for an Analyst*

*A man may seye ful sooth in game and pley.*

Harry Bailly

Everyone knows that many of Chaucer’s tales are funny; moreover, the frequent appearance of the paired terms “ernest and game” and “sentence and solace” suggests that their author knows that he and his created pilgrims are playing weighty and hilarious language games simultaneously. The presiding Host knows about the potential for “sooth” in “game and pley” and says so to the Cook (I.4355). Everyone also knows how complex the related, but not synonymous terms, laughter, humor, comedy, satire, and parody have been and still are. This chapter does not set out to untangle the scholarly debates about these categories, but looks
instead at the breadth and inclusiveness of Chaucer’s distinctive humor and the aesthetic effects it evokes. It deals only with the *Canterbury Tales* (and relatively few of them) because I want to concentrate on comic forms, and *Troilus and Criseyde*, although it can be characterized in several genres, does not seem to me to qualify as comic in its generic shape. Both it and nearly all the *Tales* are marked, of course, by sporadic humor. For example, Cecile, on the verge of martyrdom, answers Almachius with a zinger: your vaunted power over life and death is only the power to kill, not quicken (*Second Nun’s Tale* [VIII.482–83]), which seems just the sudden swerve from normal expectation that identifies wit. Comment on these occasional sparks are also absent from this chapter—there are too many to do them proper justice.

Storytelling, funny or not, inevitably involves the “metaphysical,” as Schmitt’s poem suggests—“even the raving” are subject to the demands of intellect, and although I would not call any of Chaucer’s narrators “raving,” some of them are pretty riotous. What brings together the discipline of metaphysics and the outrageousness of wit is imaginative *play*, cultural play that suddenly pours its orderliness into “Barbary,” as Pound says. Wittgenstein’s conception of language games is particularly relevant to this chapter, and so are Freud’s trenchant commentary in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Henri Bergson’s essay “Laughter,” and Linda Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Parody*. In the section on the fabliaux, I want to show how parody and satire (which predominate in that form) contribute to the coherence and shapeliness of both the individual tales and the unfolding frame tale. Antonio Damasio’s *The Feeling of What Happens* makes a general case for the mind/body connection in a way that can be linked with Susanne Langer’s “crest of a wave of felt vitality” in the presence of the comic. Daniel Dennett asserts that “luxuriant imagination” is central to fun¹ and much of what I want to say about Chaucerian fictions concerns such imaginative luxuriance: abundance of varied detail, pleasure, vigor, fertility, and profusion. It is perhaps Chaucer’s most distinctive signature.

The *Critique of Judgement* turns up again because I am treating humor as a species of the aesthetic, as did Kant himself, along with Aquinas and Freud. All three stress the element of freedom from practical consequences characteristic of both aesthetic judgment and laughter. Aquinas frames it in terms of the fact that only humans experience both humor and beauty.² Freud characterizes both as “playful judgements,” those which enjoy the object of attention rather than using it for a practical end,³ in agreement with Kant. All three also assume the escape of beauty and laughter from the grip of specified concepts, without denying their address to intellect and shareability. Such assumptions license discussion of what has seemed