Introduction: *Ridebat de facto Sara*

Abstract: *This chapter offers a reading of the fifth-century Latin poem, the Cena Cypriani (famously used by Umberto Eco in The Name of the Rose). The poem is an antic listing of biblical characters attending a feast, each behaving in a way that conforms to their typological characteristics, often to absurd effect; it ends with the words ridebat de facto Sara, “Sarah laughed about what had happened.” We ask what is special about this laughter, such that it inflects the poem; this introduces the concerns of the book as a whole, and a resumé of its chapters.*

Toward the climax of *The Name of the Rose*, Umberto Eco’s novel of skull-duggery and erudition in a thirteenth-century monastery, the hapless narrator, Adso, has a dream. The dream is of a chaotic banquet, mixing figures from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures with characters from the monastery, where a succession of grotesque murders has been taking place. The images of the dream grow ever more elaborate and disorienting, until finally Christ is waving his crown of thorns, the Pope is expressing bafflement, and the abbot of the monastery is leading his pigs off to hunt for truffles. It seems merely a florid expression of Adso’s fear and exhaustion. But when he confides his dream to his mentor, William of Baskerville, William can readily decode it:

> do you know that to a great extent what you tell me has already been written? You have added people and events of these past few days to a picture already familiar to you, because you have read the story of your dream somewhere, or it was told you as a boy, in school, in the convent. It is the *Coena Cypriani*.1

And so it is.

The *Cena Cypriani* is an anonymous poem. It seems to date originally to late antiquity,2 but it was immensely popular and repeatedly re-written and re-presented throughout the middle ages.3 The conceit of the poem is simple, though it is developed to almost impossible degrees of elaboration. A rich roster of biblical characters – and a few from early non-canonical texts – is invited to a dinner party. Each character arrives, is dressed, eats and so on in a way which puns on and literalizes his or her own snippet of biblical narrative. Each characterization is very terse: often only a name and a verb, or a name and a substantive with verb implicit. The figures are ordered according to a playful or perverse web of association within the story of the dinner, not according to their appearance in the biblical narrative, and they may re-appear or disappear as the twisted logic of the tale dictates.

For example, here is the sequence of events when the King Joel, who has convened the banquet, demands that each of the guests help with the preparations before they start to eat:

*First, Elijah looked for fire, Azarias kindled it,*
*Jephthah collected the wood, Isaac brought it,*
*Joseph chopped it, Jacob uncovered the well,*
*Sepphora offered hyssop, Daniel stood by the lake,*
*servants brought water, Rebecca a water-jug,*