PART III

EGO
CHAPTER EIGHT

DIFFORMITAS: INVective, INDIVIDUALITY, Identity

The medieval insult of ugliness (difformitas) played upon and thus in part reveals aspects of the medieval concepts of identity and personhood. Hence, in order to pursue my study of these questions, I propose in this chapter to analyze a specific episode of aggressiveness in twelfth-century France.

Medieval invectives could constitute an infraction and thus might be legally punished as threats to the social and eschatological orders, yet they could also be manipulated to serve as tools for the preservation of society and religion. Many parameters affected the norms and boundaries of medieval insults including circumstances, purposes, and targets, so that a fixed definition of invective cannot by itself form the basis for an analysis of the phenomenon. The epistemological necessity of having to deploy pre-existing analytical categories in order to grasp their specific historical nature will not, however, detain us here. Rather, I will consider how narratives of transgressions crossed social, ethical, and esthetic codes, breaching and mobilizing them in the process of constituting themselves as insults. Such invectives transgressed, paradoxically, even as they followed existing contemporary rhetorical rules for the expression of vituperation. As the Aurea Gemma ca. 1120), one of the earliest ars dictaminis, put it: “If you propose to vituperate someone, you will show or proclaim him lacking in all virtues and abundant in all vices; and you will designate his use of externally located corporal goods [riches, nobility, office, and glory], which are good as well as bad, as immoderate and intemperate and thus you will stain his person by all means. If he is learned, show that he was slothful in study and luxurious in leisure, and try to demonstrate that he was not implacable to enemies and inexorable to