

# Late Medieval Theatre in France and Germany: A survey of the origins and the evolution, the genres and the performance <sup>1</sup>

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## 1. THE ORIGINS

Speaking about medieval European theatre, it seems to me that some questions immediately arise as to the origins of theatre in the Middle Ages. The first of these questions leads as far back as Antiquity. Indeed, at the first glance on medieval theatre we may wonder whether there is anything left of the great tradition of Greek and Roman Antiquity.

No doubt, ancient theatres as architecture could still be seen in Italy, in Spain, in France, in German countries and even up to Britain, but they were no longer used for theatrical performances. It is more than probable, however, that acting traditions may have survived in a small scale; but the evidence is scarce: On the one hand there is the epitaph of the mime Vitalis of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, who seems to have continued a tradition of acting or at least imitating, on the other hand, one or two rare manuscript illuminations show a person reading a comedy of Terentius and some actors around are probably miming it (cf. Hartnoll 1968:ill. 28), but the manuscript dates from the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. As for Terence, certainly the best known of ancient dramatists, we are more convinced that the very idea of his comedies being “plays for performance” has largely been

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<sup>1</sup> In a slightly different form, this article was presented in a conference at the University of Urbino on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2004 following an invitation by professor Roberta Mullini. Although notes have been added afterwards the general style of a spoken text has been maintained.

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lost. The reason for the interruption of interest in theatre and in the possibilities of performance is not only a sort of general decay of classical knowledge and interest in it, but will certainly have been motivated by the contempt expressed by the Fathers of the Church. Christian culture at that time scorned the pagan tradition of tragedies (originally related to the cult of Dionysos) and the immoral impact of comedies. The fact is that even the idea of “tragedy” and “comedy” as plays for performance in a theatre was lost for centuries, leaving only the contrasting meaning of fatal ending vs. good ending. Think of the use Dante made of the word *Commedia*, and of the use of the term of “tragedie” e.g. by Chaucer in the *Canterbury Tales*.

One exception to this general rule may be found in Germany as early as the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and it is indeed closely connected with Terence: The German nun Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim wrote six Latin comedies formally following the Roman comedies of Terence, but filling this structure deliberately with a moral intention.<sup>2</sup> However her “plays” with this strong didactic purpose were not meant for performance, neither in monastery, school, nor for a larger public. Some more exceptions, in Latin language, too, but originated in France, are the so-called “comédies élégiaques”, mainly plays of deceit, of which the best known is *Babio*, a kind of farce that could well have been, but probably never was performed, but rather meant as a stylistic exercise. These examples of Latin “comedies” in the High Middle Ages, though “dramas” they were, are unlikely to have had an influence on the creation of a new theatre because of having been known by a very restricted reading public only.

After what has been said about the Church’s disapproval of theatrical performance, we will have to find out how it was possible, at the same time, that Christian culture became a new source for (a different kind of) theatre. Or, to put the question in a more neutral way for the moment: When and how did a new kind of theatre come into existence? This question has been discussed in all aspects, and we will not mention any details here. Besides the theory of a continuing influence of ancient dramatic texts and/or performances, there have been proposed some more sets of theories for the origins of medieval theatre, theatre now being understood as the performing art:

First, it is well known that professional minstrels and jugglers presenting themselves at fairs had a knowledge of the art of entertainment by imitation, dressing, gesture, voice etc. Then, we may believe that pagan rites comprising cos-

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<sup>2</sup> See Hrotsvithae Opera 1970. For a German reading public, the easiest way to get an idea of at least two of her comedies, is to procure the translated texts of Dulcinius and Abraham, ed. by Karl Langosch together in one small volume published in the Reclam collection. For a critical study of her work see Nagel 1965.

tume and perhaps mask, originating probably in Germanic men's association, may have been transmitted and adapted to a changing society. And last, the church itself by its ministers and in its most intimate sphere, very close to the celebration of the mass, has worked in direction of performance.

Let us have a quick look at these different fields of influence:

It is certain that minstrels, jugglers ("joculatores"), had professional knowledge of entertainment and will have recited stories for entertainment and instruction with a kind of impersonation in the shape of a one man show (sometimes with a puppet) or by twos, dialoguing. Pagan rites have certainly been at the origin of seasons' plays as they celebrate the defeat of winter and the coming of spring, and thus they have also contributed to carnival performances. These supposed influences seem both to have some probability for the origin of different genres of profane theatre, let us say at once: French farce and German carnival play. It is less probable that they should have exercised an influence on Christian sacred plays too, as some research tries to point out.

The general opinion is that there was a continuous evolution from some small additions (tropes) to the liturgy of important days of the church year, especially Easter liturgy, to performances for Easter, for Christmas, Epiphany etc. taking place first still in church and in front of the altar, then outside the church, and finally enlarged to the whole Biblical story enacted in the midst of the city. The Church then, has not only been damaging to (ancient) theatre, but on the other hand it contributed in an important way to a new invention of theatre.

Why this was so, is our next question: Why did the Church make use of the medium of theatre performance? It must be clear that it is by no means an accident that made medieval theatre, or at least part of it, come into existence in the very home of the Church, in reality in front of the altar. Although the additional questions and responses to the mass were in Latin like the whole of the mass, it certainly was a concession to the community of laymen by its indirectly addressing all people present: "Quem quaeritis in sepulchro, o christicolae?"<sup>3</sup> and at the same time by its concrete, vivid and visible presentation of priests dressed as angels, as the Marys on their way to the grave, and so on. Specialists speak of an evolution from Easter celebration to Easter play by addition mainly of new persons and dialogues, namely an "unguentarius", the merchant of ointment, an extra-biblical figure which soon became a comical part (cf. Linke 1978). The audience of the Easter play remained the Christian community of the city and they experienced their faith reinforced by the act that took place in front of them and, indeed, with them.

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<sup>3</sup> MS from St. Gallen of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, quoted by Borchardt 1969:14.

## 2. THE EVOLUTION

From the Easter plays for one tradition and from juggler's activities for the other tradition, onward, it could seem reasonable and in fact is a very widespread view to distinguish the evolutions of sacred drama and theatre on the one hand from that of profane on the other, even if the two lines of evolution overlap and if it is risky to characterize some entire genres, like the morality, as belonging to one or the other tradition. The wish for distinctions and the idea of separating sacred from profane are modern approaches to the question of genres, and perhaps not wholly adapted to the medieval view of things. We should certainly keep in mind that all public activities were considered "sub specie aeternitatis", and this means also under the control of Church authorities. On the other hand the Church always proved to have a strong stomach and thus it left some free space for the survival of traditions, even pagan, on special occasions like the feast of fools and generally in carnival season. By this means not only traditional figures of dangerous origin and craft like the "wild man" or Hellekin (who became Arlecchino) survived, but also the idea of an upside-down hierarchy as a valve for criticism – restricted to some days or weeks – could have its place in the church year. A boy bishop or abbot reigned joyously for one day or one week. These special seasons and activities would by no means invalidate the "normal" hierarchy.

Coming back incidentally to the fundamental distinction between sacred and profane drama and theatre, we should consider that there have been proposed some different distinctions stressing each another aspect: serious versus amusing theatre, or similarly didactic versus comic theatre, both distinctions based on reception and showing that the teaching intended by a great deal of plays is not necessarily religious instruction, but may also be moral, historico-political or even simply hygienic instruction (cf. Knight 1983).

Let us now have a glimpse at some examples of the first "generation" of sacred plays. These first religious plays leaving the celebration act of the mass or at least adding an imagined action to the biblical text, as we have seen already, are relied very closely to the highlights of the Christian year, like one of the very first French plays of the 12<sup>th</sup> century the fragment known as *La Résurrection du Sauveur* for Easter, other plays for Christmas or Epiphany like many *Jeux des Rois* in France and Switzerland and the first example of a theatre play in medieval Spain, the *Auto de los Reyes Magos* (also probably of the 12<sup>th</sup> century), whereas the special Spanish tradition of the "autos sacramentales" had its beginning only after Corpus Christi had been introduced as a special feast in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

In the high Middle Ages we may distinguish plays entirely based on biblical history like the very far-reaching *Mystère d'Adam* (also 12<sup>th</sup> century) leading from

the Genesis to the prophecies of salvation and to the signs of Apocalypse, which by the way presents a curious form with dialogues in old French, that is Anglo-Norman dialect, and stage directions in Latin. A little farther from direct biblical inspiration, other plays were based on parables, legends, miracles and saints' lives - as a widespread possibility to teach how to live in order to find God's favour, and sometimes how not to live in order to avoid Hell. Besides the history of the lost son, one of the favourite themes in this respect is the history of *Theophilus* of which after a famous narrative miracle dramatized versions have come down to us from France of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and by the well-known author Rutebeuf, and from different German regions. It is the dramatized life of a man of the church who, unfortunate in his ecclesiastical career, swears to the devil who indeed helps him to get his ecclesiastical charge again. But finally repenting and invoking the Virgin, Theophilus finds his way back to acknowledging the might of God, and is rescued. Many critics have shown the proximity to the history of Doctor Faustus of which a popular narrative exists in the Middle Ages before Christopher Marlowe was the first to dramatize it.<sup>4</sup>

Among serious moral but non-sacred plays I should mention at least one example because the basic story is known in the version of Boccaccio.<sup>5</sup> It is the life-story of Griseldis, the story of utmost patience in all undeserved mischief and trials she has to bear. Of this story there is a French dramatic version of the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The first example of a serious profane drama as it is, it has yet been interpreted by some critics as a parable for a saintly life.

In the German speaking countries there are Easter plays from Lübeck in the north to Vienna and Innsbruck in the south and in most of the dialects. The Easter play from Redentin (or Wismar or Lübeck) as a well known example of 2000 lines shows the Jews who are afraid Christ may leave the grave as predicted, and therefore ask Pilatus to send soldiers to guard the grave. At the moment of resurrection, all the prophets present themselves. Lucifer, on the other side, gathers all the devils around himself - and a kind of struggle between good and evil forces is starting. The critical view of contemporary bourgeois society is remarkable, for among the souls in hell there are a baker, a shoemaker, a tailor, an inn-keeper and so on, all of them found guilty of having cheated their customers.

During the Middle Ages the line of sacred theatre, to use once more this ex-

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<sup>4</sup> A German play about a female protagonist dependant on the devil, *Das Spiel von Frau Jutten* (The Play of Mrs. Jutta) by Dietrich Schernberg (about 1480) leads in a similar direction though it adds the attraction of cross dressing and even of the part of a female pope.

<sup>5</sup> The last story of the Decamerone is the best known version of the history of Griseldis.

pression, developed everywhere in Europe. In Italy “Sacre Rappresentazioni”, often celebrating a local saint were performed in every bishop city, in England in some important cities the “Cycles” tried to show as much as possible of biblical history, in Germany and in France Easter plays developed into more spectacular and effective Passion plays and became vast Mystery plays comprising the whole of the sacred history from the time of Adam to the Resurrection in the sense the old French *Mystère d’Adam* had already started it, but enormously enlarged by the multitude of episodes and the quantity of people involved. The intention of the representation certainly was to illustrate the elements and stories of the Bible, stressing, as it were, the spectacular and picturesque aspects, especially all the extraordinary and miracle episodes. Just as much as in iconographic representation at cathedrals’ doors or stained glass windows, this kind of illustration of the Bible was not meant as an aim in itself but as a means to confirm the faith. In addition to this, the visual and audible presentation on a city place or at a street corner, joining as actors and mainly as spectators the whole township and its surroundings, has a public function in melting people to a community not only religious but also civil. To a certain degree, among spectators, this intention then forms an opposite to the particular interest of those groups of citizens, who at the same time are organized in guilds and corporations. The professional, trade and craftsmen’s organizations certainly did not lose of their importance by the predominant interest of the city - to the contrary: between the actors and producers there could arise a kind of rivalry as to the best contribution to the common spectacle.

Following this evolution from Easter mass to Easter play, to plays of saints’ lives and legends and to the large mystery plays of the 15<sup>th</sup> century we get aware of two lines of changes. First, the sacred plays gain in renown. The authors, who seem to be experienced writers, begin to sign their work. In France we thus know Arnoul Gréban and Jean Michel. Then the plays themselves become longer: up to 45000 lines (the *Passion* of Jean Michel), and a performance like that of the *Passion de Valenciennes* may have lasted 20 to 25 days! Together with this enlargement goes an enormous extension of the story. It is no longer just the biblical Passion and Easter story, but legendary parts are added to it, and especially the number and rôle of devils augments - for amusement -, but also that of angels and saints. The extension of Christ’s suffering and of Mary’s compassion certainly lead into the direction of humanizing the sacred events – much as some films of our time do. It thus seems understandable that the Paris supreme court interdicted the representation of religious “mystères” in 1548 because of so many legendary details added for effect, and that in Italy at about the same time “sacre rappresentazioni” were prohibited.

It is evident that the evolution of sacred theatre shortly mentioned here with special reference to France was about the same in most European countries, even

if the documents are much less complete elsewhere. Given the main intention of a Christian instruction we may imagine that besides the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ some other biblical stories and especially parables will have been a favourite subject, mainly due to the fact that there are confronted two ways of living, one of them in harmony with God's will, the other to the contrary. The parable I am specially alluding to, of course, is that of the wise and the foolish maidens, represented very often in sculptures at cathedrals as well, and of which there subsists a fine dramatization in a German play *Das Eisenacher Spiel von den zehn Jungfrauen* (Ludus de decem virginibus).

Of course, the same distinction of right and wrong, of good and bad behaviour in a very black and white design is the base structure of all the Last Judgment plays as well and at the same time it organizes – even locally as we see from the drawings and descriptions of performances – the scene where the large mystery plays are represented: Paradise on one side – Hell on the other.<sup>6</sup> To this important context of an instruction by examples belong plays about martyrs too, and a good deal of miracle plays.

### 3. THE GENRES

If we had the intention to continue the line of evolution of theatre we would soon arrive at the somewhat embarrassing fact that in France after a first boom in the 12<sup>th</sup> and mainly the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries there is very little evidence in form of texts or documents to be found from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, before coming to the extreme heyday in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Of course, the Hundred Years' War between France and England is mainly responsible for this lack of documents. But fortunately at least one genre seems to have survived and been preserved, the miracle play. We have had a short look at one of the first examples already speaking of *Le miracle de Théophile*, and there is to be added that the main structure stays the same in the broad majority of the *Miracles de Notre Dame*, though often enough the danger for the human person in the centre of the action does not arise from a fault or misbehaviour of this protagonist, but rather from an act of malice of another person. Important for the genre is the unshakeable faith of the “victim”, which motivates the Virgin to come in person or by intermission of the archangels to rescue him or her.

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<sup>6</sup> See especially the scene of the Lucerne representation, reproduced e.g. in Kindermann 1980:ill. 26.

Speaking of the widespread and often rather simplifying structure contrasting good and evil we could have already mentioned a genre which is mostly based on this structure, too, yet in a rather abstract way, the morality. The peculiar interest of this genre, widely spread all over Europe but especially in France and England, is the fact already alluded to, that it transgresses the familiar distinction between sacred and profane drama. Whereas the instruction transmitted by its examples is often religious instruction, it may on the other hand be secular too, and even political and social instruction. A morality play like *L'Eglise, Noblesse et Pauvreté*, conservative in mind, teaches the spectators to be content with their lot even if it be comparatively miserable. More curious still, but easily understandable, if we think of the all-comprising lesson of religion, is one of the most famous French moralities *La Condamnation de Banquet* by Nicolas de La Chesnaye which warns the audience of too much eating and drinking and the possible consequences – in accord with the teaching of medieval church for which gluttony is one of the seven deadly sins. A great deal of moralities, however, are again constructed according to the opposition of good and bad behaviour in a more direct Christian teaching intention. *Bien Avisé Mal Avisé* (Well Advised. Badly Advised) shows this structure right from its title. There are clearly indicated two ways between which to choose for the human being – and we know already the consequences: one of them leading to Hell, the other to Paradise. The most widespread European example of this genre is *Everyman*, transmitted to us mainly in an English version. In this play we find demonstrated in a very impressive way the main feature of the genre as to its presentation of characters: On both sides of the protagonist Everyman we find allegories, his sins and vices on one, his good deeds on the other. In fact, allegory is a well-known means of representation of abstract ideas or powers to which the audience of the late Middle Ages is well accustomed especially by the view of iconographic representation, sculptured on cathedral entrances, in colours to be found in stained windows. Because of this more abstract way of presenting conflicts and tendencies, however, I think we can speak of a special intellectual or literary art- contrasted to the down-to-earth feature especially of farces and carnival plays. And if of a German carnival play from Lübeck we read only the title *Van der trume unde warbeyt* (About Fidelity and Truth; cf. Catholy 1966), the text itself being lost, we imagine that this must have been an example very close to the morality tradition. We will have to come back to the German carnival play as a term too widely used to be an exact mark of distinction.

Once more considering the French scene of the 15<sup>th</sup> century where genre distinctions are easier to make, some more genres must be mentioned. One of them is on the very fringe of theatre, being mainly parody and this presented by only one speaker: “the sermon joyeux”, mock sermon. This short genre has had

its origin most probably in the feast of fools or similar events when young “clerici” could for a short time take over the power. It follows the structure of the sermon giving a Latin lecture first and a kind of explanation with example then. What seems to have been appreciated by other young priests and monks and by a larger audience is the fact that the very form of the sermon was used to the most incongruent subjects. We thus find well-known sermons on St Herring, on St Onion, on All fools under heaven.

Similar to the mock sermon seems to be the genre of dramatic monologue. It is defined by the fact of being a one man’s show, and fulfils the special intention of revealing a person’s showing off. Whereas the mock sermon is essentially a rhetoric genre, the dramatic monologue makes use of most of the elements of theatrical semiotics: An actor represents a person using costume, imitation of voice, gesture, perhaps some simple object (stage property) in order to shape a typical person whom his caricature is bound to degrade. As far as we can judge from afar the intention is not to mock a certain peculiar person known by the audience but rather to ridicule a social type to be easily recognized. Sometimes the degree of imitation is augmented by the fact that the actor, changing his voice and perhaps props, plays two different *personae* in contrast. It seems clear that this kind of public entertainment is a heritage of the jugglers who for centuries were public entertainers using mostly imitation, too. But the simple imitation will not work as a little dramatic action unless it offers the revelation and degradation of the mocked type’s ambition. Thus bragging soldiers – the grandsons, as it were, of the “miles gloriosus” of Roman comedy -, quack doctors and showing off lovers (like Don Juan figures ahead of the Spanish model) are the examples most often to be found in this genre. In France a very good example of the genre is the *Franc Archier de Bagnolet* – the monologue of a braggart soldier.

In Germany we often find an accumulation of figures of the same kind to be mocked in carnival plays in the subgenre which literary historians call the “Reihenspiel”-form (review)<sup>7</sup>: e.g. in *Die Liebesnarren* (The loving fools) a set of young men boast one after the other, especially about their success with the female sex. Mentioning such a number of fools in one play we should compare the French genre of “sottie” (fools’ play). In fact the difference is that in the German carnival play of this type the boasting fools are socially defined as peasants, a group on which in this urban amusement performed in cities like Nuremberg, most of the derision is concentrated. In the “sottie” on the other hand we generally don’t find this social conflict. The most important aspect of this genre is the presentation of

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<sup>7</sup> The distinction between (early) reviews (Reihenspiele) and action plays (Handlungsspiele) has been introduced by Eckehard Catholy.

a hierarchy of fools with at its head a prince of fools or more often “Mère Sotte”, the mother of fools (played by a man) who gathers around her the inferior fools, asks them for news from the outside foolish world, gives them advice and instruction (cf. Aubailly 1976). The company of fools from which the dramatic action arises is meant as a model of the world, as much of the hierarchy of society as a whole as of the one reigning in the Church. By stressing this aspect of rank and dependence known to everybody in the actual life, but transposed mockingly into a ranking and dependence among fools this genre of “sottie” is closely related to, and indeed, is an expression of the widespread idea of universal folly of which we find literary and philosophical expression in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century, best known probably from the *Laus stultitiae* of Erasmus.

The parody we see in this genre leads us back in a certain degree to the “sermon joyeux”; the more abstract carrying out of the satirical intention compares to the morality with its allegories. In fact in one of the well-known examples of the “sottie”, *Les trompeurs* (The cheaters), the main figure is Chacun, Everyman, who proves to be a fool of course, and is cheated by Le Temps (Time, and perhaps more accurately Time Present) and some more fools – under the regards of Mère Sotte. The play teaches not to act like Chacun, but this is an instruction without any transcendence.

We finally arrive at the two most comic and at the same time down-to-earth genres from France and from Germany, the farce on the one side, and the carnival play on the other. Both are genres of generally small dimension, only in extraordinary cases more than 600 lines long, and of a small number of characters. Both genres have also in common to present exclusively human conflicts, conflicts certainly which can be solved or could be so with some good will on both sides, and being part of a comic presentation, never merge into a fatal case. Instead, one of the most frequent mobiles is trick, cunning, deceit. In French farce especially frequent is the constellation of the triangle of husband, wife and lover. The development of the action in spite of this constellation, well-known in short narrative too, may differ much, the stress being put on the manner in which the deceit is carried out. The invention of a trick is mostly prepared by the wife, but sometimes it is the lover's part to invent and to act accordingly. In a simple form, the trick played on the husband consists only in hiding the lover- under a basket, in a heap of clothes,<sup>8</sup> and we recognize the motif from the narrative genre of “novella” or “fabliaux” (merry tale). In another case the practitioner, the lover, is able of playing a real part in a practical joke not entirely innocent at the expense of

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<sup>8</sup> For short summaries of the existent farces and indications about their publication see Faivre 1993. A very large choice of farces has been edited with notes and comments by Tissier 1986-2000.

the husband: When this person – predictably- in rage with his wife shouts “the devil shall carry you away”, the lover who is a priest, appears in the costume of the devil and takes the wife away (*Martin de Cambrai*). In one of the best farces the wife’s most apparent fault is to be domineering and always to give orders to her husband, especially for household duties (*Le cuvier*). In this case the trickster is the husband who willingly puts down a long list of all his duties as dictated by his wife. But when doing some washing she falls into the tub, instead of helping her out he only reads the list of his duties in which of course this incidental act does not figure. The part of the farce wife in this and in many more cases, showing her unfaithful or quarrelsome, or in some cases with both faults, is shaped by medieval antifeminism. But to understand this feature we must keep in mind that the authors and the actors were men, and if there was some reason for their accusation of women, there was the well-known situation to consider that often young wives had to live with much older husbands.

In some of the best farces the conflict opposes not the sexes but other social groups: the craftsman to the priest or more often the monk, the apprentice to his master, the miller or the peasant to the nobleman. In these conflicts mostly the underdog gains a victory over his social superior – even if everybody knows this victory to be temporary.<sup>9</sup> This is the case too in the very most important farce of the 15<sup>th</sup> century *Maître Pierre Pathelin*, which with over 1500 lines and three closely connected parts – in fact as if there were three farces attached to one another and with the same characters – is such an outstanding example of the genre that some of the specialists prefer to call it “notre première comédie” (Michel Rousse).<sup>10</sup> Maître Pathelin, an advocate without cases, succeeds in getting from the draper Guillaume enough cloth for himself and his wife without paying. When Guillaume arrives at his house in order to be invited to dinner and to get paid, Pathelin, helped by his wife pretends to have been ill for weeks. Thus Guillaume is doubly cheated. The shepherd Thibault has to appear at court summoned by the same Guillaume of whose sheep he has killed and eaten a good deal. He asks Pathelin to act as his lawyer, and Pathelin gives him the advice to answer nothing but “bée” to all questions by the judge. At court Guillaume, confronted with the two swindlers, Guillaume confounds the cases mixing up cloth and sheep and thus confusing the judge. Thibault sticks to Pathelin’s advice, is acquitted for idiocy, and proves the better cheater by continuing his rôle when Pathelin asks for his fee.

It is certainly not the intention of this article to exaggerate the similarities be-

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<sup>9</sup> Le couturier et Esopet, Le gentilhomme, Naudet, la demoiselle, etc.

<sup>10</sup> A series of new studies and essays on *Maître Pathelin* has been presented in Denis Hüe and Darwin Smith eds. 2000.

tween French farce and German carnival play. We first of all have to keep in mind that in France there is a large choice of secular dramatic genres which has led to frequent complex spectacles, beginning with a “cri”, a sort of parade, continuing with a “sottie”, then a morality and in the end a farce.<sup>11</sup> The different types of dramatic representation visible by the number of actors, their costume and of course by the structure and theme of each short play indicate a differentiation known and expected by the audience, too. In Germany on the other hand, the term of “Fastnachtspiel” (carnival play; Shrovetide play) must serve – *faute de mieux* – as a general term for all varieties of profane or comic drama, of which the presentation is initially connected with carnival season. There must have entered into the contents of the term traditional spring celebrating pieces as well as satirical plays allowed once a year under the inverted reign of carnival.

We thus find at the very beginning of the Shrovetide play tradition several versions of a Neidhart play as *Neidhart und das Veilchen* (Neidhart and the violet) of a very simple action. The knight Neidhart discovers the first violet of spring, in order to present it to the princess, he hides it by his hat until she will come this way. Meanwhile a peasant leaves his excrements instead under the hat – the peasants often have an unpleasant part. Of course Neidhart falls into disgrace with the princess. We learn from this early example from Tyrol (or another version from Nuremberg) that in Shrovetide plays scatology frequently replaces the obscenity we know from some French farces.

However in the collections of Shrovetide plays we are bound to find serious plays, too, even on political issues as indicated before: One of the best known Nuremberg authors of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, Hans Rosenplüt, wrote a play on the danger of social quarrels in the city, literally asking the Turks for help in accordance this time with the policy of the town council of the imperial city: *Des Türken Fastnachtspiel* (The Shrovetide play of the Turk). Mostly however, the plays present conflicts between peasants and citizens, between peasants and students, or rarely between peasants and knights, or even a king. The structure often is based on a wager. In another play by Hans Rosenplüt, *Der Bauer and der Bock* (The peasant and the buck) a woman proposes a wager to the knight, pretending to be able to make a peasant - in whom the knight has special confidence - tell a lie and thus to be untrue to his reputation, wagering as much as three bulls and four cows. After a while, the woman then returns to the nobleman, fully confident of her success. But the peasant explains himself his shame to have been tempted by the woman to whom he had to offer the buck as a present. In his sincere way he admits that the woman had suggested that he should tell his master the lie of a wolf

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<sup>11</sup> This is the order of a performance by Pierre Gringore, see Schoell 1975:158.

having carried away the buck. The master who has won the bet excuses the peasant's failing.

A wager against a person of high social rank but with a somewhat different result, this victim showing the master, who even is the king, as the loser of the bet, is presented in what is perhaps the best-known Nuremberg Shrovetide play, the subject of which has been treated in narrative form, too, *König Salomon and Markolf* (King Solomon and Marcolf) by Hans Folz.

#### 4. PERFORMANCE

To talk of performance in medieval theatre seems to be rather risky because we have so few documents. Certainly there are some today's performances by scholars and students as a kind of historical reconstruction – but even if they succeed in recreating a credible form of the medieval performance, it cannot make the impression of how it was in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Of the main elements of a theatrical performance, we may reconstruct the “stage”, we have a version of the text, we are able to make costumes and props according to the illustrations we find in books and sometimes on individual paintings- but it will not be possible to find the atmosphere of a town of the 15<sup>th</sup> century in which everybody was more or less engaged with preparing the event, controlling its performance, or himself acting, prompting, playing a musical instrument. And still more important, the participation of the audience, the kind of approach each spectator takes to this act, cannot be imagined, depending as it is on their social adherence: merchants, craftsmen, peasants etc., or “clerici” (intellectuals and students), priests, lawyers etc. This is to say that the reception depended on many important circumstances. In a city like Lille, where the acting of a mystery took place every year (cf. Knight ed. 2001), the approach will have been different from that of Mons, Valenciennes, Angers, or other towns where, as we know, an all-comprising mystery play of up to 50 thousand lines and more than 20 days duration would have been a very extraordinary event.

It is convenient for the moment to come back to the traditional distinction between sacred and profane drama in order to explain the way in which performance developed during the Middle Ages. Some theatre historians underline the polarity between distance and community. Of course we are convinced all of us that the sacred, biblical or legendary plays were intended to create and to confirm the community of Christianity. Especially in the early celebrations inside the church or cathedral the audience was integrated as the parish and meant to feel like it, to re-

spond to liturgical questions and to follow the action in pious attendance. Certainly, but the priests still were the priests, even if they spoke in the name of a merchant, an archangel or even as Mary. And the minimum action took place in front of the altar, which is only a little elevated above the church floor. And even when the dramatic action had left the church itself, being played in front of the portal, it still had its peculiar place, and the actors by the way were still mostly priests. But what shall we think of the evolution that led to the large passion and mystery plays in the centre of the city? In this advanced stage we have to distinguish between two essential forms of performance: the one, best known from the English towns of Chester, Wakefield and York under the name of cycles presents itself on wagons, each of which showing one pageant, image, episode, standing still one after the other at certain places or corners and there showing each time their episode to an audience which is meant to be standing there waiting for the next pageant to come round. This form is found more rarely on the continent, but at Lille for instance, there was a tradition of the kind – and there are some comparable worldly processions a little later everywhere. To speak of distance and/or community in this case means to say that the actors on their wagons were elevated above the ground where the spectators were standing; at the same time they had their extravagant dress, cross-dressing, too, as the female parts were played by male actors, and other semiotic elements of representation as well.

The same thing is true of the frequent “continental” performance of passion and mystery plays, when a central place of the city was chosen as “theatre”. Whether this temporary theatre took a circular or a linear shape, the acting space was distinguished from the one for the spectators be they standing around or seated on a scaffolding.

The dramatic texts containing rarely stage directions, almost everything we know about performance is deduced from iconographic material, as stylised as this may be. One of the most precious documents especially in respect of the division of acting space and audience is a miniature by Jean Fouquet “the martyrdom of St. Apolline” dated 1460 and reproduced in almost every study about medieval theatre.<sup>12</sup> It is taken for granted that it represents the performance in a form of theatre in the round.<sup>13</sup> The place of the (cruel) action is elevated above the ground, above in a partly circular construction we see several “mansions”

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<sup>12</sup> In coloured reproduction as frontispiece in Kindermann 1980, on the very cover of Mazouer 1998, as ill. 33 in Hartnoll 1968, etc.

<sup>13</sup> Some thirty or forty years ago, some related studies by Richard Southern (1957), Elie Konigson (1975) and Henri Rey-Flaud (1973) showed the wide-spread possibility of understanding medieval sacred performances in a theatre in the round – overrating perhaps a little this possible and sometimes documented shape.

(houses), in the centre there is Heaven with the throne, connected with the stage by a ladder, right of it a public box, and most to the right the space of the devils, with below the mouth of Hell. The person standing with a booklet in one and a stick in the other hand is certainly the stage director or the prompter. Whereas here we find a partly circular arrangement, similar to a certain degree to the circular scene with a number of “houses” as playing space in a drawing to be found in the manuscript of the English *Castle of Perseverance*, another miniature by Hubert Cailleau, from the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, it is true, shows and explains the setting of the *Passion de Valenciennes* in a linear arrangement from Paradise to Hell, the last “mansion” as so often being the most spectacular (cf. Hartnoll 1968:ill. 36). A third arrangement of stage and audience, placed right in a medieval city, is shown by the (reconstruction) of the Lucerne market place organized for the Passion play of 1583, as presented in the book of Kindermann (1980:ill. 26).

What is most common to these different arrangements, and indeed seems to be the prominent characteristics of medieval serious, didactic and religious theatre is the simultaneous stage. What does this mean? After the entering procession each person or group of persons get to their acting place waiting there for the episode in which they will have to step forth in order to speak and to act. The place where they belong, each of them, mostly is a kind of hut or house (*mansio*) or simple a place (*locus*) with some clear or symbolic sign indication. The most easily recognizable *loca* are those, opposed of course, of heaven (paradise) and hell. Especially the Hell’s mouth as we have seen is spectacular with grotesque figures and all the devils around. The audience of this theatre was either standing or seated on a scaffolding opposite to the linear stage (Valenciennes) or on both sides of the lengthy place (Lucerne), or else in the case of the theatre in the round the spectators would be placed in boxes around the acting area (cf. Rey-Flaud 1973) or in compartments between the different *loca* (cf. Konigson 1975).<sup>14</sup> Locally speaking there is some distance between the acting space and the audience even if sometimes spectators try to step over and – probably more often – actors like devils come running among the audience. On the other hand: Is there any general distinction between actors and spectators? Perhaps from the moment onwards when the performance left the interior of the church or at least from the moment when the majority of actors, still amateur actors of course, were recruited among citizens of every social adherence, the spectators see on stage their neighbour or the craftsman or merchant member of a guild or “confrérie” whom they use to meet every day for commerce or friendly association. Thus another kind of community

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<sup>14</sup> For some of the reconstructions by Konigson and Rey-Flaud see Kindermann 1980:ill. 54 to 56, and 84 for Southern’s reconstruction of *The Castle of Perseverance*.

based as much on urban closeness as on common belief comes into existence.

Are we allowed then to speak of “popular” theatre with regard to the mystery plays, as some of us did on several occasions? Though late medieval society in big commercial cities like Angers, Bourges, Valenciennes... is certainly composed of different layers, it is not the populace in the sense of the lower class that sets the tone. Thus it is more suitable to speak of theatre as an “urban” event – including at the same time the distinction between townspeople and village people, the latter certainly being invited to see the performance and to pay for the spectacle, but far away from its preparation and conducting.

Is there anything in common between the performance of religious and that of profane and specially comic theatre? We will leave alone, for the moment, a genre like the “sottie”, of which the mode of existence from the beginning was a special “société joyeuse”, the audience therefore being a selected group and in close contact with the performers. When later on in its short history the “sottie” was performed in a public way, as we saw, it seems often to have been one part of a more complex profane performance, not so far then from the farce, even if, we imagine, the fool’s cap will have helped to speak in a critical and satirical way. In fact one of the theatre historians calls the “sottie” the contest genre of the turning from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Aubailly 1975:189). With regard to the individual performance, that is when a “sottie” was played on its own, it may well have resembled the performance of a German Shrovetide play. And their probable common origin in the upside-down carnival tradition is responsible for it.

As we know more about German Shrovetide plays, let us have a look at them. It is well established that there were two different traditions concerning the group of actors and their social adherence. In the north of Germany, especially at the Hanse town of Lübeck, the acting groups were composed of young patricians. The bulk of the plays, as far as we know from one remaining text and some 70 known titles, were serious, close to the allegorical treatment of human behaviour and human relations as we find it in the morality tradition. In the south, and namely at Nuremberg, the actors (and authors) came from the lower urban population, they were young craftsmen or apprentices, young men still searching for their social status. The city council did not really appreciate the carnival activity, always suspecting some opposition to their acts and decisions. But, with some restrictions, they granted the young people this rare possibility of expressing their opinion. Concerning the performance what is to be retained is the fact that it was an indoor performance, each time in front of a restricted audience at an inn or private house. The performance itself certainly was not improvised, but the way of presenting it in the middle of other carnival festivities was. There was nothing like a “theatre” and no distinction between stage and auditorium. Instead a sort of

prologue or director used to come into the hall, to call for silence and for some space for the small number of actors, and then they would begin their action. As the performance was allowed only in the carnival season, we can suppose that at least some of the persons present among the public were in humorous disguise, so that the actors of the play, disguised and some of them cross-dressed as they were, would not at once be remarked as different from the audience.<sup>15</sup> What can be retained from the South German carnival play performance is the lack of distance; first locally: the actors don't present themselves on a stage or on any kind of elevated place, but in the midst of the audience on the same ground with them. They certainly know some of the spectators and are known by them. And, by the way, the actors are laymen and amateurs doing this job once a year for fun and with the intention of a slight and mostly humorous kind of public critique.

The most important distinction between the German Shrovetide play performance and the one of French farce seems to be that the farce generally was performed in an open space. It is true, however, that noblemen and perhaps patricians would also invite "farceurs" to give a performance at their "hotels" or even castles on special occasions like weddings. And it is well known that even persons of the highest nobility like King René of Anjou enjoyed farces. Nevertheless the most frequent stage for the farce is built up on a market place in the centre of the town, on a playing ground outside the city, or even at a street corner or on a bridge. People wanting to see the performance were attracted by the movement of the crowd, by the vivid colours of the actors' clothes, by the music they often played for introduction and by a first parade of the three or four actors. In order to be seen by the crowd, the farce actors had their stage, even if it was rather rudimentary: The main thing was to guarantee that it was high up - well about a man's height in order to allow people standing in one of the farther rows to see enough.<sup>16</sup> The scaffolding (*échafaud*) was to be transported by the troupe and consisted of timber planks put on tubs or else on a simple wooden construction. The acting space on this minimum stage, if we look at the drawings come down to us, could hardly exceed 3 m broad and 2 m deep, but we know that there were rarely, if ever, more than three persons together on stage (cf. Rousse 1981). Of great im-

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<sup>15</sup> Illustrations like the woodcut in the frontispiece of *Ein Faßnachtspiel von einem Arzte vnd einem Krancken* (Hans Folz, 1520) reproduced in Max Siller ed. 1992, clearly show the everyday dress of the actors, who could have been confounded with other townspeople. Illustration 41 in Kindermann 1980 entitled "Fastnachtstreiben" (carnival action) is perhaps not entirely convincing as a representation of a theatrical performance, but it shows the entrance of a group of persons at an inn.

<sup>16</sup> See paintings and drawings by P. Brueghel, P. Balten and other mostly Dutch artists, reproduced in many books on medieval comic theatre, e.g. in Hartnoll 1968, Schoell 1992, and in the book mentioned in the following note.

portance is the curtain at the back, allowing some back-stage business, scenes of hiding and listening secretly. In the case of *Maître Pierre Pathelin* the scene of Pathelin ill in bed may have been half hidden by the curtain. What is to be retained from the drawings, woodcuts and paintings is that, contrary to the German Shrovetide plays, for the French farce a strict distinction between stage and audience was necessary. In order not to be invaded by the public the actors even had the possibility to draw up to them the ladder they used to enter the stage at the beginning.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, I think the drawings show as well that the persons represented on stage in their costume and with some objects they use don't differ much from people among the audience, distinguished each time only by attributes of their sex, age and profession.

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<sup>17</sup> Easily visible on the drawing of P. Balten.

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