

CHAPTER THREE

THE JOYFUL COMPANIES OF THE FRENCH-SPEAKING
CITIES AND TOWNS OF THE SOUTHERN NETHERLANDS
AND THEIR DRAMATIC CULTURE
(FIFTEENTH–SIXTEENTH CENTURIES)¹

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Introduction

That some local groups had great importance in literary activities at the end of the Middle Ages is evident. From the nineteenth century on, scholars have already underlined the importance of such groups in the French-speaking towns and cities of the Southern Netherlands in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.² However, while some groups such as the *Puys de Notre Dame* have recently been studied in depth,³ we still lack a global study of other groups: the *associations/compagnies joyeuses* or joyful associations/companies that were responsible for theatre activities in the cities. Such a study would specify their mode of functioning as well as their importance within their city and on a regional level. I want to propose here a first survey of these associations in order to appreciate the extent to which some characteristics of such groups were not merely a regional phenomenon, but can be observed in other

¹ This research is part of a broader VIDI-project financed by the Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (NWO) and supervised by Jelle Koopmans at the University of Amsterdam.

² The term Southern Netherlands refers to the region of present-day Northern France and Belgium that up until the 1660s was part of the territories ruled over by the dukes of Burgundy and their Habsburg successors. Our discussion focuses on the joyful companies of the cities and towns of Artois, Hainault and the French-speaking part of Flanders: specifically, Arras, Béthune, Cambrai, Douai, Lille, Mons, Orchies, Saint-Omer, Tournai and Valenciennes.

³ Gérard Gros, “Le poète et la Vierge: étude sur les formes poétiques du culte marial, en langue d’oïl, aux XIV^e et XV^e siècles” (Ph.D. diss., Université de Paris IV—Sorbonne, 1989); Denis Hüe, *La poésie palindromique à Rouen: 1486–1550* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2002).

parts of France or even Europe.⁴ The main source for identifying the joyful associations in the French-speaking cities of the Southern Netherlands is the account books of these cities. We can then complete our information with local chronicles and descriptions of events such as joyful entries and the feasts of these groups.⁵ An important element of comparison is to be found in the recent research of Anne-Laure Van Bruaene on the Dutch-speaking chambers of rhetoric in the Southern Netherlands during the same period: her social historical study of these organisations allows us to find numerous similarities as well as crucial differences between these chambers and the joyful companies of the French-speaking towns of the region.⁶

I would first like to describe these associations, using as my primary example one we know a good deal about, namely the *abbaye de Lescache Pourfit* in Cambrai, but also referring to the examples of similar groups in other cities such as Arras or Lille. We then have to see how these groups interacted with each other, and what relations they established with other kinds of groups performing plays in the same cities, and even with groups outside the region, that is to say the Dutch-speaking chambers of rhetoric. Not only do we have to determine how these groups were organised, but also what their relations were with religious and civil authorities. We have then to ascertain what impact they had on their urban environment, that is, to inquire what their role was within the city: we would like to show that these groups had a didactic and a pedagogic mission. Finally, we will study their literary production or rather the traces that have survived of such a production, since most of the plays performed by these joyful associations have not been preserved (and maybe never were intended to be kept).

⁴ The number of cities studied, the period of time taken into account, as well as the fact that there is no recent global study of this phenomenon in this particular region, explain that my ambition is not to offer here an extensive study. I will deliver a more developed analysis of the phenomenon in the Ph.D. dissertation I am currently working on.

⁵ See in particular the account of the *Fête de Plaisance* in 1547 in Valenciennes: Arthur Dinaux, “Une Fête flamande sous Charles-Quint: Principauté de Plaisance à Valenciennes (1548),” *Archives du Nord de la France et du Midi de la Belgique* 3 (1833), 313–338.

⁶ Anne-Laure Van Bruaene, “*Om beters wille*. Rederijkerskamers en de stedelijke cultuur in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden (1400–1650)” (Ph.D. diss., Universiteit Gent, 2004); Anne-Laure Van Bruaene, “‘A wonderfull tryumfe, for the wynnyng of a pryse’: Guilds, Ritual, Theater, and the Urban Network in the Southern Low Countries, ca. 1450–1650,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 59 (2006), 374–405.

Description of the compagnies joyeuses

Although there were a number of joyful associations in the French-speaking cities and towns of the Southern Netherlands throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, these groups shared common characteristics. We can describe them as festive groups gathering together some citizens of a town in order to prepare and perform plays during festivities within the city or in neighbouring cities. These groups often presented their plays at dramatic contests. From what we know, their production was usually limited to drama, that is to say drama was their main means of expression, and that the content of their plays seems to have been linked more often with comical or moral profane matters, religious drama such as mystery plays being more often performed by other groups in these towns.⁷ It is therefore important to differentiate these groups from temporary groups formed for one performance (such as a Passion play performed during one or several days), and from others like guilds, religious brotherhoods and other literary associations such as the Puy (the Puy being originally religious brotherhoods too). To give a better and more precise idea of these groups, we can take the example of the abbey of Lescache Pourfit of Cambrai, since it is one of the best known of these associations, and complete it with other examples, in order to describe precisely its characteristics.

The *abbaye de Lescache Pourfit* is known from the account books of the city of Cambrai, although these books disappeared during World War I; fortunately, pieces of information about this joyful association and about medieval drama in Cambrai were gathered by Achille Durieux at the end of the nineteenth century, and we have based our study on his edition of the excerpts concerning drama found in the account books.⁸ Durieux quotes literally numerous sources, but he also interprets others

⁷ However, we will see one example of joyful companies involved in the staging of religious plays with the case of the procession of Lille, where joyful associations performed mystery plays. This example underlines the difficulty of establishing a very clear scheme of the roles of different dramatic groups in this theatrical culture: while we can distinguish some tendencies, such as this division between farces and morality plays played by joyful associations and mystery plays performed by other associations, there are always exceptions that contradict our modern desire to label the activity of these groups whereas it was not as definite at the time.

⁸ Achille Durieux, "Le Théâtre à Cambrai avant et après 1789," *Mémoires de la Société d'émulation de Cambrai* 39 (1883), 5–241.

without quoting them. We have to be cautious with his interpretations, as they derive from a biased view of medieval theatre common to nineteenth-century scholars. However, given his way of quoting and interpreting these archives, Durieux seems to have produced a reliable study of the abbey of Lescache Pourfit. We can therefore use the data he presents to analyse the organization of this joyful company, all the more since we can compare them to the data concerning other joyful companies that appear to yield a similar view of these groups.

The sources refer to this association as the *abbaye de Lescache Pourfit* or *Les Cache pourfit* or *Lencache pourfit*. Three points have to be noted. First, the group used various names to designate itself, one of them being the rather vague (but extremely frequently found) term of *joueurs sur cars* (players on wagons). This name emphasizes in fact the main activity of the association: that is, to perform plays in a specific environment: in an open, public space, on a wagon chosen either because its mobility allowed the plays to be performed in different parts of the city (so, a moving spectacle), or because this structure was the easiest to use in order to create a temporary stage at a cheap price (which then allowed plays to be performed more often, since the material cost of the performance was kept as low as possible). Second, if the term ‘abbey’ exists, very often we know about this association through the name of its representative, the ‘abbot,’ since the account books mention the *abbé et ses compagnons*. This is not surprising, because the account books provide evidence of payments given to this abbot: this is why the association is more often evoked through its members than as an institution, but this does not mean that it was not an organized association. Third, there are several spellings of the group’s name: here we encounter the question of the meaning of this name. The different spellings all refer to two different interpretations: we can understand “cacher” as “to hide” or as “to look for something.” The abbey would then gather people who hide profit or who look for it, the implication being that they are constantly lacking money, which is why they would hide it whenever they have any, or look for any occasion to get some. As for the form “Lencache,” it also refers to the second meaning of “cacher” as “to look for,” under the form “encachier.” Durieux prefers this reading of the verb to another interpretation that would link this name to a gift sometimes given by the abbey that took the form of an “escache,” a stilt. Indeed, this gift was given in 1517–1518 and 1530–1531, that is to say one century after the first appearance of

the abbey in the account books.⁹ One can then infer that this stilt was probably a joke, a play on words establishing a connexion between the name of the abbey and the object. Moreover, the origin of the name insisting on the alleged poverty of the companions is confirmed by the names of similar joyful associations of the region. We find the following companies: in Béthune, the *Abbé des Pau Prouffitans* (Abbot of those who make Little Profit), the *Abbé de Mal Espargne* (Abbot who does not have any Savings); in Cambrai, beside the abbey of Lescache Pourfit, we find the *compagnons de Peu d'Argent* (companions with little Money), *compagnons de Rien n'Espargne* (companions with No Savings), *compagnons des Mal Pourveuz* (companions who don't have Much), *gallants Sans Argent* (gallants Without Money); in Lille, the *prince de Peu d'Argent* (prince of Little Money), the *roi de Malepaye* (king of [the] Poorly Paid), another *roy des Mal Prouffitans* (king of those who make Poor Profit), and a *seigneur de Peu d'Argent* (lord of Little Money). When studying the names of the joyful companies of Douai, Pierre-Emmanuel Guilleray comes to the following conclusion:

The youth of the companies' members is also to be seen in the names they choose to designate themselves, using frequently the adverbs 'bad' or 'few' or other privative adverbs, to point out the spirit of transgression of the social rules that underlines the celebration, as well as their imperfect and unsatisfying condition, that is linked to the social status of youth.¹⁰

We will discuss below the possibility that not all the members of joyful associations were young people suffering from a frustrating social position, but it is true that the names of the joyful companies underline this transgression of the social norms that value order and money, and that many of them put the accent on the claimed youth of their members, not only in the region we are studying but also in other regions of France.¹¹ In the French-speaking parts of the Southern Netherlands,

⁹ Durieux, 14.

¹⁰ "La jeunesse des membres des companies transparait aussi dans les noms qu'ils choisissent pour se désigner, en utilisant fréquemment les adverbess mal ou peu ou d'autres adverbess privatifs, pour désigner à la fois l'esprit de transgression des règles sociales qui sous-tend la fête, et aussi leur condition imparfaite et insatisfaisante, qui correspond au statut social de la jeunesse," Pierre-Emmanuel Guilleray, "La fête des fous dans le nord de la France (XIV^e–XVI^e siècles)" (Thèse de l'École des Chartes, Paris—École des Chartes, 2002), 116.

¹¹ We indeed know that such youth associations existed in other parts of France, for instance in Burgundy and in the south of France: see Natalie Zemon Davis, "The

we find a prince of Youth (*prince de Jeunesse*) in several cities: Béthune (where a feast of Youth seems to have been organized regularly), Valenciennes, Orchies and Arras, as well as an emperor of Youth in Lille. To this list could be added the companies' names referring to the supposed bad life of their members (for instance the companions of the *prévôt des Coquins* [provost of Rascals]), as well as names referring to drunkenness (the company of the Grand Hacquebart in Douai, after the name of a tavern) or to the world of madness, with associations such as the *roi des Sots* in Lille or the *abbé de Joyeuse Folie* (abbot of Joyful Madness) in Cambrai.¹² This last theme is particularly interesting in regards to associations whose main activity is drama. Indeed, the fool is very present in French medieval drama, as the *sot* whose apparent nonsense finally reveals a hidden truth of this world, for instance in the often satirical *sotties*.¹³ Finally, other names use titles that are usually those of the military structures or the civil authorities: as we can see in the previous examples, very often the leader of a joyful association is a captain, or a king, a prince, even an emperor.¹⁴ Therefore, it appears clearly that most of the joyful companies' names refer to a reversal of society's traditional values. For the time of the celebration, the joyful associations celebrate what is usually repressed or shameful, and the leaders of these joyful companies challenge the traditional figures of religious, civil or military authority. We will see, however, that such a challenge is only temporary, and limited to a certain framework defined by the very figures of this authority.

The abbey of Lescache Pourfit existed for a long span of time: the name first appears in the account books in 1426 and is registered for the last time in 1599.¹⁵ Not all the joyful associations existed over such a long

Reasons of Misrule: Youth Groups and Charivaris in Sixteenth-Century France," *Past and Present* 50 (1971), 41–70 and Martine Grinberg, "Carnaval et société urbaine XIV^e–XVI^e siècles: le royaume dans la ville," *Ethnologie Française* 4 (1974), 215–244.

¹² Guilleray, 116–117.

¹³ See in particular the chapter "Pour une épistémologie de la folie," in Olga Anna Dull, *Folie et rhétorique dans la sottie* (Genève: Droz, 1994), 41–68.

¹⁴ On the themes evoked through these names, see also Davis, "Misrule," 43; Grinberg, 217.

¹⁵ Because there have not yet been systematic studies of the archives concerning the oldest appearances of the names of the joyful associations, it is impossible to establish now which one was the oldest. We can only give estimations and emphasize this fact: the groups of Fools or Innocents that originated inside the clergy appear earlier in the ecclesiastical archival records, often in the fourteenth century (for instance in Douai from the beginning of the fourteenth century, see Guilleray, 318), whereas the joyful,

period. While the most important of them do have a certain longevity (such as the *abbaye de Liesse* [abbey of Joy], in Arras, registered from 1437 until 1533),¹⁶ some others seem to have been created for a specific feast and to have disappeared immediately after this feast, as we can see in Lille: Valéry Delay has registered the appearances of associations in the account books and chronicles throughout the sixteenth century, and it appears clearly that a great number of companies were created for a specific feast, for instance for the feast for the peace of Vervins in 1598 between Henri IV of France and Philip II of Spain.¹⁷

As for the structure of these associations, we observe that they borrowed it from three types of institutions: the Church, the State (or any kind of civil authority) or the Military. The joyful abbey of Lescache Pourfit copied indeed the structure of a real abbey and its hierarchy: there is an abbot, elected for one year (as is almost always the case in such an association), a prior (as well as a sub-prior at the end of the sixteenth century), and of course monks, since the members of the abbey who are not part of the board are called *moines* (monks), *suppôts* (subjects) or are referred to as a *convent* when they are not simply referred to as *compaignons*.¹⁸ There are also other functions within this abbey, connected with the important activities of the associations: there are two butlers, who not only took care of the dinner given by the abbey as part of the social activities of the association, but who also provided for the needs of the abbey's members when they went to participate in meetings in other cities;¹⁹ there is also a banner-bearer, who took care of the *estendart de l'abbaye* (the abbey's standard) probably exhibited in front of the group during the parades the abbey took part in, within or outside the city.²⁰

The association of Lescache Pourfit was not the only joyful company using the structure of an abbey: the number of joyful abbots in the region is impressive. There is one in Arras (*abbé de Liesse*), five in Béthune, three in Cambrai, including the abbot of Lescache Pourfit, two in

urban associations appear later, at the beginning of the fifteenth century, as we can see with this example of the abbey of Lescache Pourfit.

¹⁶ File "jeux scéniques" ("fichier Guesnon" established in 1885), section "abbé de Liesse," Bibliothèque municipale d'Arras.

¹⁷ Valérie Delay, "Les fêtes à Lille au XVI^e siècle (1492–1600)" (Master's thesis, Université de Lille III, 1984).

¹⁸ Durieux, 16, 27.

¹⁹ Durieux, 27.

²⁰ Durieux, 20.

Douai, four in Lille and four in Tournai, to name only the largest cities of the region. Sometimes these names occur in schematic entries in the archives that merely record the names of companies that were not the biggest ones of their town. And although the abbey of Lescache Pourfit is the one we know best thanks to Durieux's description, it appears that some of these abbeys were also important associations in their cities; in particular the abbot of Joy in Arras was, just as the abbot of Lescache Pourfit, in charge of a large part of the city's theatrical activities, as we will see below. Even though we do not have many details about the way this abbey of Joy was organized, we can infer that it was probably similar to the abbey of Lescache Pourfit. We can at least note the existence of two butlers, whose task was the same as the butlers of Lescache Pourfit, and of a *herault de Liesse* (herald of Joy), probably in charge of communication with the population of Arras or with the joyful associations of the other cities, announcing the coming festive activities of the abbey of Joy to everyone.²¹

However, the abbey-like structure is not the only one among the joyful associations: another is a state structure, and as we have seen above, countless joyful companies were presided over by a king or a prince. Just as for the abbeys, their name often evokes their joyful nature: it stresses the alleged lack of money or low-born nature of its members, as we have said above, their youth (there is a *prince de Jeunesse* in Arras, Béthune and Lille), their lack of wisdom (*prince de folie* in Béthune, a kind of leader also to be found in an abbey, such as the *abbé de joyeuse folie* of Cambrai), or the concern of the association for amorous activities (*prince d'Amour* in various cities). Names can sometimes indicate a reference to a civil authority, not on a state, but on an urban level, as with the provost of Rascals or the *maire du Quétivier* (mayor of the Quétivier) in Cambrai.

There is a third type of structure: some companies borrow their name and organization from military-like structures and their leader is then always a captain. It is worth noting that a difference has to be made between these companies, whose essence is joyful, and the companies of archers and of crossbowmen, that could take part in some of the dramatic activities in which joyful associations also participated, but whose essence and goals, at least at the time of their foundation, were serious, these companies being originally militias formed by citizens

²¹ Fichier Guesnon, 1498 and 1508–1509.

who wanted to be able to defend their own town in case of a conflict where the army of a higher authority (the king of France or the duke of Burgundy) was not able to do so. We will see later the links between the joyful associations and the companies of archers and crossbowmen, which have been emphasized in particular by the specialists in Dutch drama.²² Obviously, the structure of the associations, as well as their names, refers to an inversion of social values: they borrow their structures from groups or figures symbolizing authority, not so much to mock as to affirm that the boundaries that usually structure society are illusory as long as the celebration and the dramatic performance last.

Where did the members of the joyful associations meet? Given that these groups did not leave any internal documents and that the sources we have left are external, we have very little information upon which to reconstruct their everyday life. However, as for Lescache Pourfit, we do find some clues in the account books of the city: a *palais* (palace) or *abbaye* (abbey) was built on the Market place.²³ It was in fact a temporary wooden structure where the association gathered on the day of its main celebration, the feast of the Baptism of Christ, which took place twenty days after Christmas, this date giving its name to the feast, *la fête du Vingtième*. It was an occasion on which to perform plays not only for the members of the abbey and other groups of the city, but also for joyful associations coming from the neighbouring cities. There was also a dinner partly paid for by the municipality inside the palace, which indicates that this temporary structure was nevertheless big enough to accommodate banquet tables and a certain number of guests.²⁴

It is important to remember that the abbey of Lescache Pourfit was the most important joyful association in Cambrai, with a role of representative of the city when some of its members travelled to other cities. However, other joyful associations did not have such an importance in their cities and, therefore, had to gather in smaller places. In Lille for instance, a number of associations formed from the

²² See for instance the chapter devoted to the archers and crossbowmen by Peter Arnade in *Realms of ritual. Burgundian Ceremony and civic life in Late Medieval Ghent* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

²³ Durieux mentions several dates: the structure is called “abbaye” in the account book of 1448–1449 and “palais” several times in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (p. 16).

²⁴ Durieux, 15–18.

division of the town into neighbourhoods around squares.²⁵ We can assume then that each company found a meeting place in one of the houses close to the square, for instance an inn, or even outside on this square weather permitting. Indeed, the abbey of Lescache Pourfit first gathered in an inn in the 1440s for the Feast of the *Vingtième*, before it became usual for its members to gather in the temporary palace,²⁶ and we can assume that this group needed to meet up several times a year and then used a house or an inn for informal meetings. On the other hand, another major event for the association was the election of the leader of the company, abbot or prince. In the case of Lescache Pourfit, this meeting took place inside the city hall as did the banquet accompanying this election.²⁷

Obviously, this election was a solemn event, not only for the members of the association but also on a city level, since the municipality closely watched the election of the abbot of Lescache Pourfit. In the same way, the lieutenant of the city, the prosecutor of Artois, the mayor, the aldermen and the town notables elected the abbot of Joy in Arras between 1431 and 1534.²⁸ We do not have any details on the election of the leaders of other companies in Cambrai, and the example of Lescache Pourfit does not indicate that this was a normal procedure. The election might not have been as closely watched in the case of a smaller group, as we know there were many in every city; it is likely that only the biggest group in town had the honour of electing its leader at the city hall. However, the instance of Lescache Pourfit shows the role played by the municipality in the life of the association, and we will have to study more closely the links between the local civil authorities and the joyful associations, after we have seen how the association interacted with the other joyful companies and other groups in the cluster involved in dramatic activities.

²⁵ Valérie Delay, “Compagnies joyeuses, ‘places’ et festivités à Lille au XVI^e siècle,” *Revue du Nord* 69 (1987), 503–14; A. Finot, “Les Représentations scéniques données à l’occasion de la Procession de Lille par les Compagnons de la Place du Petit-Fret, au XV^e siècle,” *Bulletin historique et philologique du Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques* (1897), 504–520.

²⁶ Durieux, 17.

²⁷ Durieux, 27.

²⁸ “élu par le lieutenant de la ville, le procureur d’Artois, le mayeur, les échevins et les bourgeois notables,” Robert Muchembled, *Culture populaire et culture des élites dans la France moderne: XV^e–XVIII^e siècles* (Paris, Flammarion, 1978), 179.

The relations of the joyful companies among themselves and with other groups

We can define three different categories of relations in order to analyze how a joyful company interacted with other groups. First, we will study the relations among different joyful companies of the same cluster, especially when these groups came from different cities. Then we will try to define the relations between the joyful associations and other kinds of groups involved to some degree in drama within the same city and on the broader scale of our cluster. Third, we will consider the question of the relations of the joyful associations with groups outside the cluster, that is to say what relations these associations had with *chambres de rhétorique* and with Dutch-speaking groups such as the chambers of rhetoric (or *rederijerskamers*) of the cities of Flanders.

It is worth noting that the numerous joyful associations existing in each French-speaking city of the Southern Netherlands performed their plays not only for the pleasure of their own members but also before an audience made up of the entire city. They tended as well to go outside the city to perform in the neighbouring towns on a regular basis. Therefore, the interactions between and among joyful associations within a city and among joyful associations of different cities were extremely frequent. To begin with regarding what happened within a city, we will choose two examples. One will be the case of the different joyful associations in Cambrai; the other will be the case of the annual procession of Our Lady in Lille, which provided the opportunity for different joyful associations of the city to take part in a dramatic contest.

In Cambrai, even if the abbey of Lescache Pourfit was the most prominent association, there were other, smaller groups that appear in the account books at different times. Durieux counts nineteen associations cited in the account books, some lasting for a long time, others being recorded only once. The *maire de Crollecul* (literally, mayor of Move Arse) holds the record for longevity with an existence of almost a century from 1449–1450 till 1531–1532, as well as the *compagnons de Saint-Jacques* (1475–1476 till 1559–1560), but many others also lasted thirty to sixty years. As for the associations Durieux found only once in the Cambrai accounts, we have to underline that it is necessary to crosscheck these entries against the ones found in the account books of other cities, since these associations travelled just as the abbey of Lescache Pourfit did. The provost of Rascals, for example, appears

only once in the account books of Cambrai, in 1530–1531, according to Durieux, but this company also appears twice in Douai in 1513 and 1517,²⁹ which proves that it was founded earlier and lasted longer than the list established by Durieux would lead us to think. Nevertheless, it is true that, on some occasions, small associations were founded for a particular event and do not seem to have survived beyond this event, especially when this happened in the second half of the sixteenth century. We cited above the example of the feast for the peace organized in Lille in 1598: for this event in particular, Delay notes eighteen companies created especially for this occasion, not to mention the associations that were probably re-created for the event, given the long time to be found between their previous appearance in the account books and their participation in the celebration of 1598.³⁰

As for Cambrai's joyful associations other than the abbey of Lescache Pourfit, we have to underscore the fact that their theatrical activities were not totally separated from those of Lescache. Although we can speak here of independent associations, we notice that they often joined the abbey of Lescache Pourfit during various festivities in Cambrai, and that they also join the abbey of Lescache Pourfit when some of its members went to another city in order to perform plays. Let us take the example of one of these companies, the *maire du Quétivier* and his companions.³¹ Durieux finds entries referring to this association in the account books from 1500–1501 until 1559–1560, and we also find references to the visit of this association to other cities of the region in the same period. It seems that the company of the Quétivier took part in the feast of the *Vingtième* several times. In 1517, it even received 10 pounds (*livres tournoi*)³² from the municipality on this occasion. Although the copyist specifies that the association received a payment “pour cette fois seulement,” it nevertheless appears again in the accounts of 1519:

²⁹ Monique Mestayer, “Les fêtes et cérémonies à Douai 1450–1550,” *Actes du colloque La sociabilité urbaine en Europe du Nord-Ouest du XIV^e au XVIII^e siècle, organisé le samedi 5 février 1983 à Douai dans les Salles d'Anchin* (Douai: Lefebvre-Lévêque, 1983), 104; Gustave Lhotte, *Le Théâtre à Douai avant la Révolution* (Douai: Crépin, 1881), 10.

³⁰ Delay, “Fêtes,” 52.

³¹ The mayor of Quétivier was the leader of this association named after a neighbourhood of Cambrai, which proves that Lille was not the only town where some associations derived their origin from a precise place in the city.

³² I have translated the French terms concerning money and measures of wine into approximate English equivalents. However, I just wanted to give an overview of these measures. Therefore, I did not attempt to convert their values from one system to another, and I merely transcribed these values.

the association may have taken part in the feast more often than the account books record, without receiving any grant from the city. In any case, however, what was supposed to be an exceptional payment was given again two years later, and maybe more often after this date.³³ The company also participated in other festivities with the abbey of Lescache Pourfit: in 1518 for instance, the two companies celebrated together the feast of Saint Scholastic and carnival festivities. Moreover, the mayor of Quétivier and his companions sometimes went with the abbey of Lescache Pourfit to other cities of the region: in 1517, the Quétivier went to Douai for the annual *fête de l'âne* (feast of the ass, more commonly known as the feast of fools) celebrating the New Year and to Arras for the annual feast of Shrove Sunday.³⁴ On both occasions, the Quétivier went with the abbey of Lescache Pourfit to these celebrations as a kind of reinforcement of the troupe of Lescache.

It seems generally that, from the beginning of the sixteenth century, the number of joyful associations increased: most of the associations Durieux found in the Cambrai account books appear in the sixteenth century. Likewise, from the beginning of the sixteenth century there seems to be everywhere in the region an increasing number of associations that come to participate in the annual feast of a city, whether they are from the city or from another town.³⁵ Therefore, it is no surprise that these groups become associated with feasts that were previously (and that remained) under the supervision of an older and more important association of the city, such as Lescache Pourfit in Cambrai.³⁶ The Quétivier is not the only one being in this way associated with the activities of Lescache: in 1517, we count six different companies that went with Lescache Pourfit to the *fête de l'âne* at Douai.³⁷ But it is true that some associations seem to gain some independence: we have seen

³³ Durieux, 151, 163–164. Durieux specifies that he did not give a complete account of all the repetitive mentions concerning the feast of the *Vingtième*, since they appear almost every year, unless a new fact appears, which reduces our knowledge about the regular activities of the associations.

³⁴ Durieux, 163.

³⁵ Mestayer, 105; Dinaux, 313–338.

³⁶ Indeed, in the accounts of 1414–1415, the Quétivier received 10 pounds for its expenses because the association also served the abbot of Lescache during the year: “Au maire du Questivier pour subvenir à la dépense que la portée en faisant son office et servant l’abbé durant cette année, x l.t.” (“given to the mayor of Quétivier to compensate what he spent during his office and when he served the abbot this year, 10 pounds”), Durieux, 162.

³⁷ Lhotte, 10.

that Durieux's inventory is not always complete, but it seems that on some occasions, such as in 1511 and 1518, the Quétivier went outside the city without Lescache, in order to go to the feast of Shrove Sunday in Péronne (a city close to Amiens, in Picardy).³⁸

Durieux mentions for those two years a specific grant given by the municipality of Cambrai to the Quétivier for having gone to this feast in Péronne, whereas the abbot of Lescache is not mentioned in the excerpts reproduced by Durieux. We know that two cities in the region organized festivities on that day, throughout the fifteenth and the sixteenth century: Arras and Péronne (a rather unusual fact, since the cities of the region usually organized feasts at different times, for historical reasons such as a local tradition related to a feast or a patron saint, and probably not to conflict with the feast of a neighbouring town, which would reduce the number of visitors). We also know that the abbot of Lescache Pourfit sometimes went to one, sometimes to the other. Therefore, it could very well be that, as the Quétivier became a more important association in the eyes of the municipality, it was sent to Péronne to represent its city, while Lescache went to Arras, so that both cities would not feel offended by the absence of representatives of Cambrai at their feast. It is however impossible to establish a rigorous scheme with our available data, and given the fact that the account books of Cambrai have disappeared, we will probably remain unable to see in the entries concerning the travels of Lescache and Quétivier a regular pattern and the trace of deliberate choices made by the associations and the municipality. On the level of the reconstruction though, the entries that Durieux has reproduced show that a company probably founded at the beginning of the sixteenth century such as the Quétivier quickly received grants from the municipality to assist Lescache and for what seem to be independent travels, and hence quickly gained status inside the city as well as the trust of the municipality. Far from being monopolized by only one association in the sixteenth century, then, the theatrical life of Cambrai shows the great vitality of these various associations, a fact that we have to note in the other cities of the region as well.

The second example of the coexistence of different dramatic associations within a city is the case of Lille. We have seen that in most of the cities in the region, the leader of one lay association was in charge

³⁸ Durieux, 160 and 164.

of organizing the annual feast of the city that can have had religious roots (such as the *Vingtième*), but that in essence was a civic feast, outside the intervention of the clergy. In Lille, on the contrary, the biggest theatrical event of the year was the dramatic contest organized during the procession of Our Lady (*Notre-Dame de la Treille*), supervised by the Bishop of Fools, a member of the clergy whose role was not limited to the feast of fools, a comic celebration of the New Year by the lower clergy.³⁹ The Bishop of Fools was elected for a whole year and had to organize the dramatic contest linked to the procession. Here, we do not have one particular association that was in charge of secular, theatrical activities and performed plays, but a representative of the clergy, invested for a year with a festive role, who supervised but did not take part in the dramatic activities he organized. Another peculiarity of this contest was that it was organized in relation to a procession (the plays being performed “par signes,” that is as silent tableaux vivants during the procession, then performed with the dialogues after the ceremony),⁴⁰ whereas the other dramatic activities and contests organized in the cities of the region were again essentially lay ones. However, this contest was also the best known contest of the region, not only because we have archival documents recording the different stages of the organisation and the progress of the contest, but also because a number of plays that were written and performed on this occasion have been preserved.⁴¹

Finally, another fact is striking: the records of other cities such as Cambrai are not always clear about the nature of the various joyful associations that took part in dramatic activities. In Cambrai, we find some references to an association that seems to gather the porters, hence an association that could have descended from a guild, and other references to an association that probably had a religious origin, the brotherhood of Saint James (referred to as the *confrères de saint Jacques*). It will, therefore, be necessary to study further how these different types of associations interacted with each other; moreover, we also need to see what relations the joyful associations from several towns, and not only from the same town, had with each other.

³⁹ For a complete presentation of this particular tradition of Lille, see Alan E. Knight, “The Bishop of Fools and his Feast in Lille,” in *Festive Drama*, ed. M. Twycross (Cambridge: Brewer, 1996), 157–166.

⁴⁰ Alan E. Knight, ed., *Les mystères de la Procession de Lille* (Genève: Droz, 2001–2004); vol. 1: *Le Pentateuque* (Genève: Droz, 2001), 53.

⁴¹ Knight, *Les mystères de la Procession de Lille*.

We have already given a few examples of joyful associations from a town (Cambrai) going to another town for an annual feast (Arras, Douai). Indeed, we can observe a festive calendar in which several towns of the region each had a specific date on which the joyful companies of other towns were invited to come and present dramatic performances, during either a festival or a contest. This calendar is based both on religious grounds and on carnival celebrations. In Douai, it is the *fête de l'âne*, which celebrated the New Year; in Cambrai the feast of the *Vingtième*, that is to say Christ's baptism twenty days after Christmas; in Arras Shrove Sunday; and in Valenciennes the Sunday of the Quasimodo (the first Sunday after Easter). The most important associations of these four cities visited each other very regularly on these occasions, forming a small circle of associations meeting in these cities that lie at a close distance from each other. In the case of Valenciennes, however, although companions from Valenciennes are recorded as participating throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the city did not always send the same companies to these feasts, which tends to prove that there was not one prominent association there, but several associations that became more or less powerful during this long span of time. Furthermore, there seem to be two competing feasts in Valenciennes. The feast of Quasimodo, with its religious meaning, was celebrated annually by the joyful associations, as the following entry in the account books of Cambrai in 1459 proves: the abbot of Lescache Pourfit and his companions received 4 pounds (*livres tournoi*) when they returned from "Valenciennes where they had been to the feast which is held every year in that city on the Sunday after Quasimodo" (read: on the Sunday of Quasimodo).⁴²

However, there is also another feast in Valenciennes that was apparently also regularly celebrated: the feast of Pleasance, celebrated in May, and thus linked to the pagan, rural celebrations of May for the return of spring. It is worth noting that not all cities necessarily visited each other every year, and that there are also records of visits of some joyful companies that came from cities not belonging to this small circle, such as Tournai, Câteau-Cambrésis, Ypres (Ieper), or smaller towns or villages. Some associations such as the abbey of Lescache Pourfit or the abbey of Joy did travel very often, if not every year, but an annual feast

⁴² "Valenciennes ou ils avoient esté a le feste qui se fait chacun an audit lieu le dimanche après le Quasimodo," Durieux, 152.

was not necessarily going to attract the same number of companies every year. The *fête du Vingtième* in 1461 was particularly successful, or so it seems, since the copyist gives a more complete account of the guests than usual, adding that the joyful companies from outside the city “came in greater numbers and array than they ever had before.”⁴³ The abbot of Lescache actually received that year more money than usual from the municipality to welcome these companies, some coming from small towns and villages that are rarely mentioned in studies about drama in the French-speaking regions of the Southern Netherlands but that were apparently also active in performing plays and thus invited to come to Cambrai, maybe because they were at a short distance from Cambrai and Valenciennes.⁴⁴

On the other hand, a city could also organise a less regular feast but still invite the companies that usually attended the annual feast. In Arras, in September 1431, the abbot of Joy organized a dramatic contest with various prizes, the biggest prize being given to the association that could best show why peace does not come to France (“celui qui saura le mieux démontrer pourquoi paix ne vient en France”), an obvious reference to the rather difficult political context of the period, the region being one of the places where the troops of the duke of Burgundy and the king of France regularly fought against each other. Other prizes were given to more comical performances, for instance to the performer who could best imitate an inebriated man. From the results of the contest, we see that the associations representing neighbouring cities came from Cambrai, Hesdin, Douai, Valenciennes, Saint-Quentin, and there were certainly more cities represented, but their names do not appear in the archival records, since they did not win any prize.⁴⁵ Some cities seem not to belong to this circle, such as Lille. However, we do have records of companies coming to Lille for celebrations other than the procession: the abbot of Lescache Pourfit came to visit the feast of the *roi des Sots* (king of Fools) in Lille according to the account books of Cambrai in 1494–1495.⁴⁶ Does this isolated entry mean that

⁴³ “vinrent en plus grant nombre et arroye que onques n’avoient fait,” Durieux, 153.

⁴⁴ It would certainly be interesting to investigate here if a parallel can be made between these relations of bigger and smaller cities or villages with respect to dramatic contests and the conclusions of Anne-Laure Van Bruaene about the relations between rhetoricians from the towns and from the countryside in the Dutch-speaking Southern Netherlands: Van Bruaene, “A wonderful tryumfe,” 397–398.

⁴⁵ Fichier Guesnon, 1431.

⁴⁶ Durieux, 157.

the abbot of Lescache went only once to this feast, or that this feast took place only once? It could very well be that, because the procession and its contest were such important events, they required all the energy of the joyful associations of Lille, which did not want or have time to organize events on a smaller scale open to joyful associations from outside the city. Distance could also be an important factor to explain that some cities of the region such as Lille, Béthune or Saint-Omer, although they were very active when it came to theatrical events, did not visit the circle of cities mentioned above. Finally, there could also be an economic explanation: Guilleray, who studied the *fêtes des ânes* (feasts of fools) in Douai underlines the fact that:

The economic competition since the end of the thirteenth century between Douai on the one hand and Lille and Tournai on the other hand explains why these two cities seldom come to Douai, even if they are not much further away than Cambrai or Arras.⁴⁷

The second category of relationships that we want to investigate covers the relations between the joyful associations as we have defined them above with the other groups within the cluster that were also involved at some point in theatrical activity. We can define four types of groups: the joyful groups originating in the church (Fools, Innocents), the guilds, the brotherhoods of archers or crossbowmen and the Puy. To begin with the joyful groups of the traditional feasts of fools, we can take the example of Douai. Guilleray shows that, when comparing the archives of the chapter of Saint-Amé of Douai with the account books of the municipality, there were in fact two *fêtes des ânes* (feasts of fools), one for the clergy, and one in town. As Alan Knight makes clear, within the church,

The feast of fools was a burlesque celebration of the New Year by the inferior clergy of cathedrals and collegial churches, which seems to have originated in the twelfth century. It was ultimately adopted in many parts of Europe, but nowhere was its observance more firmly entrenched than in France.⁴⁸

And Guilleray reminds us of the specific calendar that the lower clergy followed around Christmas time to celebrate a series of feasts, each

⁴⁷ “La rivalité économique de Douai avec Lille et Tournai, depuis la fin du XIII^e siècle, explique que ces deux villes se déplacent peu à Douai, bien qu’elles ne soient pas tellement plus éloignées que Cambrai ou Arras,” Guilleray, 130.

⁴⁸ Knight, “Bishop of Fools,” 157.

being devoted to a rank of the hierarchy: on the 6th of December the Bishop of Fools was elected and maybe also the Bishop of Innocents. On the 26th the feast of vicars was celebrated, on the 27th, the feast of the chaplains, on the 28th the feast of the altar boys and novices, and on the 1st of January, in Douai, the real *fête de l'âne* (the real feast of fools) was celebrated.⁴⁹ Thus, this period of the year was, for the young and less young members of the lower clergy, an occasion to turn the church hierarchy upside down and celebrate what we can call carnivalesque festivities inside the church and in the streets of the city. Moreover, the vicars performed theatrical plays inside the church on this occasion, and it seems that they also took part in the theatrical contest taking place in town, among other joyful associations.⁵⁰ Indeed, even if they were closely watched by their superiors, priests and members of the clergy did take part in the theatrical life of the city, either in mystery plays or, more surprisingly, in lay festivities such as dramatic contests or civic celebrations. For example, in 1529, vicars in Douai took part in performances on wagons to celebrate the peace between Emperor Charles V and the King of France Francis I also known as the *Paix des Dames*.⁵¹ They did therefore have contacts with the joyful, lay associations that we are studying, although the church hierarchy must have closely monitored them. We have seen that in Lille the Bishop of Fools himself was in charge of organizing the dramatic contest of the procession. Thus the presence of ecclesiastical groups of actors does vary from simple participation in lay festivities, on the same level as any other group, to a control of these festivities in the case of Lille. In any case, it appears clearly that the members of the Church were more involved in theatrical activities not necessarily linked with a religious context than one would think at first.

The second group whose interaction with the joyful associations is of interest to us is the guilds. Guilds sometimes took part in festivities implying theatrical performances: quite often, they prepared their own plays and performed them during joyful entries, since these were occasions where all kinds of groups took part in an event, as for example the entry of Charles V, during which various guilds such as the butchers, the weavers or the shoemakers staged several tableaux

⁴⁹ Guilleray, 72.

⁵⁰ Guilleray, 92.

⁵¹ Mestayer, 108.

vivants comparing the deeds of characters from the Bible with those of Charles V.⁵² The guild also took part in plays or rather tableaux vivants performed during processions. In Lille, the associations taking part in the dramatic contest were clearly of two kinds: some were joyful associations in essence, coming from the different neighbourhoods of the town, others were groups issuing from trade guilds or associations. Indeed, if Knight underlines the fact that the groups named in the plays that have survived were indeed joyful companies,⁵³ Delay has also found names of companies presenting plays in the contest that obviously referred to guilds: in 1536, she counts thirty-nine associations issuing from a guild, among which trades and crafts as diverse as carpenters, goldsmiths, butchers, and a great variety of crafts related to the textile industry.⁵⁴ It also appears that the guilds were especially in charge of the tableaux vivants illustrating the procession of Béthune.⁵⁵ However, guilds could also take part in the annual festivities celebrated by the joyful associations: the porters of Cambrai for instance frequently went to Douai with the abbot of Lescache Pourfit to join in the *fête de l'âne*.⁵⁶ We even have to face the confusing case of Shrove Sunday in Arras in 1534, where it appears that some of the companies bearing an obviously joyful name were in fact companies originating from guilds: the prince of Loquebault led the butchers, while the prince of Honour was the head of the drapers.⁵⁷

However, it is important to mark a distinction between the members of guilds performing dramas and the joyful companies: whereas the guilds were first and foremost all groups defending the interests of workers of one specific craft or trade on economic grounds, the joyful companies had as their primary and main purpose to entertain the audience with their festive activities. Therefore, if some members of a guild gathered together to take part in festivities or even formed a specific

⁵² Lhotte, 19–27.

⁵³ Knight, “Bishop of Fools,” 163.

⁵⁴ Delay, “Fêtes,” section “Thèmes des histoires jouées à la procession par les compagnies joyeuses et les métiers lillois.”

⁵⁵ Alexandre de La Fons Méricocq, “Extraits de chartes et autres documents originaux concernant les jeux de personnages, mystères, etc., exécutés dans la ville de Béthune et autres lieux de la Flandre pendant le XV^e et le XVI^e siècle,” in *Documents historiques inédits tirés des collections manuscrites de la Bibliothèque royale et des archives ou des bibliothèques des départements*, ed. J.-J. Champollion-Figeac (Paris: Firmin Didot frères, 1848), IV, 332.

⁵⁶ Durieux, 162–163.

⁵⁷ Robert Muchembled, *La violence au village: sociabilité et comportements populaires en Artois du XV^e au XVII^e siècle* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1989), 359.

joyful association to do so, we have to consider them as a group apart and not as a guild in its entirety. The first purpose of an association can help us here to see differences between groups and admit that, if the borders between guilds and joyful associations can sometimes appear blurred at first, their distinct missions allow us to draw a line between them, and in particular to distinguish a joyful company originating in a guild from the guild itself.

The third group with whom the joyful associations intersected was the companies of archers, crossbowmen and other sorts of companies originating in urban militias. Their role regarding drama in the French-speaking cities and towns of the Southern Netherlands, however, is unclear. There is no global study of these groups as such, and we can only rely on scattered entries in the account books that prove that these groups were involved in drama, although their direct participation in performances is not always established. Peter Arnade insists on the theatrical dimension of an early feast of crossbowmen in Tournai in July 1394:

To highlight this theatrical quality, Tournai offered prizes to the confraternity that staged “the best games and staging without villainy, performing pleasing and delightful amusements.” This is one of the earliest indications that theatre and tableaux vivants were consequential at these shooting celebrations and that either the crossbowmen themselves or a related drama group performed them.⁵⁸

It is indeed not always possible to know which groups performed plays at these festivals, where the archers or crossbowmen took part in contests to elect the best shooter. However, their dramatic activity is obvious in a few entries: in 1470 in Douai, the archers and the crossbowmen took part in the staging of tableaux vivants for the entry of Margaret of York,⁵⁹ in 1493 in Béthune, similar groups of the city performed two plays to celebrate the proclamation of peace;⁶⁰ in 1520, the two types of brotherhoods took part in a contest in Lille organized to celebrate the safe trip of Charles V and won the second and third prizes, after

⁵⁸ Arnade, 79. Peter Arnade follows a traditional historical interpretation that sees the origins of the chambers of rhetoric in the archers' associations. Anne-Laure Van Bruaene has shown, however, that such an interpretation does not rest on solid ground: Van Bruaene, “Om beters wille,” 118.

⁵⁹ Lhotte, 16.

⁶⁰ La Fons, “Extraits,” 342.

a joyful company.⁶¹ Through these examples, we see that these two types of company were associated with festivities celebrating a specific event. We do not know, however, if they also took part in more regular events organized by the joyful associations such as annual feasts, or if on the contrary these archers and crossbowmen organized their own festivities to which they invited joyful companies. We also know that the companies of *joueurs d'épée*, that showed their skills at wielding swords, also occasionally performed plays, such as in Béthune in 1563 and in Cambrai in 1528 during the feast of the *Vingtième*.⁶² Here again, these dramatic activities appear as a secondary activity for groups whose attention was centred on training and showing their skills in handling weapons.

Finally as regards the fourth group involved in drama with which the joyous associations may potentially have come into contact, the Puy, their interaction is very obscure if it existed at all. There are very few precise entries in the account books of drama performed at the Puy, but there are several clues that show that drama was indeed among the activities of these literary associations, one very conclusive clue being that the text of a play performed during a dinner of the Puy of Amiens in 1473 has survived.⁶³ However, it appears clearly that drama was only a side activity at the Puy, a mere amusement during dinners. This does not diminish the interest of this drama, but rather indicates that the members of the Puy focused their attention on other types of literary activities, and that they apparently had no contacts with the joyful associations. Therefore, we will not discuss further the question of the Puy.⁶⁴

The third and final category of relationships that we want to consider are those that the joyful associations had with groups outside the cluster, namely with rhetoricians; that is with *chambres de rhétorique* and with Dutch-speaking chambers of rhetoric. We know thanks to the archives of these cities that there were in some of them groups called *chambres de rhétorique*. In Douai for instance, Guilleray found in the archives of the city some *rhétoriciens* that took part in the *fête de*

⁶¹ La Fons, "Sociétés," 25.

⁶² La Fons, "Extraits," 327; Durieux, 165.

⁶³ Victor de Beauvillé, *Recueil de documents inédits concernant la Picardie* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1860), 149–154. I study in depth this play and its historical context in my Ph.D. dissertation.

⁶⁴ The reader will find further information on the Puy and on their specific status as early modern societies in the article by Dylan Reid in the present volume.

l'âne and even received subsidies from the city for individual activities from the middle of the sixteenth century.⁶⁵ It is however difficult to know exactly what this term *rhétoricien* covers. The number of *arts de rhétorique*, or treatises on the art of rhetoric and poetry written in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, shows that there was a growing interest in poetic theory at that time.⁶⁶ The term *rhétoricien* thus designates a person possessing the skill of writing well, particularly in verse, and is used to name the members of joyful associations who were in charge of composing plays, such as Grard de Laborie who in 1501 was the *rhétoricien* of the abbey of Lescache Pourfit and who was mentioned as such for having written a play performed for Epiphany.⁶⁷ However, there is a more restricted meaning to the term that denotes the more precise profile of a *rhétoricien* as being a member of a *chambre de rhétorique*. Such an association seems to have existed in Tournai and in a few other French-speaking cities of the Southern Netherlands, and to have been in this case a cousin of the Dutch chambers of rhetoric about which we know much more.⁶⁸

The information about these French groups is very scarce: from the studies written by scholars in the nineteenth century it seems that Tournai's chamber of rhetoric was the most important of the French-speaking chambers, but the archives of Tournai disappeared in 1940 in the bombing of that city, and we must therefore rely on the rather imprecise references to this group made by these scholars.⁶⁹ The rhetoricians of Tournai are known under various names: the *chambre* or *escole de Rhétorique*, or the *Puy de rhétorique*.⁷⁰ It is difficult to evaluate whether the *Puy d'Amour* was indeed another name for the chamber of rhetoric

⁶⁵ Guilleray, 327.

⁶⁶ Among others, let us mention the *Art de rhétorique vulgaire* by Jean Molinet (1493) and the *Grand et vrai art de pleine rhétorique* by Pierre Fabri (1521).

⁶⁷ Durieux, 159.

⁶⁸ Among the numerous studies of these groups, see these very recent social historical studies: Van Bruaene, "Om beters wille"; Arjan van Dixhoorn, "Lustige Geesten. Rederijkers en hun kamers in het publieke leven van de Noordelijke Nederlanden in de 15e, 16e en 17e eeuw" (Ph.D. diss., Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2004).

⁶⁹ The dissertation of François Claesen, "Le théâtre des Rhétoriciens: comment il a favorisé les relations qui ont existé pendant les XIV^e, XV^e et XVI^e siècles entre les Flamands et les Wallons, surtout aux environs de Tournai" (Ph.D. diss., Université Catholique de Louvain, 1923) is the most recent work on the question: its author reviews previous studies, although we can regret that his account is not always complete enough.

⁷⁰ Adolphe Hocquet, *Tournai et le Tournais au XVI^e siècle, au point de vue moral et politique* (Bruxelles: Hayez, 1906), 112–113.

(although we find an entry that mentions *Rétorisiens du Puy d'Amours* in the books of the city in 1467),⁷¹ but it seems that, if these three names are indeed synonymous, the chamber had its origin in the structure of the Puy we evoked above.

The major difference between the Puy and the French-speaking chambers of rhetoric would then be not in the nature of their literary activities but in the importance of religious principles in their organization: whereas the Puy perpetuated a religious doctrine that orientated the themes of their texts, we suspect that the chambers of rhetoric came in the sixteenth century to rely on literary activities only that could eventually be more open to satire. They could therefore deal with religious issues in a more critical and satirical way than the Puy, opening themselves to the ideas of the Reformation.⁷² In fact, most of the details we have about these groups concern their end, since they were suppressed on the orders of Margaret of Parma. Indeed, we know that these chambers of rhetoric were accused several times by the authorities of disturbing public order with their satires against the Catholic clergy and therefore were threatened with dissolution from the 1550 on. On 30 January 1560, Margaret of Parma sent a letter to the bailiff of Tournai to insist on the importance of applying the orders of Philip II of Spain forbidding any play against the Catholic religion and clergy, especially by publishing these orders

in the chamber of the rhetoricians of Tournai, when they meet and when you will find it convenient, and also in the other chambers of rhetoric if there are any in your jurisdiction.⁷³

⁷¹ A. de La Grange, *Extraits analytiques des registres des consaulx de la ville de Tournai, 1431–1476* (Tournai: Casterman, 1893), 295.

⁷² Religious devotion determined the poetic practices of the Puy, whereas, as far as we can tell from the few sources we have left, the French chambers of rhetoric had no such religious practices any longer in the sixteenth century: I think this is why they could deal more easily with satire against the clergy. That seems to be the case of the “Puy d’Escole de Rhétorique” of Tournai; see F. Hennebert, *Ritmes et refrains tournésiens: poésies couronnées par le Puy d’Escole de Rhétorique de Tournay (1477–1491): extraites d’un manuscrit de la Bibliothèque publique de Tournay* (Mons: Hoyois-Derely, 1837), and my Ph.D. dissertation, I.1.1.b. Les rhétoriciens et les chambres de rhétorique.

⁷³ Order to publish these orders “en la chambre des rhetoriciens à Tournay le certain jour de leur assemblée que trouvez à ce convenable, et aussi es autres chambres de rhetoricque si aucunes en y a es limites de votredite jurisdiction,” Bruxelles, Archives générales du royaume, Etats d’audience, 1170/20, f. 6.

Even if the chamber of rhetoric of Tournai was dissolved in August 1563 and all its registers and archives burnt,⁷⁴ other chambers survived until the end of the sixteenth century, since in 1585 Jean Symon, a canon of Lille, complained in a letter to the bishop of Tournai that “almost in every city the heresy of the Protestants’ secret meetings has corrupted the chambers of rhetoric where these meetings took place,”⁷⁵ thus linking the Protestant meetings and criticism of the Catholic clergy to the activity of the French-speaking chambers of rhetoric. What are then the differences between the joyful associations and these chambers of rhetoric? It seems that the members of these chambers had a higher idea of their writing skills, since they gathered together to compose not only theatre plays but also poems and other types of writing that they kept in registers (these registers have unfortunately disappeared with the chambers of rhetoric). Moreover, they seem to have been involved in political and/or Protestant activities, thus coming into conflict with the authorities, whereas the joyful associations did not. However, it is difficult to have a clear view of the boundaries between the joyful associations and the chambers of rhetoric of the region, which are sometimes blurred because of the vague references to these groups in the archival records and the lack of details remaining on the chambers of rhetoric.

On the other hand, we know that there were relations between French- and Dutch-speaking groups performing drama.⁷⁶ We will take only one example. In Douai, in 1494, the annual feast of fools attracted a lot of guests. Among them, we find several joyful companies coming from Lille, Valenciennes, and the abbot of Lescache Pourfit accompanied by other companies represented Cambrai. But we find also merchants from Ghent who performed plays, as well as the prince of Love of Tournai.⁷⁷ It seems therefore that guests coming from Dutch-speaking

⁷⁴ “[Q]uasi en toutes villes les chambres de rhétoriciens ont esté fort corrompues d’hérésies par les conventicules, lesquelz en telle chambres se tenoient,” Hocquet, 113.

⁷⁵ André-Joseph Le Glay, *Spicilege d’histoire littéraire ou documents pour servir à l’histoire des sciences, des lettres et des arts dans le nord de la France* (Lille: L. Danel, 1858–1861), 62–66.

⁷⁶ For a more detailed account of dramatic exchanges between French and Flemish cities, see my article “Public et représentations dramatiques dans le nord de la France à la fin du Moyen Âge,” *European Medieval Drama* 9 (2005), 93–95; see also Van Bruaene, “Om beters wille,” 78, 147–148.

⁷⁷ Just as for Cambrai, we have only partial information about Tournai because of a lack of archival sources. It seems however that there was in this city, as well as in other cities of the cluster (Arras, Douai, Lille) a company called the *Puy d’Amour* (Puy of Love) or one directed by the *Prince d’Amour* (Prince of Love), that actually appears to

cities sometimes visited some of the regular festivities of the joyful companies. Here we find a crucial point concerning the relations between the French- and Dutch-speaking dramatic groups at the time: Anne-Laure Van Bruaene has shown that the joyful associations of the French-speaking towns were actually more similar to the Flemish *titels* (titles) that were ancestors of the Dutch-speaking chambers of rhetoric, and that the relations between the groups stopped at the end of the fifteenth century, when the Dutch chambers of rhetoric were born and evolved into more organized structures.⁷⁸

We could thus suggest the hypothesis of drawing a distinction between the joyful associations born at the end of the fourteenth century and similar to the *titels* but lasting longer throughout the sixteenth century, and the *chambres de rhétorique* born at the same time as the Dutch-speaking chambers of rhetoric, but never having reached the same level of organization and importance. This distinction is a key to reading the records of ‘mixed contests’ and to understanding our sources better. I hope to be able in the future to investigate in my own research field the extent to which the French-speaking joyful associations and the *titels* were in contact, but for the moment we can already establish that the world of the joyful companies of the French-speaking Southern Netherlands was not a closed one, and that even if they formed a homogenous group, they had frequent relations with other groups within and outside their cluster, at least until the beginning of the sixteenth century.

The relations of the joyful associations with the religious and civil authorities

We will now turn to considering the relationships the joyful associations had with religious and civil authorities, that is both municipal authorities, as well as ducal authorities. As we have seen earlier, the joyful associations sometimes had to deal with the ecclesiastical authorities. Some groups of actors drawn from the Church were indeed involved in

be closer to a joyful company than to a Puy devoted to the Virgin Mary. In Tournai, another difficulty has to be taken into account: the *Puy d'Amour* and the *Prince d'Amour* are sometimes evoked in relation to the chamber of rhetoric by nineteenth-century scholars: Claesen, 26. I think however that we can speak here of two different literary associations, with a Puy of Love taking part from the fifteenth century in theatrical activities among the joyful associations and as one of them, while the chamber of rhetoric appears later and does not mingle with the latter.

⁷⁸ Van Bruaene, “Om beters wille,” 76–93.

theatrical activities linked with a religious event, like a procession (such as in Lille for the dramatic contest organized during the yearly procession), or in the performance of plays among the joyful, lay associations of the city (such as in Douai for the feast of fools). As we will see later, however, theatrical groups often had to let their play be inspected by Church authorities on the order of the municipal authorities, in particular in the sixteenth century, in order to make sure that the plays did not contain any polemical content such as Protestant ideas. Tellingly, we have surprisingly few references to incidents in which the joyful, lay associations were opposed to the Church. It seems that, while the Church monitored ecclesiastical groups involved in feasts of Fools or Innocents, to the extent of forbidding such festivities regularly throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the regulation of the joyful associations' festivities was left to the municipal authorities. This appears clearly in the case of the feasts of fools at Douai. The festivities of the vicars were closely watched by the ecclesiastical authorities and the last Bishop of Fools was elected in 1494, after which the festivities of the vicars were, at least to a certain extent, replaced by a more innocuous horse parade on Innocents' day, even if the frequent interdictions of profane festivities among the lower clergy that we find in the archival records until 1586 show that these festivities continued to be celebrated until the end of the sixteenth century.⁷⁹ On the other hand, the feast of fools celebrated in town was controlled by the municipality and went on until the second half of the sixteenth century.⁸⁰

Why did the Church authorities not get involved in the control of the lay, joyful companies? Did they agree to leave this jurisdiction to the municipal authorities, provided that the joyful companies behaved and did not ridicule the Church in their plays? Or did the Church exercise a form of control by censoring the text of the plays beforehand? Nothing in the archival entries we have left allows us to suggest that the ecclesiastical authorities read the texts of the plays before the actual festivities. One can infer though that there was such a social and municipal control on these groups that such a religious control was not necessary.

We have indeed information about the joyful associations thanks to the municipal archives, since the civil authorities of the cities used to

⁷⁹ Guilleray, 94 and 101.

⁸⁰ Guilleray, 107.

give subventions to these groups. Because these are our main sources of information, these archives may give us a biased view of the relations between these groups and the municipal authorities. However, a cautious reading of these sources allows us to draw some conclusions. It appears clearly that a joyful association such as the abbey of Lescache Pourfit had a close bond with the magistracy of the city.

Firstly, we know that the city started subsidizing the association early in the fifteenth century, the first mention of the abbey of Lescache Pourfit in the account books dating from 1426. Since the account books are our only source, we do not know if the association existed prior to this entry, or if it was founded officially in the very same year that it is first mentioned in the account books. It is however likely that the association existed before it became subsidized by the city, and that its mention in the archives merely made its existence official, giving it a municipal dimension. It is difficult to evaluate what the municipal grants represented in the total of the expenses of a joyful company: in the case of Lescache, the abbey was given money “en advancement,” that is as an aid for the spectacle it presented, or “en courtoisie,” that is as a present. Although the amount of money given varies throughout the period, there seems to be a fixed sum given each year to the abbot to help him pay the expenses of the various plays the company performed in the year, as the formula in the following entry shows: “Given to the abbot and brothers of Lescache Pourfit to help them with the expenses they made for their feast of the aforesaid Twentieth Day of this year, in the usual way, 12 pounds.”⁸¹

In that same year, the association received extra help for their trip to Arras for Shrove Sunday, which shows that even if a fixed sum was given for the expenses of the year, there was the possibility to add an extra sum in case the expenses were higher than expected. Moreover, the city also made gifts in wine, usually for the dinner of the association. The other associations of the city were not forgotten: they received gifts for their plays, often in wine, and associations coming from outside the city also received such gifts at times. It is unclear how much the abbot paid for himself. Durieux says that “moreover, the abbot was chosen among the richest people, so that he could maintain with dignity his

⁸¹ “[A] l’abbé et confreres de lescache pourfit pour ayde de leurs despens fais a leur feste du jour dudit XX^e de ce present an en le maniere accoustumée, 12 lt,” [1444–1445, f32v], Durieux, 148.

rank and the prestige of the city he represented.”⁸² He does not provide proofs for this affirmation, but we know that being the leader of a joyful association was indeed an expensive privilege, so expensive that some elected leaders might have refused this honour. Indeed, we know that in 1547, in Valenciennes, Jacques Sanglier accepted the office of prince of Pleasance and went as such to the *Fête de Pleasance* in Lille that year. However, he resigned this position before going to a second feast organized in Tournai, and the city council had to ask Quintin Coret, one of Valenciennes’ aldermen, to replace him. The author who described this incident is Simon Le Boucq, a provost living at the beginning of the seventeenth century in Valenciennes, who wrote the history of the sumptuous *Fête de Pleasance* of Valenciennes in 1548, in which a member of his family, Noël Le Boucq, took part. He underlines that “truly [the feast of 1548] cost the aforesaid prince dearly, and people thought that Jacques Sanglier had been right to resign this position without waiting for this blow.”⁸³ It seems therefore that this position was an honour but could also be a financial burden if the joyful association had a certain rank to uphold.

Furthermore, we have seen that the abbot was elected in the city hall.⁸⁴ Thus, this election was not a ceremony during a private meeting of an independent association, but an official event in the life of the city council. The municipal authorities (the provost, the aldermen, etc.) also gathered together in the city hall to watch the plays performed by the abbey of Lescache Pourfit, whose stage was built on the central square of the city, in front of the city hall. We find regularly such entries in the city’s account books as the following:

Spent by my Lords provost, aldermen, collector: four men and their servants in the city’s house, with them other bourgeois notables of this city on the Twentieth Day, in order to be together to see and hear the plays that were performed on the aforesaid day, 76 shillings.⁸⁵

⁸² “[L]’abbé était choisi en outre parmi les plus fortunés, afin de pouvoir soutenir dignement le rang et le prestige de la ville qu’il représentait,” Durieux, 19.

⁸³ “[A] la vérité cousta bien cher audit Prince, et fut trouvé que Jacques Sanglier avoit très bien faict de s’en déporter avant attendre ce coup,” Félix Brassart, “Fêtes populaires au XVI^e siècle dans les villes du nord de la France et particulièrement à Valenciennes (1547 et 1548),” in *Souvenirs de la Flandre wallonne*, 11 (Douai: Crépin, 1871), 73.

⁸⁴ See note 20.

⁸⁵ “Despendu par Messeigneurs prevost, eschevins, collecteurs 4 hommes et leurs gens en le maison de le ville, avec eulx autres notables bourgeois de ceste cité le jour du vingtiesme, affin d’estre ensemble pour veir et oïr les jus et esbatemens qui se firent audit jour [...] 76 s.” [1434–1435, f123], Durieux, 27.

These food bills show that the spectacle offered by the joyful associations was considered an official entertainment. So do other food expenses paid by the municipality, such as the expenses of the dinner of the association. While it is understandable for a municipality to reward any group having given an honest and enjoyable entertainment to the people, it is striking to see how far the municipality meddled in the activities of the joyful associations. These two entries are enlightening in this regard:

Presented to Roland of Bavay on the Twentieth Day during the supper given by his abbey of Lencache Proffit, where were my Lord the archbishop, my Lord of the chapter and other gentlemen with my Lords the aldermen, 11 jugs of 18 measures of wine taken in the cellar of the city, at 9 shillings per measure, 8 pounds, 2 shillings.

On the Twentieth Day, given to Jehan Rosel, abbot of Lencache Proffit during his supper of honour where were my Lord of Ballagny, my Lady his wife and others, 25 jugs of wine of 36 measures, taken in the cellar, at 34 shilling the measure, 61 pounds 4 shillings.⁸⁶

The dinner of the association was given in the presence of the aldermen, and sometimes hosted prominent figures, either ecclesiastical or civil. It was probably even an opportunity for the municipal council to establish and maintain good relations with these persons. The first entry underscores the fact that, far from opposing the activities of the joyful association, the higher Church hierarchy allowed, if not encouraged it by being present at the dinner. On the other hand, the second entry shows that the dinner could also have a more political colour by associating to the feast a representative of an authority superior to the local authorities.

In fact, the joyful associations grew in importance to the point of becoming real representatives of the city, and these subsidies prove that these companies had an official status, that they represented their town when they went to perform in neighbouring cities. As representatives

⁸⁶ “Presenté a Roland de Bavay le jour du XX^e au soupper au relief de son abbaye de lencache proffit, ou estoient Monseigneur le reverendissime [Louis of Berlaymont, archbishop of Cambrai], Monseigneur de cappiltre et autre gens de bien avec mesieurs, onze quennes de 18 lotz de vin prins au cellier de la ville, a 9 sous le lot, 8 l.t. 2 s.” [1574–1575, f35], Durieux, 145–146; “Le XX^e a Jehan Rosel abbé de lencache proffit a son soupper d’honneur ou furent Monseigneur de Ballagny [governor of Cambrai for the Duke of Alençon], madame sa femme [Renée of Amboise] et aultres, 24 cannes de vin de 36 lots, pris au cellier, a 34 s. le lot, 61 l. 4 s.t.” [1587–1588], Durieux, 169–171.

of the city, their role was double: they travelled to maintain the good relations between the cities, “to maintain friendship with the good cities” (abbot of Joy, Arras, 1509),⁸⁷ “to maintain and continue the old friendships” (abbot of Lescache Pourfit, Arras, 1496),⁸⁸ and to defend the honour of the city (Cambrai, 1530–1531).⁸⁹ Performing plays in neighbouring cities was not only a form of entertainment: the joyful companies were in charge of defending the honour of their city, displaying the wealth and intellectual skills of their inhabitants, and demonstrating their respect and esteem for their neighbours. The official aspect of this task is revealed by the fact that some aldermen sometimes accompanied the association, such as the aldermen who went with the abbot of Joy or the prince of Love of Arras to neighbouring cities on various occasions.⁹⁰ The importance of these companies is reinforced by their role inside the city: not only did they entertain the population, they also were in charge of the spectacles displayed upon the entry of important people. In Arras, the abbot of Joy and other companies were among the groups that prepared and performed tableaux vivants or short sketches upon the entry of the duchess of Burgundy on 16 February 1430, and of the princess of Castile on 28 February 1500. They even organized such an entry when Philip the Good entered the city on 27 February 1455, the abbey of Joy being the group that received the biggest reward from the city (20 pounds), followed by six other joyful companies.⁹¹ Thus, it appears that in each city of the circle we evoked earlier, one group was in charge of profane drama, and its leader was helped by the city to pay the expenses of such performances, within the city as well as outside, for festivals for the inhabitants as well as for important events such as the entries of prominent figures.

The official role of these associations is confirmed by an incident in which the city of Cambrai opposed the Duke of Burgundy, Philip the Good. In 1463, the Duke asked the city government to arrest and to punish a man called Jehan de Lille, the reason for this punishment and its form remaining unclear since, according to Durieux, the account books of Cambrai were in a bad condition here. This Jehan de Lille

⁸⁷ “pour entretenir amitié avec les bonnes villes,” Fichier Guesnon, 1509.

⁸⁸ “pour entretenir et continuer les anciennes amitez,” Durieux, 157.

⁸⁹ “affin de y garder l’honneur de le ville,” Durieux, 165. On the importance of the notion of honour for the Dutch-speaking chambers of rhetoric, see Van Bruaene, “Om beters wille,” 400–417.

⁹⁰ Fichier Guesnon, 1490, 1497, 1510 [...].

⁹¹ Fichier Guesnon, 1430, 1455 and 1500.

apparently originated from or was linked to Cambrai, and the city refused to carry out the verdict. Moreover, the King of France, Louis XI, who had recognised the neutrality of the city, just as the Duke of Burgundy had done, forbade the city to punish the man, threatening to impose a fine of 200 marks of gold on Cambrai if it did. The Duke then had the abbot of Lescache Pourfit, Mathieu du Castel, and his four companions arrested during a visit they made to Mons in order to take part in festivities there. The silver dinner ware of the abbot was confiscated. The aldermen of Cambrai had to negotiate to have the abbot of Lescache and his companions released, and had to pay “a thousand crowns that were discussed and agreed on to get and obtain their liberation,” the men having been held hostage for eighteen days.⁹² This incident shows the importance of the leader of the joyful company. We learn that he travelled with silver dinner ware, either his own, which would prove that he was a wealthy citizen putting it at the service of the abbey of Lescache Pourfit, or the dinner ware of the city that would lend it to the abbot as the city of Valenciennes lent its own to the prince of Pleasance in 1548, as a mark of trust in this leader of a joyful company.⁹³ His importance maybe as a rich citizen of Cambrai and in any case as a representative of the city was acknowledged by the Duke, who used him as a tool to put pressure on the municipality of Cambrai, and the city also considered this citizen important enough to spend a lot of money to secure his release and that of his companions.

The official status given to these joyful companies probably explains why we do not find any mention of control or interdiction of their plays, contrary to the plays of other types of actors' groups. Indeed, from the end of the fifteenth century especially, groups wishing to stage a play outside a religious or urban context (such as the staging of Passion plays or joyful entries), had to present the text of their plays to the authorities and to ask for permission to perform them, as the registers of deliberations of the aldermen suggest.⁹⁴ But, whereas we find numerous entries about this process of control and authorisation or rejection of a play in the case of inhabitants of a city asking to perform a mystery play or, from the middle of the sixteenth century,

⁹² “mil escus en quoy on avait traictié et pacifié pour avoir et obtenir leur delivrance,” Durieux, 28–29.

⁹³ Brassart, 72–73.

⁹⁴ Lavéant, 15–107.

of travelling, professional troupes coming from outside the region, we do not find such entries concerning the joyful associations, probably because of their links with the local authorities, that could control in a non-official way the activities of these companies and therefore did not have to control their plays officially, through a process recorded in the registers of the town.

Social control and education: the role of the joyful companies in their urban environment

Apart from their role as representatives of their city and organizers of a part or all of the profane dramatic festivities within their city, the joyful associations also played a social role in their urban environment. Indeed, scholars agree to see in these companies the heirs of the rural, youth groups that organized carnival festivities and *charivaris*, but structured in a way that would tend to exercise social control over two groups of inhabitants of the city in particular: the poor and the youth.⁹⁵ Moreover, we would like to explore another possible role these companies may have fulfilled, namely their position in the transfer of knowledge and education for specific groups such as the sons of the city's social elite. We wonder as well if it is possible to find in these groups signs of opposition to and criticism of the authorities.

To begin with the issue of social control, many scholars have emphasized the fact that the structure of these groups as well as the way their activities were regulated by the city had a role to play in channelling the sometimes violent energy of some categories of inhabitants.⁹⁶ As for the degree of prosperity of these associations, it is very difficult to evaluate. While we know that the leaders of the most important joyful companies of each city must have been rich enough to pay the expenses linked to their activities, it seems that some joyful associations were also much more modest. According to Durieux, the mayor of Qué-tivier whom we evoked earlier took his name from a neighbourhood

⁹⁵ On the rural and urban cultures in France in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, see Muchembled, *Culture*.

⁹⁶ See in particular Natalie Z. Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1975); the concept of urban culture and the question of the role of urban elites have been intensely discussed by historians: for a review of the most recent theories and debates, see Van Bruaene, "A wonderful tryumfe," 376–380.

of Cambrai where people without a profession or resources found shelter (their *ressources quietives*, that is to say *chétives*: meager, being the origin of the neighbourhood's name according to Durieux).⁹⁷ We also know that in Lille, the companions of the Place du Petit Fret asked the Chamber of accounts in 1470 to support them financially so that they could stage a play during the procession. They appealed to the solidarity of the members of the Chamber of accounts because its *hôtel* touched the Place du Petit Fret, thus making of these members "subjects and citizens of the aforesaid seignory of Petit Fret" (9 June 1469).⁹⁸ In their letter of 2 July 1470, they complain that "for a long time no one has performed any play because of the poverty of the aforesaid company."⁹⁹ Is this an exaggerated complaint so that the company can get an extra grant to prepare their play, or was the poverty of the members of the association real? In any case, we see that not all the joyful associations were wealthy enough to spend large sums in order to stage theatre plays. However, they did express the desire to participate in the contests organised in the city, which would tend to indicate that these theatrical festivities could be an effective way of controlling poor or modest neighbourhoods by encouraging them to put their energy into their participation in city events.

Another group may have needed to be watched as well: the youth. As we said above, some associations insisted on the idea of youth in their name. We have very few details about these groups, and we do not know if their age composition corresponded to their name. However, it is likely that these urban groups were the equivalent of the rural youth groups that celebrated carnival, planted May trees, and organized *charivaris*. However, in the city, their activities were highly controlled and, while they were encouraged to participate in the celebration of some events such as dramatic festivities and contests within a determined and controlled framework, the other traditional activities of the youth were restricted, sometimes even forbidden. In Lille for instance, a series of municipal ordinances from the end of the fourteenth century forbade the planting of May trees.¹⁰⁰ On the other hand, these associations

⁹⁷ Durieux, 34.

⁹⁸ "subgez et manans soubz ladicte seignourie de Petit Fret," Finot, 519.

⁹⁹ "[D]es long temps on ne a fait quelques esbatemens pour la povreté de ladite place," Finot, 519.

¹⁰⁰ Alan E. Knight, "Beyond Misrule: Theatre and the Socialization of Youth in Lille," *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama*, 35 (1996), 75.

were allowed to stage plays, and Knight has shown how the dramatic contest of Lille was an instrument to control this turbulent group. Indeed, Knight shows that not only the circumstances of the contest but also the themes of the plays, showing examples of good or bad behaviour of a young man or woman, put “a special emphasis on the lessons appropriate to the youth of the city.”¹⁰¹ Moreover, it is likely that, by letting some groups stage plays during traditional feasts such as carnival, the city hoped to regulate the sometimes violent enthusiasm that young people showed for this type of celebration. The records that we have show that the cities gave rewards to groups that were not necessarily youth groups, such as religious brotherhoods like the brothers of Saint James who performed farces to entertain the people (“pour recreer le peuple”) on Shrove Tuesday in 1536 and 1556 in Cambrai.¹⁰² It seems an interesting strategy indeed to allow some entertainment to be performed on that festive day by ‘authorized’ actors who presented a play that would not be too critical of the civil or religious powers and that would attract the attention of groups of inhabitants who would otherwise be tempted to celebrate carnival their own way.

On the other hand, we have to wonder if all these joyful companies were youth associations. Indeed, we have seen that in the case of big companies such as the abbeys of Lescache Pourfit and of Joy, the abbot had to pay a part of the expenses of the year himself. The same goes for companies appearing later in the sixteenth century such as the groups celebrating the feast of Pleasance in Valenciennes in 1548. We therefore have to study more closely the social composition of these bigger companies, in so far as the archival entries allow us to do so. In Arras, we know the profession of some of the abbots of Joy that indicate various but nevertheless middle-rank to higher social positions: we know of craftsmen (a goldsmith in 1484, a mason in 1485, a caster in 1499), of merchants (in wine: 1500, in silk: 1521, without details about the trade in 1533), or prosecutors (1490). Sometimes, they are not designated by a profession but by their status, such as Philippe de Boffles, squire (1505), Bastart de Habarcq, bourgeois and archer of the city’s archers’ guild (1517) and Adam Barbet, bourgeois merchant (1533). In Cambrai, even if we have fewer details about the position of the abbots of Lescache, we know at least that, at the end of the period,

¹⁰¹ Knight, “Beyond Misrule,” 76.

¹⁰² Durieux, 167.

some were aldermen (Michel de Hennin in 1590–1591, “Monsieur de Pynon” in 1592–1593 and Jehan Baptiste Laude in 1598–1599), while some of the abbots became aldermen between ten and eighteen years after having been the head of the joyful abbey (at least six examples).

Because we lack details about the profession of most of these joyful abbots, it would be precipitous to give a systemic view of their social position. However, we notice that, especially in the sixteenth century, some of them seem to enjoy an already high position either thanks to their birth, or thanks to the recognition they received from their fellow citizens for their work or their activity in the municipality. In any case, it seems that these men were already adults and possibly too old to fit into the category of young, unmarried men (*jeunes hommes à marier*). Indeed, we know of an abbot of Lescache who had to be replaced because his wife died during his term. He was master Ernoult Droguet, who was the master carpenter of the city and who was elected abbot of Lescache for the year 1464–1465.¹⁰³ That Droguet was already a master-carpenter skilled enough to have the position of carpenter of the city and that he was old enough to be married at a time when one usually got married after 25 indicates that he probably was an older man, as were the aldermen elected abbot at the end of the sixteenth century. We could therefore propose the hypothesis that, even if a joyful abbey such as Lescache Pourfit or Joy could be composed of young members, its head had to be older, wealthy and respected enough to occupy this position, whose role was to lead the group and to be responsible for the simple monks or younger members. It seems in any case that, in addition to its role as representative of the city, this association exercised an educative function as well, when allowing the young members to express themselves through acting and/or writing plays, organizing feasts that were important for the city, and travelling outside the city to meet the members of other associations during dramatic contests. They were thus in a way being trained for their future activities as the elite of the city, and to form bonds with the future aldermen of the neighbouring towns, under the tuition of one or several older men who had already a steady and recognized social position.

How could then such companies have had a discourse critical toward the religious and civil authorities? Contrary to other associations such as the chambers of rhetoric, the joyful associations linked to the munici-

¹⁰³ Durieux, 26.

palities had less to suffer from censorship and lasted longer probably because they had an official status and were not suspected of having sympathies for the ideas of the Reformation. Although the borders between joyful companies and other kinds of groups were sometimes blurred and shifting, it is obvious that the companies that lasted until the end of the sixteenth century were those, like the joyful companies and the Puys, that were already under such official and social control that they were not too bothered by censorship and the external control of the Habsburg authorities, unlike the chambers of rhetoric. Their extinction is then to be explained not by censorship that would have turned into total prohibition, but by the more natural evolution of the public tastes at the turn of the seventeenth century.

Literary production: the plays of the joyful associations

The question of the literary production of the joyful associations poses a problem. Contrary to other groups like the Puys, these associations did not necessarily put the quality of their production first: their plays were not meant to last after they have been performed, which explains why very few, if any plays written in this context, have been kept. These groups clearly gave more importance to the performance, the rituals linked to their annual activities, and meetings with other associations of neighbouring towns, than to the preservation of their texts. We do have preserved the texts of a few plays, but they all belong to the same category: the plays performed at the procession of Lille.¹⁰⁴ Because they are based on religious themes taken from the Old and New Testaments as well as Roman history and Christian topics (life of a saint, miracle of the Virgin), they are dramatizations of famous or less known parables emphasizing moral issues. It seems indeed that moral drama was part of the performances of the joyful companies. This is obvious when the occasion was the procession of Lille, but there are other instances. We have evoked the theme of the contest organized in Arras by the abbot of Joy in September 1431, where the first prize was to be given to the company that could best explain why peace does not come to France, a most serious topic, even if comic plays were also performed during this contest. The abbey of Lescache Pourfit sometimes performed

¹⁰⁴ Knight, *Mystères*, *passim*.

morality plays, such as in Douai in 1533,¹⁰⁵ and other joyful companies performed farces, *sotties* and morality plays in Douai for the feast of fools of 1516.¹⁰⁶

The title of the plays or tableaux vivants that joyful companies could stage at times for royal entries also gives us an insight into the diversity of their plays. For instance, on 27 February 1455, in Arras, the abbey of Joy and other joyful associations staged the life of Gideon in silent tableaux vivants for the entry of the Duke of Burgundy, in order to please Philip the Good, since Gideon was one of the heroic figures particularly favoured at the Duke's court.¹⁰⁷ In 1469 for the entry of Charles the Bold, and in 1470 for the entry of Margaret of York and Mary of Burgundy, the joyful associations staged various tableaux vivants representing episodes from the Bible or Ancient History and linked with the person entering the city, for instance a life of saint Margaret in honour of Margaret of York, or a scene from the Old Testament showing Roboam and his council holding a discussion about taxes, in order subtly to warn Charles the Bold that the city could not bear more taxes.¹⁰⁸ However, we lack details about these plays: while we can infer that most if not all of them were tableaux vivants, given the fact that it would be difficult to stage real plays during a joyful entry, we do not always know if the actors spoke or not, moved or not, in other words, if the tableau vivant was in some way animated or not.

More often, the title given to these plays in the account books is vague, but implies a joyful content, when the plays were called “esbattements, farces et jeux” (*Vingtième* at Cambrai, 1545) or “jeux de joyeuseté” (Saint Scholastic's day, Shrove Sunday at Cambrai, 1518).¹⁰⁹ However, we do not know what the topics of these plays were, and we have in general very little information about the plays performed during these annual feasts, since the records, most of the time, do not even specify if the plays were *esbattements* and comic plays or morality plays. Since this type of staging forms the bigger part of the joyful associations' activities, the nature of most of their plays has to remain obscure, mainly

¹⁰⁵ Michel Rouse, “Le Théâtre des farces en France au Moyen Âge” (Ph.D. diss., Université Rennes 2—Haute Bretagne, 1983), 4, 180.

¹⁰⁶ Lhotte, 10.

¹⁰⁷ Alexandre Chotin, *Histoire de Tournai et du Tournésis*, 2 vols. (Tournai, Massart et Janssens, 1840), I, 43.

¹⁰⁸ Edmond Lecesne, *Histoire d'Arras*, 2 vols. (Arras: Imprimerie de Rohard-Courtin, 1880), I, 372 and 383.

¹⁰⁹ Durieux, 16 and 164.

because the account books record rather dryly the rewards given to the joyful companies.

Conclusion

There is still a great deal more research to be done on the joyful companies of the Southern Netherlands' French-speaking cities and towns in order to give a clear and complete view of their nature and way of functioning. We have tried to give here a first presentation of these rather complex groups. We have seen that their number and the variety of their forms and activities, as well as the lack of sources about them, can sometimes be puzzling as one tries to find in them a systematic organization. In fact, it is probably impossible to reconstruct a totally coherent and clear-cut system that would explain every aspect of these associations and of their activities, since we are studying here a world of groups that evolved over more than two centuries and that were not constituted as separate groups with a specific mission from the beginning.

However, we hope to have shed some new light on some features of these associations: these groups certainly had a specific character that separated them from other groups such as guilds, religious, festive associations or Puits and chambers of rhetoric. Moreover, their mission of entertainment, when supported by the religious and municipal authorities, reveals a deeper meaning to their activities, and shows clearly that these groups also fulfilled a more important function as representatives of their city and that they were also a means for these cities to control some social groups as well as to educate their future elites. The study of these joyful associations therefore brings to light a complex system where drama is not just a form of entertainment, but is closely related to very important issues for cities fighting for their identity: power, social control, education and prestige.

A deeper investigation is necessary to uncover those mechanisms and give a better view of these important groups within the cities in our cluster. A more complete study will also allow us to address other issues that we have not yet tackled: can we speak here of a local and/or regional identity shown by these groups and their plays? Is it possible to know more about the members of these associations in order to increase our knowledge of the origins and the structures of these groups, as well as of their level of learning? What perceptions

can we gain about the joyful component of these groups and about their 'parodic' nature? All these questions need answers that we hope to deliver by means of a more thorough study of these groups that undoubtedly made the dramatic culture of the French-speaking cities and towns of the Southern Netherlands at the end of the Middle Ages such a rich and complex world.