

Back to the Source: Repositioning the Archive in Medieval French Drama Studies

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In the past twenty years, specialists of drama have increasingly been working on an interdisciplinary approach to theatre and its sources, crossing literary analysis and the study of archival evidence in order to reach a better understanding of the circumstances in which plays were written, performed, received, and transmitted. For those studying the French-speaking regions, there is no REED project¹ that allows extensive access to the vast amounts of archival evidence available at the local level. Moreover, the large corpus of plays that have survived as well as the long French philological tradition may have prevented scholars from taking the kind of historical approach evident in Anglophone drama studies. In any case, we can see a clear gap between the numerous and very well documented studies produced by local scholars at the end of the nineteenth century and work by scholars such as Graham A. Runnalls that resulted from the rediscovery of this archival material in the 1980s.² Recently, several researchers have insisted on the necessity of studying extensively different types of French archives collections in order to show how drama functioned as an essential phenomenon in the late medieval society.³ I would like to sum up here a few essential methodological questions regarding the way we can approach these archival sources by first pointing out the problems one should be aware of when dealing with historical sources in order to investigate a specific topic within the field of medieval theatre studies, and then by demonstrating how one can deal with a specific source or archive collection in order to understand the place and role of drama in medieval society.

An essential point to keep in mind when using archival evidence as the main source for an enquiry on late medieval drama is that, depending on the subject one is studying, as well as the way records were created and kept in the region or city on which the study focuses, different types of sources may be used. We need them not only to document the performance itself, but also to understand the way in which the authors, organizers, and actors engaged in such activity, the intended goals and results of the performance, and the audience(s) and the city or institution in which this activity took place. This means that, when focusing on one aspect of drama and performance, for methodological as well as practical reasons scholars have to make

choices that lead them to selecting a certain type of archive over another. Such choices necessarily orient the kind of results they may find in these collections. Scholars are also often guided by a number of presuppositions that are in turn inherited from a long scholarly tradition. For instance, Marie Bouhaïk-Gironès has clearly demonstrated that if one wishes to study the medieval actor in his sociological aspects, one has to take into account not only a number of varied sources, from municipal books of account to notarial archives and judicial records, but also to reassess the notion of actor itself, by questioning traditional dichotomies such as professional versus amateur.⁴ In this respect, reevaluating the corpus of sources as well as the way we read them offers new answers and new perspectives related to various aspects of the medieval theatrical world, provided that the scholar is conscious of possible biases or limits in his/her study because of: 1. the characteristics of the topic that is focused on, and 2. the nature of the sources that are selected.

However, alongside this macro-level approach (i.e., starting from the large theoretical frame of theatre studies in an historical context and then narrowing down the investigation to specific sources), another approach to the sources on the micro-level is also necessary; namely, to start by intentionally focusing on one archive collection, in order to understand how it functions and what it can deliver in terms of data and questions on medieval drama. Indeed, if one considers that drama is a major phenomenon that pervades the entirety of late medieval society, it will not be surprising to see it mentioned in a very large variety of archive collections devoted to larger aspects of urban life (be they judicial, civic, professional, or notarial archives). Although it would of course be impossible to survey all possible sources produced at the end of the Middle Ages and the early modern period to look for specific mentions of theatrical or performative activities, it is worth considering how the scope of possible sources to investigate is much larger than what has been explored until now. I will briefly present a variety of such possible enquiries by giving a few examples of specific sets of collections useful to the history of performance, before I propose several methodological questions that emerged from my own approach to one collection in the municipal archives of Lille.

Municipal books of accounts are the type of source that was most extensively scrutinized by those scholars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who first began investigating the material conditions of medieval theatrical performance. The repertoires of performances compiled by Louis Petit de Julleville in the 1880s, which synthesized many details drawn from local studies, are still often used as a starting point for further enquiries into a specific performance or city; these are largely based on such municipal accounting records.⁵ However, despite these first and very often meticulous results, most of these series still need a thorough inspection and, most importantly, a renewed interpretation, given how definitions of performance and views about what constitutes evidence of theatricality have changed over the last few decades. Indeed, a careful examination of such volumes allows us not only to describe the material aspects of a (set of) performance(s), but also to demonstrate the importance of performance within the budget of a city, and hence to understand how its status as a public spectacle often bore a political meaning, as Matthieu Bonicel has demonstrated in his study of the account books of the city of Avignon.⁶

I have listed elsewhere a number of sources that can be used to document performance in the cities of the Southern Low Countries, and I have proposed methodological questions concerning the way we can read and use such sources in order to investigate the level of literacy of the actors as well as the audience(s) of a play in the sixteenth century.⁷ Such sources include account books, but also registers of deliberations of the aldermen, and judicial archives such as the records of the Governance of the Low Countries kept at the Royal Archives in Brussels, where copies of enquiries made on a local level were sent to be studied by the imperial authorities.⁸ In addition, we might examine registers of sentences pronounced in a city or collections of letters of remission for court cases in which actors may have been directly or indirectly involved.⁹ Marie Bouhaïk-Gironès has also established an extensive list of interesting series of the Parliament of Paris, kept at the National Archives in Paris.¹⁰ These are all collections of sources that can deliver exceptional documents on drama.

Yet, as historians often remind us, we must also study the archives themselves in order to understand why, how, and in which circumstances drama was included among the various topics covered in their holdings. These collections are sometimes simply too vast to be investigated in their entirety. However, tables or summaries are often available to search them, provided one uses the right keywords (also keeping in mind that the keywords used at the time of recollection often rely on the medieval vocabulary to refer to drama rather than our own modern one). By focusing on the collection and understanding how it was made up and organized, one can more accurately situate and recognize the significance of references to drama, performances or actors in relation to the other documents and topics gathered in the collection.

I would like to give one specific example of such a source, namely the registers of the ordinances enacted by the aldermen of the city of Lille in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (called the *registres des ordonnances du Magistrat*).¹¹ Each city had a specific name for such records, in which were written all general bans and/or authorizations pronounced by the municipality in order to maintain public order.¹² I came across these registers during research on drama and the Reformation in the region of Lille covering the period 1520-1570. However, these registers have been kept since 1382; it is actually quite striking that the first register opens almost directly with a ban concerning drama, with the first interdiction to perform *gieu de personnages de rimes* (“plays with characters in rhymes”)¹³ appearing on the third folio (17th of April 1382, AML, BB1, f3v).¹⁴ Thanks to very precise analytic tables, it is possible to spot all allusions to drama, theatrical or performative spectacles, and leisurely activities given over more than two centuries. Significantly, the standard term *jeux* often refers to games rather than theatrical plays, indicating that, for the authors of these deliberations, drama belonged to a larger category of entertainment (be it public spectacles or individual entertainment taking place in the public space, such as games of dice). It is also worth noting that these Lille registers contain only bans, while similar registers in other cities such as Tournai¹⁵ or Amiens (as studied by Runnalls) also offer a view of authorizations given to individuals or groups asking to perform a play.

We learn two essential elements from the study of these texts. First, it is necessary to study these documents with the entire timeframe covered by the collection in mind, even if one’s research focuses on a shorter period within that period. By understanding

how the system of local scrutiny and authorization of drama functioned at the end of the fourteenth century, one gets a new perspective on the situation in the sixteenth century. Indeed, the older documents confirm that there was a long tradition of local control of the performances by the municipality, before the imperial authorities implemented a specific legislation in 1520 to prevent the circulation of Reformation ideas by written or oral means (drama being one of these oral media that are suspect to these authorities, together with songs and, of course, clandestine preaching).¹⁶ In this respect, studying the whole collection informs us that the imperial legislation is not an innovation of the sixteenth century in terms of control and censorship of theatrical activities; what is new is the shift of the decision process from local to imperial authorities, as well as the emphasis on religious and ideological aspects. Incidentally, it is worth remembering that, already in the fifteenth century, that is to say before the Reformation issue appears, it was common to let prominent ecclesiastics check the content of religious plays in order to ensure that the theological arguments of the text were sound. From this perspective, the imperial injunctions to do so in the middle of the sixteenth century are in direct line with the previous local practice, and can be seen as a continuation of this process rather than as a new way of dealing with the performed or printed theatrical text.

Moreover, and this is my second point, it also appears that it is necessary to study not only the details concerning drama found in these references, but also the references as a whole, in order to understand to what extent drama was seen as a specific problem rather than as one issue among others from a regulative point of view. This instance is exemplary: a deliberation pronounced between January and July 1575 in Lille deals with several situations that need to be controlled or forbidden, among them performances. It states that it is compulsory to provide water at the entrance of the houses, and that it is forbidden to go to the bathhouses, to “perform plays at the ‘Pourchelet’ [a square in Lille] or in other places,” to sing or go to the places patronized by singers, to hang clothes belonging to sick people on the fortification to let them dry, and to bathe and fish in the rivers and ditches of the city (AML, BB 10, f191v-192, published again in June 1578 and June 1583). These seemingly very different topics probably revolved around one common concern of the municipal authorities of Lille: to prevent the further spread of an epidemic. This is revealed by the reference to the availability of water at the door of the houses (to clean the streets) and the proscription against displaying the clothes of “plague-stricken people” outside; in the document, *pestiférés* may refer to the plague but also to any other contagious disease. In this context, it is likely that, although the steam rooms or bathhouses were also traditionally places of prostitution in the Middle Ages, the reference to them in this text expresses a hygienic rather than a moral judgment. Similarly, one can infer that this prohibition against performing plays aimed to prevent gatherings that would increase the risk of contagion among the audience and does not necessarily represent an effort to stop the diffusion of the ideas of the Reformation, even if at first glance the context suggests this connection. Olivier Spina comes to related conclusions in his study of strikingly similar deliberations in London from the same period.¹⁷

To sum up, I would like to underline the fact that the current studies of French medieval drama through the analysis of archival evidence point in two directions that are not in contradiction, but rather complementary. On the one hand, the macro-

approach encourages us to remain conscious of methodological problems and larger historical contexts when dealing with sources that may reveal specific aspects of the history of performance in a particular time and place. On the other hand, the micro-approach is necessary in order to recognize and appreciate local situations of performances and sources. Ideally, these two approaches could lead in the future to two projects that would be extremely valuable for specialists of medieval drama: a synthesis of the various types of sources that can be used to write the history of theatre and dramatic performance in the Middle Ages in French speaking-regions; and studies of local clusters that would offer insight into local situations and specific archival collections.¹⁸

Although the first one may appear more ambitious and innovative according to the current standards of research funding agencies, the second enterprise should not be neglected, as it is necessary in order to achieve a real comprehension of medieval drama on a local as well as on a global level. Although many archive collections in France still await an exhaustive study, they promise to deliver an extremely rich amount of data that will lead to a better understanding of drama as a major phenomenon in late medieval society.

Notes

1. The Records of Early English Drama, has produced, since its founding in 1975, an impressive series of volumes editing historical evidence of drama and spectacular entertainment in the British Isles. For more information and bibliography the website of the project, see <http://www.reed.utoronto.ca>.
2. For the impressive bibliography of this author, see Denis Hüe, Mario Longtin, and Lynette Muir, eds., *Maintes belles œuvres faites. Études sur le théâtre médiéval offertes à Graham A. Runnalls* (Orléans: Paradigme, 2005), 11-18.
3. For a recent reflection on this renewal of the research on drama, see Marie Bouhaïk-Gironès, "Comment faire l'histoire de l'acteur au Moyen Âge," *Médiévales* 59 (2010): 107-25 (translated by Carol Symes as "How Can We Write the History of the Actor in the Middle Ages?" *ROMARD* 50 (2011): 31-46; Matthieu Bonicel and Katell Lavéant, "Le théâtre dans la ville: pour une histoire sociale des représentations dramatiques," *Médiévales* 59 (2010): 91-105.
4. In a series of articles on several types of sources, this scholar analyzes a number of questions concerning the status and the practice of the actor in the Middle Ages. See Bouhaïk-Gironès, "How Can We Write the History of the Actor"; Marie Bouhaïk-Gironès, "Le statut de l'acteur face aux pratiques du droit : l'exemple de l'affaire Poncelet au Parlement de Paris (1416)," *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes* 23 (2012): 127-40; Marie Bouhaïk-Gironès, "L'organisation d'un métier: l'acteur aux XV^e-XVI^e siècles," *Vivre de son art. Histoire du statut de l'artiste XV^e-XXI^e s.*, Agnès Graceffa, ed. (Paris: Hermann, 2012), 27-35; Marie Bouhaïk-Gironès and Katell Lavéant, "S'associer pour jouer. Actes notariés et pratique théâtrale, XV^e-XVI^e siècles," *Le Jeu et l'accessoire. Mélanges en l'honneur du professeur Michel Rousse*, ed. Marie Bouhaïk-Gironès, Denis Hüe, and Jelle Koopmans (Paris: Garnier, 2011), 301-18.
5. There are two thematic repertoires, published in the series *Histoire du théâtre en France*: one for religious plays in Louis Petit de Julleville, *Les Mystères*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1880), and one for comic drama in Louis Petit de Julleville, *Répertoire du théâtre comique en France au Moyen Âge* (1886, repr. Geneva, 1967).

6. Matthieu Bonicel, *Arts et gens du spectacle à Avignon à la fin du Moyen Age (1450-1550), d'après les archives communales d'Avignon*, Thesis of the Ecole nationale des Chartes, (Paris, 2006); this author is currently completing a PhD dissertation on the same topic under the title *Arts et gens du spectacle à Avignon et en Provence à la fin du moyen âge* (University of Paris-I, Panthéon-Sorbonne).
7. Katell Lavéant, "Drama and Urban Literacy: Recording and Documenting the Performance in the Southern Low Countries (15th-16th centuries)," *Uses of the Written Word in Medieval Towns*, Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy 28 (Turnhout: Brepols, forthcoming in 2013).
8. For an example of such enquiries in the case of polemic performances, see Katell Lavéant, "Le théâtre du Nord et la Réforme: un procès d'acteurs dans la région de Lille en 1563," *European Medieval Drama* 11 (2007): 59-77.
9. Among such letters, Walter Prevenier has edited documents (in French) around a fascinating case involving an actor in Malines in 1475: Walter Prevenier, "Vorstellijke genade in de praktijk. Remissiebrief voor Matthieu Cricke en diens mede-acteurs voor vermeende vrouwenroof in oktober 1476, slechts geïnterineerd na kritische verificatie door de raadsheren van het Parlement van Mechelen," *Bulletin de la Commission royale d'histoire* 175 (2009): 225-58.
10. Marie Bouhaïk-Gironès, *Les clerks de la Basoche et le théâtre comique (Paris, 1420-1550)* (Paris: Champion, 2007), 41-43.
11. For a more extensive view of this material, read Katell Lavéant, "Une scène incontrôlable? L'encadrement juridique des pratiques théâtrales à Lille et dans sa région à l'époque de la Réforme," *Tangence*, to be published in 2013.
12. Graham Runnalls used such registers in his study of the Passion play performed in Amiens in 1500: Graham A. Runnalls, "La Passion d'Amiens de 1500," *Les mystères dans les provinces françaises* (Paris: Champion, 2003), 227-63.
13. The formulation "gieu de personnages de rimes" is uncommon: one usually finds mentions such as "jeux rimés par personnages." We may interpret this as an early form of what afterwards becomes a standard formulation, but it is also possible that the detail "de rimes" is added here to the common "gieu de personnages" in order to underline the fact that it targets spoken plays rather than silent ones (such as tableaux vivants). This specific interdiction covers all future feasts that could be organized in neighborhoods for joyful purposes (including planting May trees and other seasonal activities), with the exception of the plays of the yearly Procession that are prepared in the neighborhoods of Lille but are staged in a much more official context. I hope to be able to publish in the foreseeable future a more detailed account and analysis of all the interesting references one can find in these registers.
14. For the period I have studied series BB1 (previously 373) starting in 1382, to BB12 (previously 384) finishing in 1598, Municipal archives of Lille (Archives municipales de Lille, henceforth AML).
15. See, for instance, Katell Lavéant, *Un théâtre des frontières. La culture dramatique dans les provinces du Nord (XV^e-XVI^e siècles)* (Orleans : Paradigme, 2011), 201-2 and Amaury de La Grange, *Extraits analytiques des registres des consaulx de la ville de Tournai, 1431-1476* (Tournai, 1893).
16. See Lavéant, *Un théâtre des frontières*, 196-98.
17. Olivier Spina, *Glorieux spectacles et honnêtes divertissements. Les Londoniens et les spectacles sous les Tudor (c. 1525-1603)*, PhD dissertation (University of Paris-IV, Paris-Sorbonne, 2011), 323-33.

18. Such a local approach was already called for by Jelle Koopmans in his project *Regional cultures and local subcultures: worlds of drama in France (1450-1550)* (funded from 2003 to 2007 by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research).