

Drama and Urban Literacy: Recording and Documenting the Performance in the Southern Low Countries (Fifteenth-Sixteenth Centuries)

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Introduction

As has been pointed out in studies on medieval urban literacy over the last three decennia, one obvious element to examine when addressing the topic is to study a specific range of records as well as their context of production. In this respect, the archival evidence that helps in documenting theatrical performances is particularly interesting to take into account. The region I will focus on in the present contribution covers the French-speaking southern Low Countries, today the north of France and the south of Belgium. As is well known, this region was one of the most urbanised in Europe from an early point in the Middle Ages. In all these cities, of which Lille and Tournai are but two examples, a wealth of archival material was produced. This is especially true for the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a period during which both the production of archives and the organisation of theatrical performances increased significantly. Even if there are gaps in the archives, scholars working

Uses of the Written Word in Medieval Towns: Medieval Urban Literacy II, ed. Marco MOSTERT and Anna ADAMSKA, *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy*, 28 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), pp. 375-387.

on any topic related to this region and this period usually have to deal with enormous amounts of archival material, manuscripts, and even printed matter; this observation is valid when one studies the theatre as well.

I will try to establish which sources can be used when studying the links between drama and the notion of urban literacy in the context just mentioned. Indeed, while a substantial amount of the elements related to practical and institutional matters, as well as to literary texts, were being written down in the Middle Ages, the written aspects of theatre remain problematic, given the specific links between this activity and orality, and the possible (and largely immeasurable) gap between the text uttered during the performance and its state when transformed to be recorded in manuscript or print. The problems posed by the sources used to document these aspects therefore need to be examined, especially in the case of a dramatic culture that left many records of its activities, but only a limited amount of the dramatic texts that were performed.

Groups performing drama played a central role in the cultural life of the towns of the region. Their variety, from joyful companies and guilds to occasionally or professional groups of actors, also means a vast range of records that allow us today to reconstruct their activities.¹ I would like to present these different types of records, from institutional written records to pragmatic literacy. A number of these sources are problematic when we try to evaluate the meaning of the notion of literacy for the actors and the public of this theatrical culture. I will present and analyse the different sources and deal with a few interesting cases in order to answer these two questions: how can the study of medieval drama contribute to our understanding of the phenomenon of urban literacy in the late Middle Ages? And what does our current understanding of these sources reveal about the level and the nature of literacy of the actors and the public of these performances?

Many of the elements I will evoke are also being studied by a number of scholars currently working on drama in French. Therefore, in addition to using the archival documents I studied in my own research, I will point out the results of other studies by scholars who also insist on the importance of not only working on theatre plays as literary texts, but on the archives that document the performance aspects as well. Thus, the conclusions presented here will be derived from the study of a specific cluster of texts and theatrical performances, but may also give a first impression of more general patterns regarding

¹ I have studied these groups in K. LAVÉANT, *Un théâtre des frontières: La culture dramatique dans les provinces du Nord aux XV^e et XVI^e siècles* (Orléans, 2011: *Medievalia* 76).

theatrical activities in various French and French-speaking areas in the late Middle Ages.

Drama and the Sources: Recording and Keeping Track of the Performance

When studying the theatrical culture of the French-speaking towns in the Southern Netherlands, it is necessary to take into account both the historical and the literary sources. As for the historical sources, we can find details concerning theatre in various documents among three types of sources:

1. Normative sources, that is to say the documents concerning laws, rules and regulations at governmental level, and internal regulations for brotherhoods or other associations. In this category, however, one finds only a few documents. We mostly have regulations promulgated by the governors of the Low Countries in the sixteenth century in order to fight the propagation of Reformation ideas, and published in placards. They tend to limit the possibilities of performing plays, although most of them consider theatrical texts rather than performances, and therefore include theatre as part of the larger category of printed literary texts subject to censorship. This may explain why there are very few general regulations that specifically deal with theatre from the point of view of the performative activity. Moreover, we do not possess internal sources such as statutes of associations that could reveal how various theatrical groups organised their own activities. This unfortunately prevents us from knowing precisely how these groups functioned.

2. Documents of practice that show how decisions were made and applied at a local level, and how institutions functioned on a daily basis. In this category, we find many documents that help us to precisely locate the theatrical activities in the towns of the region, of which we can list here the most useful types:

- Town archives, particularly the books of accounts and the deliberations of the aldermen. Thanks to these records, we can see that some groups were allowed to perform plays by the local authorities, and that their performances could be financed by the municipality, which proves their involvement in the public life of the cities.
- Judicial archives, which offer interesting information on problematic performances that contravened regulations and therefore led to enquiries and sometimes prosecu-

tions. In this case, one finds accounts giving more or less accurate descriptions of the content of the plays, details about the actors, and even at times the reactions of the audience to the performance.²

- Contracts that actors could sign in order to organise their representation for a given time (not to be mistaken for long-term statutes), informing us how some groups functioned as commercial associations that derived a profit from their theatrical activities.³

3. The narrative sources, that is to say chronicles, diaries, and local histories written by the bourgeois of these towns, as well as the accounts of joyful entries, which were often written down and kept in the archives of the town, or, in the sixteenth century, even printed for a larger public. In these texts we mostly find descriptions of the performances and *tableaux vivants* insisting on the symbolic meaning of these spectacles, but they lack details concerning the actors and the material aspects of the performance.

To sum up very briefly, we can see that most of these sources are external to the theatrical groups. On the one hand, this means that very often, while they offer many details on the way theatrical culture functioned as a whole, they give only a limited view on the subject of literacy among the theatrical groups themselves. On the other hand, their existence proves that in this late medieval urban society it was considered essential to keep track of these performances in various written records, either on an institutional level, by duly registering these activities in different municipal archives, or on an individual level, when bourgeois wrote about this phenomenon in their diary or in a local history.

Obviously, in the case of drama, we also have to take into account another kind of source, namely the literary sources, in this case the texts of plays (whether we know if they were actually performed or not). There are still a great many of them to be found in manuscript and in early printed editions, but, as mentioned earlier, we have to remember that they represent only a very small part of all the texts that were performed at the time, given the incredibly

² I have studied two of these cases from two judicial enquiries about performances organised in the middle of the sixteenth century: K. LAVÉANT, “Le théâtre du Nord et la Réforme: Un procès d’acteurs dans la région de Lille en 1563”, *European Medieval Drama* 11 (2007), pp. 59-77; EAD., “Le théâtre et la Réforme dans les villes francophones des Pays-Bas Méridionaux”, in: *Le théâtre polémique français (1450-1550)*, ed. M. BOUHAÏK-GIRONÈS, J. KOOPMANS, and K. LAVÉANT (Rennes, 2008), pp. 161-177.

³ M. BOUHAÏK-GIRONÈS and K. LAVÉANT, “Les contrats d’acteur à la fin du Moyen Âge”, in: *L’acteur et l’accessoire: Mélanges en l’honneur de Michel Rousse*, ed. M. BOUHAÏK-GIRONÈS, D. HÛE, and J. KOOPMANS (Paris, 2011), pp. 301-318.

high number of performances that are evoked, often quite dryly, by the local archives and in particular in books of accounts. First, we find a remarkably broad range of manuscripts. Scholars have established a whole typology of theatre manuscripts.⁴ They consider several states of the text and its paratext. At one end of the spectrum, some manuscripts display a text annotated for a performance, or even only roles of actors disconnected from the play as a whole (the *rolet* contains only the lines of one role, with an indication of where this text is placed in the play). Alternatively, such a ‘working document’ can be an overview of all the roles in a play, with only the indication of the beginning and the end of the text of each role in the dialogues; this indicates that it was used by the director (the *meneur de jeu*).⁵ At the other end of the spectrum, we have the richly decorated manuscripts containing the text of a play, often religious or moral in nature. These manuscripts were typically made to be read rather than to organise a new performance. Secondly, we have collections of plays or independent texts of plays printed from the end of the fifteenth century onwards. However, it was customary for a printer to erase details relative to the performance or linguistic regionalisms from the text, so that the play could be read by a large public. It is therefore very difficult to analyse these printed plays in order to get information on the context in which they were produced.

I would now like to reflect on what these sources, historical or literary, reveal about the conception of drama in regard to the literate mentality. In other words, what can we infer from the strategies of conservation of documents displaying information about theatrical performances, as well as of some dramatic texts?

When we consider the historical sources dealing with theatre, we can underline two aspects.

1. The official records, such as account books or judicial archives, deal not with theatre itself, but with its significance for public life or in public matters. The books of accounts retain traces of the performance when, at some point, money was given to prepare a staging or as a gift to the actors, or when the aldermen were asked to deliberate whether an authorisation was needed to

⁴ G.A. RUNNALLS, “Toward a typology of medieval French plays manuscripts”, in: *The Editor and the Text: Mélanges Anthony J. Holden*, ed. P.E. BENNETT and G.A. RUNNALLS (Edinburgh, 1990), pp. 96-113; D. SMITH, “Les manuscrits ‘de théâtre’: Introduction codicologique à des manuscrits qui n’existent pas”, *Gazette du livre médiéval* 33 (1998), pp. 1-10.

⁵ The most famous example of such a working document has been edited by G. COHEN, *Le Livre de conduite du régisseur et le compte des dépenses pour le Mystère de la Passion joué à Mons en 1501* (Strasbourg, 1925).

perform a play (mostly when the play had a religious content). One can say that theatre then acquires an official status, when the authorisations and especially the subventions given by the municipality transform the performance into an event with a public significance. This is shown by the formula accompanying the sums given to the actors or organisers: the performance is organised “for the honour of the city”. Alternatively, these archival sources record information when performances need to be controlled so as not to disrupt public order. This was the case in the sixteenth century, for instance, when travelling companies of actors from outside the region wished to perform plays from their repertoire for a few days in the city. Judicial records also dealt with this last aspect of drama, especially in the sixteenth century, when plays were suspected to support the propagation of Reformation ideas.

2. Other sources, such as the diaries of individuals, record information about performances of festivities, single plays or joyful entries, as do the accounts of joyful entries in municipal archives, from a memorial perspective: that is to say, to remember the performance as such or, more often, as part of an important ceremony. This aspect is reinforced and linked to the honour of the city, once again, when such accounts of joyful entries were not only kept in the archives of a town, but were also printed in order to be offered to a large public of readers. Such is the case of the joyful entry of the emperor Charles V in Valenciennes in 1540. A few weeks after the entry had taken place, the account was printed not in the region, but in one of the big centres of printing: Rouen. A prologue explains why the text has been printed:

Because all ancient and modern historiographers, orators and rhetoricians have the habit of writing and having printed all the events happening in their time that are worthy of praise and memory, in order to give spirit and courage to their posterity and successors so that they act and progress better and follow the memory and acts of their ancestors in everything, it seemed to me that it was suitable to write and have printed this little text ...⁶

⁶ “*Pour cause que tous hystoriographes, orateurs et rethoriciens anciens et modernes ont accoustumé mettre par escript et faire imprimer toutes nouvelles advenues en leurs temps dignes de louenge et memoire, affin de animer et bailler couraige a la posterité et successeurs de proceder et cheminer de mieulx en mieulx et de [suivre] en future les vestiges et marches de leurs progeniteurs en tout, bien me assemblé estre convenable mettre par escript et faire imprimer ce petit codicille*” (*La triumpante et manifique Entree de lempereur Charles tousjours auguste, cinquiesme de ce nom, accompaigne de messeigneurs le daulphin de France et duc Dorléans en sa ville de Valentiennes*, printed by Jehan Lhomme in Rouen, 1539 (old style)).

Here the anonymous writer considers the value of the account for the descendants of the people who saw the spectacle. We can also infer that the choice to print the text in order to spread it, instead of just recording it in the archives of the city, is significant. This can derive from financial motives (if the text is printed, there is a potential market of people who have seen the entry and want to remember it, or who have not seen it and want to learn more about it), or from strategic motives of the city (if the decision to print the account came from the magistrate of Valenciennes), since the memory of the entry, spread by print beyond the borders of the region of Valenciennes, also enhances the importance and pomp of the ceremonies of the town. In any case, it is crucial to see that in this instance the fact of recording the event by writing it down and even printing it is considered essential, since it is this act that underlines the exemplariness of the event.

When we deal with literary sources, and especially with texts of plays that have been kept, we have to remember that theatrical texts, as performed by different kinds of groups, were not necessarily considered as worthy of being preserved. This is evident when one considers the comic plays performed by joyful companies during annual feasts, considered essential for the public life of the town. In the region studied here, textual evidence of this type of play has not survived. If it was at some point written down, the text was apparently not considered as worthy of being preserved among the public records, nor do we find any private records that retained it. The discrepancy between the public importance of these festivities and the absence of any trace of the plays that were performed is striking. This does not mean that there are no records of such plays at all for the French-speaking regions, but they have to be sought for in Normandy or in Paris, and they are very few. Most of the comic plays that have survived are in fact farces that were printed in order to be read, and that are therefore devoid of any traces linking them to specific joyful companies, as explained above.

The traces we find about these joyful companies in the French-speaking Southern Low Countries are, again, mostly linked to the importance of the festivities for the town, with numerous mentions in the account books that show that the joyful companies were given some compensation for their activities. We also have a few accounts preserved in the archives that retell the parade of joyful groups from inside and outside the town.⁷ They are very specific

⁷ One account of the '*Fête de Plaisance*' in Valenciennes in 1547 is edited by F. BRAS-SART, "Fêtes populaires au XVI^e siècle dans les villes du nord de la France et particulièrement à

about the appearance of the companies, as they were an occasion for the participants to richly exhibit their costumes, and they insist on the ceremonial and ritual aspects of the parade, but they give almost no details about their theatrical activities.

Two other examples of the conservation of profane, moral plays are interesting. The first concerns two plays performed at the religious and literary association of the Puy of Amiens in 1472-1473. They have been preserved because they were collected along with other documents to make a 'souvenir album' for the Master of the Puy of that year. Once again, the plays were kept for their memorial value rather than for their literary content.⁸ The second example is that of a single play that was found in the ecclesiastical archives of Lille. This *Jeu du Grand Dominé et du Petit* is a morality play preserved without elements indicating either its origin or its date of composition. One possible explanation is, that the text of the play was written down in order to be studied by a 'censorship committee' at the beginning of the sixteenth century, as its content deals with religious reform or can even be linked to the ideas of the Reformation, if one dates the play from the beginning of the sixteenth century.⁹

As for religious plays, they were more likely to be retained, but again the manuscripts were frequently made for a user that would read the text of the plays as any other literary text. That is the case of some Passion plays such as the *Passion de Valenciennes* of 1549,¹⁰ or of the plays of the Procession of Lille.¹¹ These last plays were kept in a decorated manuscript that was likely made as a witness to the event, since separated plays, probably performed over a few years during the contest organised in parallel to the procession, are here collected in a book that is also decorated with paintings.

This does not mean that all religious plays were preserved with these intentions: it is likely that some texts were kept to be re-used later, for instance

Valenciennes", *Souvenirs de la Flandre-Wallonne* 11 (1871), pp. 46-74.

⁸ K. LAVÉANT, "Personal expression of a playwright or public discourse of a confraternity? A performance at the Puy de Notre-Dame in Amiens in 1473", in: *Drama, Performance and Debate: Theatre and Public Opinion in the Early Modern Period*, ed. J. BLOEMENDAL et al. (Leiden, 2011), pp. 19-33.

⁹ A. HINDLEY and G. SMALL, "Le *Ju du Grand Dominé et du Petit*: Une moralité tournaisienne inédite (fin XV^e-début XVI^e siècle)", *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 80.2 (2002), pp. 413-456

¹⁰ E. KONIGSON, *La représentation d'un mystère de la Passion à Valenciennes en 1547* (Paris, 1969).

¹¹ *Les mystères de la procession de Lille*, ed. A.E. KNIGHT, 5 vols. (Geneva, 2001-2011).

because the municipality investing a sum in order to have the text written down may have considered the text as an investment for the future. This is probably the reason why the text of the Passion play performed at Amiens in 1500 was kept by the town that had paid several scribes to write it down. It was lent to the city of Mons, so that this city could copy the play and adapt it for its own performance in 1501.¹²

A last type of theatre manuscripts, the texts annotated for a performance or the roles of actors, must be studied in another perspective, i.e. that of the question of literacy linked to the theatrical culture and its actors.

Urban Literacy and Dramatic Culture

According to the kind of material that contains the text of a play or details about a performance, we can derive a number of indications about the level of literacy of the actors of a play as well as of the audience of a performance. Two important questions therefore are: what was the level of literacy of the actors, and of the public?

As for the level of literacy of the actors, one has to wonder to what extent they were able to read (let alone write) in learning their text. The question might seem superfluous, as one could think that an actor needs to be able to read in order to learn his role. Indeed, the manuscripts showing roles of actors support this idea. However, it is not such an easy question to answer. One has to remember that there are as many kinds of actors as of plays: bourgeois of a city organising the performance of a Passion play, members of a joyful company preparing annual festivities with plays meant to be performed during a contest, actors from various social backgrounds signing a contract with each other to form an association so that they can derive a salary from their performances, members of the Church at various levels of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, or other sorts of professionals, such as the Law clerks of the Basoche of Paris.¹³ While some obviously had a basic education allowing them to read and write, such as the merchants, or even an education at academic level, such as

¹² G.A. RUNNALLS, "La Passion de Mons (1501): Étude sur le texte et sur ses rapports avec la Passion d'Amiens (1500)", *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 80.4 (2002), pp. 1143-1188. This article combines the study of the text of the play with a reconstruction of the exchange of texts between Amiens and Mons, using the account books of both cities.

¹³ For these various categories of actors, see the references cited *supra*, and M. BOUHAÏK-GIRONÈS, *Les clercs de la Basoche et le théâtre politique (Paris, 1420-1550)* (Paris, 2007).

the members of the clergy and the clerks, we have to ask ourselves to what extent actors coming from lower layers of society could be literate.

We have a law case from Dijon in 1447, in which craftsmen are accused of having performed a problematic farce during a *mystère*, because the play evoked some political problems between the King of France and the Duke of Burgundy at a time when the authorities wanted to preserve a fragile peace in the region. The actors all declared that they could not see from their role that the play was problematic, thus implying that they had learnt their role without reading the whole play first. The man who organised the performance, a craftsman in textiles, also declared that, although he had bought the text of a play when seeing a performance of it two years earlier, he had not been able to find problems in the text, because he was not a clerk and could not read much (as underlined in his testimony, saying: “*il sait tres peu lire*”).¹⁴

Is this excuse realistic? Specialists of theatre tend to think that this was only a defence strategy used in order to avoid getting into trouble with justice. This is quite obvious in the case of rhetoricians of Brussels who used the same excuse in 1559 when they were accused of having performed plays that contained religious criticism.¹⁵ Still, the question remains to what extent actors, and in particular the craftsmen who may not have benefited from a basic education, needed to be literate and to rely on written texts to learn a role by heart and perform it well – all the more since they appear at the end of a long dramatic tradition in which, we can infer, actors were primarily trained orally?

Another problematic question is that of the level of literacy of the audience of a play. One might again think that this is only a secondary problem, as it is not necessary to be literate to follow a visual spectacle. This may be true for a number of performances. However, there is at least one type of spectacle that does imply a certain ability of the audience to read texts: the joyful entries using *tableaux vivants*. In 1549, Charles V and the prospective Philip II of Spain entered Tournai, the emperor travelling in the Low Countries as part of a process of transferring power to his son. This entry is described in three different sources, all likely deriving their text from a common source: an account in the municipal archives; the diary kept by a bourgeois of the city, Pasquier de le Barre; and a Spanish writer, Calvete de Estrella, who followed the court.¹⁶

¹⁴ M. BOUHAÏK-GIRONÈS, “Le procès des farceurs de Dijon (1447)”, *European Medieval Drama* 7 (2003), pp. 117-134.

¹⁵ A.-L. VAN BRUAENE, *Om beters wille: Rederijkerskamers en de stedelijke cultuur in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden (1400-1650)* (Amsterdam, 2008), pp. 115-118.

¹⁶ J.C. CALVETE DE ESTRALLA, *El Felicissimo viaie d’el muy alto y muy poderoso Principe*

Several stages were presented to the princes, under the form of arches of triumph and *tableaux vivants* with a complex setting, presenting several stories and characters simultaneously. Some of the *tableaux vivants* were composed of two stages, presenting both a biblical story and an episode of the life of Charles V to compare the second to the first, thus giving a religious meaning to the deeds of the emperor. The significance of these *tableaux* was explained by panels containing poems in French or Latin. Two of these compositions, mixing text and image, are described in detail by Pasquier de le Barre. One is a comparison of the lives of David and of Charles V, flanked by two ditties explaining in twelve lines each the content of the biblical story and the episode of Charles V's life. When giving the content of these ditties, the account specifies that the panels were made "to give to the people the meaning of the said story".¹⁷ Another construction is an arch on which a stage shows how David crowns his son Solomon, and how Charles also bestows the power on his son. Two quatrains, one in Latin and one in French, explain the meaning of the *tableaux vivants*, and two ditties, again in twelve lines, reiterate the explanation "in order to let the common people have a better understanding of the story".¹⁸

According to the text, the long stanzas are written as additional explanations for the common people, and not for the princes. We can accept this if we consider that the people would indeed stand next to the stage and have time to read the stanzas, while the princes would pass by and may not have the time to do so. But this implies that the "common public", as designated by Pasquier, was literate enough to be able to read the ditties – or at least that some of the people could read them aloud for the other spectators. This may well have been the case, as recent research suggests that the level of literacy in the region at

Don Phelippe, hijo d'el Emperador Don Carlos Quinto Maximo, desde España à sus tierras dela baxa Alemaña: Con la descripcion de todos los Estados de Brabante y Flandes escrito en quatro libros (Antwerp, printed by Marten Nuyts, 1555), trans. J. PETIT, *Le très-heureux voyage fait par le très-haut et très-puissant prince Don Philippe, fils du grand empereur Charles-Quint depuis l'Espagne jusqu'à ses domaines de la Basse-Allemagne avec la description de tous les états de Brabant et de Flandre, écrit en quatre livres*, 5 vols. (Brussels, 1873-1884); P. DE LE BARRE, *Journal*, ed. G. MOREAU, *Le journal d'un bourgeois de Tournai: Le second livre des chroniques de Pasquier de le Barre (1500-1565)* (Brussels, 1975).

¹⁷ "Pour donner au peuple l'intelligence de ladicte histoire" (P. de le Barre, *Journal*, p. 339).

¹⁸ "Pour mieulx donner l'histoire à entendre au commun populaire" (P. DE LE BARRE, *Journal*, p. 349).

the end of the Middle Ages has been largely underestimated.¹⁹ In any case, it shows that the written text also has its place in a theatrical performance, even with an explanatory one in a situation as this, as if the images created in the *tableaux vivants* were not clear enough to be understood without a written note – perhaps because they referred to very specific events in the life of Charles V and biblical references. Such an example may lead us to reconsider the level of literacy of the mixed audience of a public performance.

Conclusion

We have shown briefly that there are two essential aspects for the study of the importance of urban literacy in the organisation of dramatic performances in the French-speaking Low Countries at the end of the Middle Ages. On the one hand, literacy was the key to recording and keeping traces of the spectacles presented in the cities of the region. Perhaps surprisingly, this drama has survived not through manuscripts or printed versions of its texts, but by records around the circumstances of the performance, from the authorisation delivered by the municipal authorities to the payment of the actors and other professionals involved in the staging of a play. Urban archives are an irreplaceable source to describe a theatrical culture, and the lack of archival records for its countryside counterpart prevents us from knowing much about the groups involved in theatrical activities outside the towns. Although this conclusion about the lack of sources concerning the villages seems obvious, one must, for instance, recall that a great deal of speculation took place among scholars in the 1970s as to whether or not the urban joyful companies found their origin in the rural *abbayes de jeunesse*, and to what extent both groups differed from each other.²⁰ Although research on the joyful companies in the past ten years has unearthed a wealth of new material in the archives, it is still very difficult to address the question of these ‘youth abbeys’ with the same certainty, given the lack of available sources.

On the other hand, we have seen that the question of the level of literacy among actors and spectators is far from being secondary, as it has conse-

¹⁹ A. DERVILLE, “L’alphabétisation du peuple à la fin du Moyen Âge”, *Revue du Nord* 66 (1984), pp. 761-776.

²⁰ See for instance R. MUCHEMBLED, “Des conduites de bruit au spectacle des processions. Mutations mentales et déclin des fêtes populaires dans le Nord de la France (XV-XVI siècles)”, in: *Le Charivari*, ed. J. LE GOFF and J.-C. SCHMITT (Paris, 1981), pp. 229-236.

quences for the understanding of the stage when texts are used as an important element of the spectacle, or even as the medium that allows the audience to decipher the allusions and references depicted in *tableaux vivants*. Actors even knew that literacy was a key element in their defence when they were accused of staging a scandalous play. By pretending that they could not read and understand the whole text of a play, some of them underlined that literacy was not necessarily obvious and necessary in their long line of oral tradition. We know, however, that this can be disputed, as literacy was certainly an essential notion to fully understand the position and importance of theatre in and for the late medieval town.

