

## EISEGESIS AND MEDIEVAL DRAMA: THE POLITICS OF READING (IN)

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This essay goes back to a session of a conference organized by the dedicatee of this volume in the 1970s, when literary medieval studies were reframing the "genre question" (Jauss, Zumthor, etc.). In those days, I was puzzling over how to fit French medieval theatrical texts into genre types born of theories inconsistent with medieval practice. There were (and are) more anomalies than paradigm cases. One of the anomalies that occupied my attention at the time was the generic status of a little-known 15-century play (which I will discuss below), theoretically engaging, in a narrow way, because it is variously readable as a *sottie* or as a morality play. Less narrow and more interesting is the metacritical question of "narrow" itself: the interaction, that is, of literary history with theory. No one would dispute that literary history (like any history) is built up of questions narrowly focused on factual data; but what are the conditions of factuality in literature? Let me rephrase this question in the terms that will serve as the working hypothesis for the present essay: a) that all presumably "factual" data involved with literary meaning mask (or suppress) a larger problem, the problem of eisegesis; b) that eisegesis is not an optional or deviant mode of reading, but the normal and necessary one; and c) that in literary pedagogy today, more attention should be focused on methods and techniques for determining the conditions and limits of eisegesis. What follows is an attempt to sketch these principles in the form of a case study.

Eisegesis means 'reading in.' Biblical scholars took it to be the negative counterpart of exegesis; literally construed, the latter means 'guiding' (*egesthai*) 'OUT OF' (*ex-*).<sup>1</sup> For literary scholars as well, some manner of exegesis is still (consciously or not) taken to be the ideal of interpretation, "explaining only what is actually in the text." For critics accustomed to professing overtly that such an activity is possible, eisegesis (broadly speaking) would cover all manner of improper explanation: any reading that is speculative, subjective, unverifiable (displaying no concatenation of matchable identity relations) --any reading, in short, that is personal; hence selective; hence distortive. Thus eisegesis is unavoidable, normal and necessary. This is the point I wish to stress from the outset: *all* reading by human subjects is always, to a greater or lesser degree, eisegetic.<sup>2</sup> This axiom, like most elementary propositions, is not very exciting when stated in black and white terms; for it to be more

interesting, we would need to know just how eisegetic is "normal" reading, or whether there is such a thing as normal reading, and what it would mean actually to believe (rather than simply to repeat, after Harold Bloom) that all reading is misreading. To explore questions of this sort, there is no better place to look than in one's own praxis, so I will return now to the little-known 15th-century dramatic text alluded to above.

For this discussion, I consider it an advantage that the subject of my earlier study is an obscure work that no one has much stake in arguing for one way or another. Marginal works are at least free from the pious vigilance with which classics and would-be classics are defended, in our marketplaces of ideas, against the defiling misprisions of competing interpretations. Thus with our non-classic text, we can look dispassionately at the reading strategies, and their underlying assumptions, which enabled two successive generations of skilled and sensitive eisegetes (the latter citing the work of the former) to create a literary-historical fiction whose mechanisms are no less engaging than those of the text in question (entitled, non-classically enough, the *Moralité de 1427*), where a banal and innocuous series of moral topoi have been seen to constitute "in reality" a carefully disguised attack on an oppressive political regime. The purpose, then, of my essay will not be to "set the record straight" on the nature of this play (though I will add some new information on the ideological context of its composition and performance); more important at the moment are questions having to do with the mechanisms and conditions of what we call reading and misreading (our own ordinary [professional] reading, not Reading in the abstract). Simply stated: is it really possible (and if so, to what extent) to define boundaries separating reading from misreading--to mark off, that is, the bounds of an interpretive ('getic') space that can only appear delimitable if we continue to act as though we take seriously the directional particles *ex-* and *eis-*?

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In a book entitled *La Satire en France au Moyen Age*, the 19th-century literary historian Charles Lenient imagined the existence in Paris during the Hundred Years War of what today would be called guerrilla theater:

Tandis que la querelle des Armagnacs et des Bourguignons ensanglantait les rues de Paris, les clercs de la Basoche et les Enfants Sans Soucy durent fournir un redoutable appoint aux factions politiques. Le théâtre devint un champ de bataille, où les partis prenaient plaisir à se déchirer: on dressa tréteaux contre tréteaux, comme on avait dressé chaire contre chaire, trône contre trône (1859:344).

Not much attention has been paid to Lenient's hypothesis, probably since we

have no texts with which one could either confirm or disprove it:

On n'a conservé aucun de ces drames armagnacs et bourguignons, empreints de toutes les passions du temps, calomnies en action, qui avaient tour à tour pour dénouement l'assassinat de Louis d'Orléans et de Jean sans Peur. Ils ressemblaient sans doute à ces farces furieuses que huguenots et catholiques échangeaient un siècle et demi plus tard comme autant de coups de pistolet (1859:374).

It is true that from the 16th century (not the 15th), "farces furieuses" of this type have come down to us (Beck 1986). It is also true that scenarios of the type described by Lenient, featuring insurrection and violent assassinations cast in a quasi 'Medieval' or 'Renaissance' setting, were popular in the post-Revolutionary *dramas historiques* of the Romantic period (when Lenient was growing up); but they did not exist in the Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1970s, however, in two important studies devoted to medieval drama, Jean-Claude Aubailly lent an air of plausibility to Lenient's "coup de pistolet" thesis of 15th-century drama. Support for Lenient's case (though he is not mentioned) comes in Aubailly's interpretation of a play described, in the manuscript in which it is preserved, as *Une moralité faicte en foulois pour le chastiment du Monde*, retitled *La Moralité de 1427* in the modern edition by Robert and André Bossuat (Bossuat 1955; see also Bossuat 1950). Aubailly describes this play as the oldest surviving representative of a dramatic class he calls medieval "théâtre engagé": "une arme de combat politique...qui se veut explicitement contestataire."<sup>4</sup> In such plays, "l'action traduit explicitement une prise de position qui est à la fois contestation et effort de résoudre un problème. C'est là un témoignage de la conscience aiguë que prend le peuple d'une vie politique à laquelle il se reconnaît le droit de participer" (1985:176). This is obviously an important assertion. For not only would such a theater have been a weapon of the lower classes, but also "le moyen de lutte et d'opposition politique choisi par la moyenne bourgeoisie pour exprimer au grand jour ses revendications et son programme, en une époque où apparaissent les premiers symptômes d'une lutte des classes" (1975:197). Finally, concludes Aubailly, this type of theater would have expressed "le désir de s'attaquer aux problèmes fondamentaux de la vie sociale et politique et de susciter, derrière le paravent immunisateur d'une folie simulée, une prise de conscience et un engagement du spectateur" (1975:163).

In 1990 is it still the case that the *Moralité de 1427* fits this description of the *sottie* as a "moyen de lutte et d'opposition politique"? If it does not, then the perception of the play as not only the oldest "confrontational" *sottie*, but, indeed, as "la *sottie* la plus ancienne qui soit

parvenue jusqu'à nous," would either have to be revised (1975:189; 1976:329,352), or, at the very least, its eisegetic basis acknowledged. For my purposes here of characterizing the conditions and limits of eisegesis (admittedly this is a local case, but, I believe, generally illustrative of the mechanisms in question), we shall look carefully at Aubailly's two contentions: 1) that the *Moralité de 1427* is not a morality play but a *sottie*; 2) that it is a "sottie-action," i.e., a *sottie contestataire*. As background, it will be useful first to point out a few particularities of the social and intellectual climate in which, respectively, Lenient's 1870 *coup de pistolet* thesis, and Aubailly's 1970s view of the *sottie contestataire*, took shape.

Like many of his positivist generation, Charles Lenient (1826-1908) was very much a *romantique attardé* (a type vividly drawn by Flaubert in his novels and letters). His taste in literature ran to works of a politically militant stamp, an orientation announced in the title and preface of *La Satire en France, ou la littérature militante au XVIIe siècle*:

Dans *La Satire au Moyen Age* [Lenient 1859] nous avons vu le génie critique et railleur de notre race éclatant même au sein de la société féodale et religieuse. ...De bonne heure une secrète sympathie, peut-être une certaine analogie de destinées et d'aspirations confuses, a ramené l'attention de notre époque vers ce berceau de la Renaissance et de la Réforme... (1866:i-ii)

We have seen some of the effects of this "secrète sympathie" in Lenient's idea of medieval drama (note 3 above). The preface to his last major work, *La poésie patriotique en France au Moyen Age* (1891), proclaims, with a certain acidic moralism, the credo of the 19th-century academic activist whose 82 years were mostly spent (in classrooms, libraries, and his study) amidst the battles and books of the French Middle Ages and 16th century, superimposed on those of his own day:

Ces pages se ressentiront peut-être de l'heure où elles ont été écrites [i.e., during the siege of Paris in 1870 and the Commune of '71]. Les années écoulées depuis, les suppressions nombreuses apportées à la rédaction primitive, n'ont pu effacer tout à fait l'émotion qui nous dominait alors. D'ailleurs (faut-il l'avouer?), nous n'aurions pas voulu la faire disparaître entièrement. Nous avons mis dans ce travail une part de notre âme, n'étant pas de ceux qui, sous prétexte d'impartialité, condamnent la critique à la froideur et à l'indifférence. Qu'un chant, qu'une page nous ait remué profondément, qu'elle nous ait arraché un cri de douleur ou un amer souvenir, nous n'avons cherché à en étouffer l'écho devant un auditoire dont le coeur vibrait à l'unisson du nôtre (1891:viii).

Lenient's lucidity is no less remarkable than his lyric extravagance. Seeing himself as a veteran of the literary barricades, he is acutely aware that the

transmission of a cultural heritage is no ideologically neutral activity (and that the denial of this axiom is equally ideological). How does the literary historian decide which works will be rescued from oblivion (the material of his own three-volume history, for example) and which will be left to moulder there (like the Navarre morality play written in 1427, published in 1955)? Our criteria for decreeing which works are great and which are unworthy of attention may be aesthetic, ethical, methodologically "scientific" and so forth; but how many critics today admit (even to themselves) that the only literary knowledge we are capable of is shaped *essentially* by ideology? It is easy enough to see it in the fiery exuberance of a writer like Lenient, whose orientation is self-characterized, almost caricaturized, as a particular configuration of values with respect to political life ("émotion," "cri de douleur," "coeur vibrant") definable in opposition to others held in the same culture ("impartialité," "froideur," "indifférence"). And it is easy enough to see that his approach to reading and teaching literature was shaped on the forge of the events of 1848 and those of 1870-71.<sup>5</sup>

Jean-Claude Aubailly's doctoral thesis, from which the passages quoted above on the *sottie* are taken, was defended in 1972 (*Lettres*, Paris-IV). This means his notion of the *sottie contestataire* was shaped on the forge of our own generation's siege of Paris, in May 1968. (The term *sottie* dates from the Middle Ages; the epithet *contestataire* here associated with it is unattested before...yes, 1968 [TLF VI:41-42].) It seems hardly necessary to invoke a theoretical framework such as the one in which Barthes analyzed self-referential "écritures politiques" (1953:31ff., esp. 41-44) in noting the parallel between the approach to "revolutionary" medieval drama taken by Lenient (1848) and that of Aubailly (1968). In both cases, similar inferences about the theater as a mode of cultural representation were drawn from a limited number of (supposed) historical facts.

At this point I want to bring to the fore a number of other (supposed) historical facts which have not previously been taken into account in discussions of the *Moralité de 1427*. My purpose in doing so is not to disparage or dismiss eisegesis, nor to separate "real" facts from inferences ("reading in") in any hard and fast way. I am concerned less with the inevitability of eisegesis (which for literature I take to be axiomatic) than with the possibility of developing criteria for specifying its conditions and boundaries: at what point does (or can) "drawing inferences" ("tirer les choses à moi") distinguish itself in my mind from what I simply call "reading"? Empirically, at what point does my reading appear idiosyncratic

or distortive? In a more rigorous approach to this question--which should be recognized as a crucial one in studies that purport to be historical--I would want to be able to specify: a) which features of those I read in(to) a given discourse are non-consensual; b) the nature of those features; and c) the textual complications (decoding options) that evoked them. The results would suggest boundaries between ambiguity-categories that would characterize a typology with which we might begin to sort out the features of literary eisegesis.

True, this is still taxonomy, but taxonomy of a different order. The object of classification is not texts, nor even readings, but the conditions of readings of texts. Here the locus of truth (or arguable facts) is not the construct "text," but its constructor. In this latter formulation, the problem embraces the totality of the human sciences. Narrowing the scope, I will focus on our own, local version of the Great Paradigm Shift of recent years in literary studies. In the 1970s the major preoccupation of French medievalists writing on theater was accurate taxonomy of texts; today, of course, our major preoccupation is not "theory of genres," but genres of theory.

For the case at hand: since genre, in the 1970s, was seen to be the key to proper literary-historical understanding, it was important to Aubailly's strategy to prove that the *Moralité de 1427* was a *sottie*, and important to my own to maintain that it was a morality play. Of course we were not without knowledge of "fuzzy sets"; but an acute consciousness of the inadequacy of our knowledge categories merely forced us to try all the harder to situate ambiguous items (such as the *Moralité de 1427*) as close as possible to the central region of a taxonomic class. In reality, the "genre question" was only a vehicle, the authorized *problématique* in which we were permitted to pursue our discussions. What we really wanted to talk about was not classification systems but language: language and power, language and *jeu*, *en jeu*, and how we read beauty, fear, anger, humor, dignity, struggle, and play in medieval plays. Following are the main lines of the genre argument (the smaller argument), with annotations referring it to the larger argument (literary meaning is always eisegetic).

#### I. Sottie or morality: What's IN a name?

Aubailly was not the first to treat the Navarre play as a *sottie*. Recognizing in the MS designation of the play--"Une moralité faicte *en foulois* pour le chastement du monde"--the derivation of the adverbial qualifier built

on *fol*, Robert Bossuat was quick to conclude that the MS description corresponded to "la définition de la sottie donnée par Petit de Julleville: 'une farce jouée par des sots'" (92).<sup>6</sup> It is true that many *sotties* can be described in this way, as farces played by *sots*, but the Navarre play is no farce, nor do any *sots* appear in the play. What Bossuat does here is to stretch (with an eisegetic nudge) an already flaccid category (Aubailly 1976:280-85) to encompass now a *moralité* played by *fols*, reasoning as follows:

Tel qu'il nous paraît ici, le genre côtoie tantôt la farce, tantôt la moralité. Mais l'essentiel est que figurent au nombre des personnages quatre fous authentiques et qualifiés ainsi, et que leurs interlocuteurs, le Docteur, son Clerc et le Monde, tiennent des propos semblables aux leurs (93).

Bossuat's idea that the play crosses back and forth over a boundary between farce and morality required an artificial view (now mostly abandoned) both of the morality (allegorical, edifying, serious) and of the farce (comic but not serious or satirical). In fact (as we now see the facts), comic and serious elements belong to both genres, as can allegory. Some morality plays are purely or predominantly comic,<sup>7</sup> and some "farces" have serious aims; comic elements in the Navarre play do not, therefore, preclude its membership in the class "morality play."<sup>8</sup> But what Bossuat took to be "the essential point, is that the play contains four authentic fous, and that they are designated as such" (93). "Authentic" meant that they "animent la scène de leurs quiproquos" (96), but "quiproquos," word play, collegiate humor, are not the defining characteristic of any genre: they appear in all medieval drama, even liturgical plays.

"Authentic" or not, the mere presence of characters designated *fols* is an insufficient criterion for calling any play a *sottie*. Halina Lewicka made this point with respect to farces (1974:11-12), but one can go further. There is a *fol* in the *Condamnation des banquets*, a play traditionally cited as the archetypic French morality play; and a *fol* in the allegorical *Moralité de Charité*; and another in the *Moralité des Enfants de Maintenant* (another *moralité de collège*). There is even a *fol* in the abridged Passion play entitled *Moralité et figure sur la Passion de N.S. Jesus Christ*.<sup>9</sup> So four fools in the Navarre play do not a *sottie* make; no more so than the fools in the morality plays just enumerated. Nor do the fools in the *fêtes des fous* make them *sotties* any more than the devils in the mystery plays make the latter *diableries*.

Aubailly, who knows all these things better than I do, nonetheless found it useful to quote Bossuat's assertion that the Navarre play is a *sottie*

(1975:172, 1976:321), even though acknowledging, elsewhere, that the presence of characters called *foles* does not determine a play's genre (1976:350s.). The problem was that he wanted to consider the Navarre play a *sottie*; and he knew that prior to the invention of the *sottie*, the fool was a traditional character in mystery and morality plays. Solution (another eisegetic nudge)-the fools in the Navarre play are "different":

Or combien différents apparaissent ces écoliers malicieux et fins du personnage qui leur a donné son nom, le fou des mystères et des moralités! Pourtant, ce personnage complexe qu'est le fou des moralités leur a légué certains de ses caractères fondamentaux,

which he enumerates in discussing the *Moralité de Charité*: the fou is

1) Chargé de détendre l'atmosphère en divertissant les spectateurs entre deux scènes graves... 2) Sorte de commentateur "hors-jeu," il intervient pour manifester sur scène, à l'égard des personnages de l'action, des sentiments qui sont ceux du public... 3) Mieux encore, il guide souvent ce dernier dont il facilite la compréhension par des apartés, en s'immisçant à l'action pour en prédire le déroulement... A l'image du fou bouffon obscène se superpose donc peu à peu celle d'un fou omniprésent et omniscient, ...capable de connaître l'avenir, en un mot l'image d'un fou sage d'une sagesse prémonitoire et divine (1976:352-53).

That apparent folly is really wisdom, and vice versa, is the paradox "qu'illustre bien la pensée de nos quatre 'foux' de la *Moralité de 1427*, qui sont des fou-sages" (ibid.).

I find this wholly convincing, but if they are *fou-sages*, then they are *not* different, in their essential functions, from their predecessors, nor indeed from their counterparts in other morality plays contemporaneous with the Navarre play. Comic *boutades* and ironic commentary on the actions and statements of the other characters: this is their function in all cases. If the essential function of the *fou-sage* as an ironizing (self-)accusatory commentator is a permanent structure in medieval French drama,<sup>10</sup> entrusted at times to a *sot* or *fol* protected by the "paravent immunisateur de la folie" (Aubailly 1976:163), it is also entrusted at other times to an allegorical character to whom the same protection was furnished by his anonymous designation as the abstract incarnation of Vice or Evil. The essential was the same: to permit statements of unpleasant truths to be made with impunity. Thus, in the moralities quoted above, this function could be assumed by a *fol*, but in others (from the same decade as the Navarre play), the ironizing/accusatory function of the *fou-sage* is incorporated, by metonymy, in a personification of vice or evil: Heresie in the *Concil de Basle* (1434), Guerre in the *Moralité de Povre Commun* (1435). In the mystery play the

accusatory function of ironic commentator is assumed by devils.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, even in the most archetypic, paradigmatic examples of the *sottie* itself, one finds the same metonymic shading off of *fou-sage* into allegorical or collective abstractions (e.g., in Gringore's famous *sottie*, *la Mère Sotte* is at the same time *la Mère Eglise* and the allegorical figure of a wicked pope). This same sort of redistribution of functional loads onto different surface features is even more apparent and systematic in Andrieu de La Vigne's *Sottise a huict personnages*,<sup>12</sup> where the various *sots* incarnate vices attributed to the various social classes: "Sot Dissolu" is *l'Eglise*, "Sot Glorieux" *la Chevalerie*, "Sot Corrompu" *la Justice*, "Sot Trompeur" *Marchandise*, "Sot Ignorant" *le Commun*. Thus, neither presence nor function of the fools in the Navarre play suffice to justify calling it a *sottie*. What remains now to be seen is whether there exist other, more pertinent criteria for resolving the taxonomic problem posed by the Navarre play, and the vacillation on that score by Bossuat and Aubailly.<sup>13</sup>

A major step in this direction came with the publication in 1984 of Alan Knight's book *Aspects of Genre in Late Medieval French Drama*. In differentiating among overlapping dramatic genres, Knight abandons the extrinsic and superficial taxonomic criteria which, after a century of debate and modification, are still routinely invoked (e.g., Tissier 1986), though some scholars have simply given up on ever distinguishing satisfactorily generic boundaries in late medieval French drama.<sup>14</sup> Instead of extrinsic or surface criteria (subject matter; plot; appellation, number and grouping of characters; titles assigned to plays by 16th-century copyists and compilers), Knight bases his classification model on the different social functions the individual plays actually fulfilled in their society. In Knight's scheme, differences in these functions define generic boundaries, while their consistencies constitute repertoires within genres. Thus, he groups together *sottie* and *farce moralisée* as sub-genres of FARCE, which he contrasts with MORALITY PLAY. If we apply Knight's functional-semantic criteria to the Navarre play, it comes out (specifically in its treatment of folly and social disorder) squarely in the morality class, with no means of access to the farce category.

## II. Moralité "contestataire"?

As in many other moralities, the structure of the Navarre play is that of a sermon. It consists in the statement of and commentary on an edifying theme: "Bonne doctrine met en lui/Qui se chastie par aultruy" (497-98, 537-

38, 557-58). Bossuat underlines the play's didactic and edifying nature in summarizing its plot: "Le tort du [personnage du] Monde est de se croire supérieur à tous et de mépriser son prochain. Qu'il considère le destin commun des hommes, et il verra la vie sous son réel aspect." Once *le Monde* is ready to listen to reason, the four "fools" undertake to explain the causes of the present troubles in France,

et commenteront, chacun à son tour, les raisons exposées d'abord en latin. Cette démonstration se poursuit jusqu'à la fin du texte lisible [the last four folios are mutilated], et, d'après les traces d'écriture qui subsistent sur les feuillets 56-59, on peut supposer que le Monde, édifié par tant d'arguments, fait amende honorable et renonce à ses erreurs (96).

Now, is this a "confrontational" play? As it turns out, to answer this question the issue of genre is irrelevant. Both *sottie* and morality play condition audience expectations (and thus reception) in ways that allow for expression of social criticism and dissent--i.e., there exist political *sotties* AND political morality plays. What specifically, then, in the Navarre play justifies considering it an example of what Aubailly calls "théâtre engagé," or of the guerrilla theatre imagined by Bossuat after Lenient? To be sure, the play contains much discussion of good and evil, but only in the most general and anonymous of terms: there are no accusations against any individual or group, no direct criticisms of specific activities, doctrines or policies. Traditional vices are decried in general terms, and traditional appeals are made to moral, not political remedies. The play ends with the following summary, by Toussains, of "les causes pour quoi mua/Ce royaume":

Il se tua  
Par orgueil, par outrecuidance  
Qui la regnoit en habundance;  
1484 Pour ce fut abessé si fort,  
Et auxi que Dieu estoit mort  
En leurs cuers, si qu'il ne ten[oient]  
Compte de luy, ne gardoient  
1488 Nesung de sez commandemens.

So on what does Aubailly base his case? Less on the text, as it turns out, than on selected passages from the interpretation and commentary provided by Bossuat. But Bossuat exaggerates. His commentaries leave the impression that the play contains outspoken polemic; it contains no polemic. Of course it is always possible, in studying a text whose generic conventions admit of satire and polemic, for an astute eisegete like Bossuat, to extrapolate and particularize all he wants to from general moral considerations. But the author of the Navarre play does not particularize, and makes no accusations.

Ah yes (was Bossuat's reply), this was due to the author's fear of reprisals. And so the absence points to its own hidden presence, and the circle closes, with eventual censorship the proof of conjectural political criticism.

There is nothing "wrong" with this reading, provided we take it for what it is: literary history as telling stories about stories. Though almost totally conjectural, Bossuat's political eisegesis of the Navarre play has never been challenged. Aubailly not only accepted it, but in an escalation of terminology and a narrowing of categories, substituted for what Bossuat called "political satire" in the play his own notion of "political confrontation."<sup>15</sup> If Bossuat's conjectures cannot be validated, then Aubailly's refined version of them will be even more vulnerable. A fair assessment of Bossuat's position requires that it be summarized at some length. I beg the reader's indulgence.

Admitting that "il n'est pas toujours possible, à vrai dire, de discerner l'objet précis des allusions satiriques" (102), Bossuat describes as follows the historical background of the play:

Nous sommes en pleine occupation anglaise, à un moment où la coalition anglo-bourguignonne paraît triompher pour longtemps. L'Université de Paris s'est ralliée au nouveau régime et le collège de Navarre n'a pu reprendre son activité qu'en dissimulant sa rancœur. Il n'oublie pas que des bandes populaires l'ont sauvagement pillée en 1418, avec l'approbation des Bourguignons vainqueurs, et que plusieurs de ses maîtres ont été victimes de la réaction pour avoir sympathisé avec les Armagnacs. Sans attaquer directement les puissants du jour, il est naturel que les Navarristes déplorent la guerre civile, la division du royaume entre les factions, de l'Eglise entre les papes rivaux. Il est normal qu'à la faveur d'un divertissement de caractère privé, réservé à un public restreint, ils saisissent l'occasion d'*analyser les causes du malheur national* dont ils sont les témoins (102-103, my emphasis).

*Analyser?* In what terms is this analysis framed? Not surprisingly, the characters borrow their categories for describing the "malheur national" from the *Gesta Romanorum*, a pseudo-historical moralistic treatise from the 14th century. Here is Bossuat's summary and commentary (the propositions in italics are from the *Gesta*):

1. *Potentia est justitia*: la justice est subordonnée au bon plaisir du prince. 2. *Unus est duo*; l'autorité n'est plus entre les mains d'un seul. 3. *Fures sunt prepositi*; les agents de l'Etat ne songent qu'à le piller. 4. *Deus est mortuus*; la loi divine est bafouée (102).

After the general categories (in italics) have been enunciated and glossed, the characters proceed to update them, in an attempt to characterize what Bossuat calls the current "malheur national." This proceeds in two stages:

1. First they advance only commonplace generalizations. The kingdom fut mué

De bien en mal, et desnüé  
 De richessez et d'autre avoir  
 998 Pour ce qu'il ne vouloit avoir  
 De Dieu et de sçoy congnoissance.

To this edifying consideration<sup>16</sup> is added another of the standard motifs of medieval moralistic literature: universal rapine. Following the *estats du monde* tradition (a tradition uninterrupted from the 12th to the 15th century), the satire is here directed successively against all classes of society: government, clergy, and common people (artisans, merchants, laborers), each devouring the other in a relentless cycle of extortion. Bossuat and Aubailly agree that there is no political protest here.<sup>17</sup>

2. After the traditional moral topoi, the author becomes more specific. Now the characters will explain the causes of the current decadence in the kingdom by reapplying, less vaguely this time, the same *causas* from the *Gesta Romanorum*. This explanation extends over the remainder of the play. Here is Bossuat's summary:

Les causes des malheurs publics énumérées par les clercs des *Gesta* sont réduites de douze à huit et s'appliquent rigoureusement à la situation présente, telle qu'elle résulte des erreurs commises depuis la mort de Charles V: quand la justice est soumise aux caprices du pouvoir, l'ordre public est troublé, car la force de l'Etat exige l'obéissance aux lois. La justice est la condition de la liberté et il faut souhaiter que la France puisse recouvrer sa franchise. D'autre part, les gens d'Eglise pour qui le jour est la nuit, compromettent par leurs scandales l'autorité de la religion et le désordre s'établit parmi les clercs. Ainsi l'Eglise est ruinée par les abus, tandis que l'Etat succombe sous les intrigues des princes qui, faute d'un roi puissant, luttent pour faire prévaloir leur volonté, et fomentent la guerre civile. Dans le royaume en proie à l'anarchie, ébranlé par le choc des ambitions rivales, les inégalités sociales sont plus gravement accusées. Les fonctionnaires royaux, pressés de s'enrichir, trahissent leur devoir, et dilapident les deniers publics. Les hommes d'armes, oublieux des traditions chevaleresques, cèdent à l'envahisseur la terre qu'ils devraient défendre, pillent les villages, rançonnent les habitants et se réconcilient avec les ennemis sur le dos de "Jacques Bonhomme." Au désordre matériel s'ajoute le désarroi moral et le respect de Dieu ne sert plus de frein à l'orgueil des hommes (103-104).

Now, how much of this is in the text? None of it. Bossuat's commentary neatly summarizes the troubles besetting France in the 1420s and their causes; but in the play these causes are neither perceived nor related to each other with anything approaching Bossuat's acumen and precision. So if "les causes des malheurs publics énumérées par les clercs des *Gesta* s'appliquent rigoureusement à la situation présente", it must be admitted that this rigor is not "in" the text until read in by Bossuat. Here, for example, is what he calls "une allusion aux malheurs causés par l'insurrection cabochienne et

l'occupation de Paris par les Anglo-Bourguignons" (187n924-28):

924 Je croy que c'estoit demostrance  
De la doulleur et de la grevance  
Que Paris a depuis souffert,  
Tant en segret come en apert,  
928 Et auxi le pais d'entour.

The referent of *ce* (924) is unspecified, and "douleur" and "grevance" are not partisan phenomena.

Another example: Charles VI is never mentioned, nor is any other historical personage or party, political or ecclesiastical. The "soumission de la justice aux caprices de pouvoir" (*Gesta*, category 1) has arisen for the following reasons, according to the author of the play:

Par faulte de bonne[s] vertus  
Qui doivent estre en la police,  
1152 Par especcial de justisse  
Par qui cessent debat et noyse.

This is less an attack than a truism. He blames no one; indeed he takes aim at an absence: "par faulte de bonnes vertus," but these are what are offered as the extreme limits of the "confrontational" allusions in the play. To the contrary, Toussains, the leader of the four "fools," takes care to disavow even the slightest hint of a critical *prise de position*:

1026 Toutes fois desse je proteste  
Que je ne veuil blasmer personne.  
Et si ge di rien qui mal sonne,  
Des maintenant je me revoucque  
1030 Et n'ay rien dit, aincoys me mouque.

Of course Bossuat, as we've seen, contends that Toussains' "je ne veuil blasmer personne," along with the lack of precision in the moral commentary, is proof of censorship, and fear of Anglo-Burgundian reprisals, a fear Bossuat imagines would have been prompted by memories of the occupation some ten years prior:

On imagine aisément [this is precisely the problem] ce que des représentations théâtrales organisées dans l'atmosphère de suspicion, qui régnait encore autour du collège, exigeaient de la part des maîtres de vigilance et d'attention. S'il convenait d'encourager la reprise des jeux traditionnels à l'occasion de certaines fêtes, on pouvait craindre aussi, si une sévère censure ne s'exerçait pas, que des boutades imprudentes, des satires trop peu voilées, n'attirassent à nouveau les représailles sur l'illustre maison dont les murs portaient encore la trace des excès populaires (15).

Bossuat offers no evidence to support these ideas, imagined along the same lines as Lenient's "coup de pistolet" plays. The only ground for the claims made by both Lenient and Bossuat is their ideological earnestness

(patriotism). Bossuat's triumphant conclusion to the lines just quoted echoes the rhetoric of Lenient: "Fidèles aux traditions de la vieille maison qu'ils s'efforçaient de faire revivre, les maîtres et les écoliers de Navarre prenaient le parti de la France contre les usurpateurs momentanés" (107).

But not only does Bossuat give no evidence to support these conjectures--that an "atmosphère de suspicion...régnait encore [from 1418 to 1427] autour du collège" (15)--, they are weakened by compelling evidence to the contrary. The college of Navarre, like the University itself, did not speak with one voice (the Valois-Armagnac voice taken for granted by Bossuat). A telling example exists in the person of Nicolas de Clamanges, the eminent humanist scholar who taught rhetoric and theology, and served as *Proviseur* (chief administrator), at Navarre at the time this play was performed.

Clamanges had become, in 1415, secretary and familiar<sup>18</sup> of the new Pope Martin V, who intervened on his behalf in 1420 to obtain from Henry V (king of England and France, since the Treaty of Troyes of the same year) the assurance that Clamanges' Bayeux benefice would not be reassigned. In the next year, 1421, he received the special recommendation of the English king during a lawsuit involving Clamanges' claim to a benefice at Chartres. His relations with the dukes of Burgundy were equally cordial. Here, then, is a *Navarriste* who is clearly what Bossuat would have to call a collaborator. As Coville puts it:

Bien que la plupart de ses amis aient appartenu au parti Armagnac, il [Clamanges] n'était pas homme à se mettre en opposition déclarée avec les maîtres du jour, Anglais et Bourguignons. C'est ainsi qu'il rajeunissait un traité *De lapsu et reparatione justitie* d'abord écrit à la prière du duc de Bourgogne, Philippe le Hardi, pour l'instruction du dauphin Louis de Guyenne, et qu'il offrait au duc Philippe le Bon. Il acceptait d'un coeur désolé, mais sans indignation, les conséquences désastreuses pour le royaume du traité de Troyes. Il vint terminer sa vie là où il avait passé sa jeunesse, au collège de Navarre, dont il aurait été alors proviseur, bien qu'il fût septuagénaire. Sous le régime anglais, il faisait encore bonne figure, puisqu'en 1424, il offrait à ses frais un banquet *lautissimus* pour le sacre de l'évêque de Châlons... (1934:233-34).

Since the Anglo-Burgundian sympathies of Nicolas de Clamanges were never any secret, his return to the college of Navarre in 1425 (where he served as *proviseur* and remained until his death in 1437<sup>19</sup>) seriously weakens Bossuat's view of the college as a smoldering hotbed of anti-Anglo-Burgundian politics. And to the extent to which Aubailly's second-degree eisegesis of the Navarre play depends on Bossuat's, it, too, is undermined *in radice*.

\*

To conclude: it is impossible to prove the hypothesis that beneath the

moral lessons of the Navarre play there runs an undercurrent of anti-Anglo-Burgundian partisan sentiment. But even if we wish to believe that the author of the play really did "prudently conceal" (Bossuat 107) elements of political satire in the play, this prudent concealment of putative satire is so weak that one can hardly speak of polemic, nor, a fortiori, of "contestation." On the one hand, the extreme caution with which the anti-Burgundian, anti-English sentiment would have been shrouded renders the allusions if not positively obscure, at all events far from militant; on the other hand, a play performed in secret solely for the entertainment of the *internes* of the college ("un divertissement de caractère privé, réservé à un public restreint," 103) can hardly be considered "confrontational."

Thus, if one wishes to read in the Bossuat-Aubailly perspective, one should be wary of washing up against the following eisegetic shoals: first, the Navarre play is not a *sottie* (according either to recent or traditional definitions, or, indeed, Aubailly's own). Second, the play cannot be shown to be a politically committed confrontational weapon of ideological combat. The problems posed in the Navarre play of 1427 are moral ones and were considered remediable. The purpose of the play was precisely to reiterate this traditional appeal to moral solutions, which, whatever their efficacy or inefficacy, did not extend to militant political confrontation.

I should add, finally, that the above observations are not intended to argue that there is no *théâtre engagé* or *théâtre contestataire* in the French Middle Ages. On the contrary, if one is interested in that sort of thing, there are better places to read-in the politics of one's "secrètes sympathies" than in the Navarre college morality play in particular, or in the *sottie* in general. More important, however, are the techniques (which I have only been able to sketch roughly here) that afford the eisegete access to the (self-) knowledge with which to demystify, *le cas échéant*, those secret sympathies, good and bad.

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<sup>1</sup> The term goes back to antiquity. In Athens, the *exegete* (another deverbal from *exegesthai* 'to interpret' < *ex* + *egesthai* 'to lead, guide') was "one of the three members of the Eumolpidae, whose province it was to interpret the religious and ceremonial law, the signs in the heavens, and oracles" (*O.E.D.*). In the N T (Luke, 24:35, John. 1:18), *exegesthai* still means 'to reveal, make known [that which is supernatural].' But the bracketed nuance is suppressed in St. Jerome's translations *cognoscere* and *enarrare*: *exegesis* has already become dogmatic.

<sup>2</sup> Reading means matching external signs against internal coding grids. That eisegesis is necessary in reading by human subjects can be easily seen when we contrast human reading with machine reading. Electronic scanners, whether they read bar codes or printed texts, make no hypotheses, draw no inferences (this is why machine translation of natural languages has met with such limited success). Rather, machines simply match a given sequence of external sign-combinations against the semantically allowable combinations programmed internally. In the event of a non-match, the machine either stops, or ignores the item. In either case the result is a blank space. Human readers don't leave gaps; they read in. This proposition has been variously confirmed from disciplines as diverse as philosophy, aesthetics, and phenomenology on the one hand; from linguistics, cognitive psychology, and neuroscience on the other.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Népomucène Lemerrier, *Pinto, ou la journée d'une conspiration* (1798); Ludovic Vitet, *Les Barricades* (1826), *Les Etats de Blois* (1829); Mérimée, *La Jacquerie* (1828); Dumas, *Henri III et sa cour* (1829), *La Tour de Nesle* (1832); Hugo, *Hernani* (1830), *Les Burgraves* (1843); Musset, *Lorenzaccio* (1834, adapted from G. Sand's *Une Conspiration en 1537*), etc.

<sup>4</sup> Aubailly 1975:178, 179, 197, 105, 163, 176. This book is a condensation (207 pp.) of A.'s full-scale doctoral study (1976, 561 pp.).

<sup>5</sup> Lenient recalls, in his mid-sixties: "Il y a vingt ans, en rouvrant notre cours à la Sorbonne, le 3 décembre 1870, sous la menace des obus prussiens, nous disions: 'Quand Paris tout entier se transforme en arsenal et en camp retranché, hérissé de formidables bastions, vomissant nuit et jour ses colères en pluie de feu; quand le Ministère de l'Instruction Publique est devenu le siège du premier comité de défense nationale, la Sorbonne peut-elle rester indifférente et étrangère à ce grand mouvement? Pourquoi ne serait-elle pas, elle aussi, une sorte de forteresse morale, d'où partiraient, au nom de la philosophie, de l'histoire, de l'éloquence, de la poésie, les nobles sentiments, les mâles pensées, les généreuses protestations contre l'injustice, la violence et la barbarie?...La Science, disons-le hautement, et par elle l'Université, aura sa part, et sa part glorieuse, dans l'histoire du siège de Paris! Que fera sa soeur la Littérature?...Elle peut remuer ce levier des âmes qui s'appelle l'enthousiasme, le patriotisme, l'esprit de sacrifice et de dévouement ...A l'heure où nos coeurs étaient le plus cruellement serrés, où le mot fatal prononcé sur la Pologne, *Finis Poloniae*, semblait s'appliquer à la

France, nous avons cherché [my emphasis here] dans ces souvenirs du passé une consolation et une espérance, un confort moral plus encore qu'un sujet de dispute érudite. Il nous a paru que la littérature, loin de s'abaisser en s'associant ainsi aux douleurs et aux misères du jour, s'élevait à la dignité d'un enseignement national et patriotique. C'est là, selon nous, un des mérites de notre poésie au moyen-âge, même dans sa période de décadence [15th c.!), même alors que l'inspiration faiblit et s'éteint, d'être restée toujours fidèle aux grandes impressions et aux intérêts du temps... (1891:v-viii)'. "

<sup>6</sup> Bossuat quotes from the 1905 reprint (p. 67) of Petit de Julleville 1889. The same passage is found in P. de J. 1886:105: "En résumé, quand la farce est jouée par des sots, elle est sottie." Though Aubailly disagrees with this definition, he quotes Bossuat's assertion derived from it to bolster his view of the play as a *sottie-action* (1975:172, 1976:321).

<sup>7</sup> Historians have divided the French morality play into various subclasses, one of which for Emile Picot was "moralités satiriques et facétieuses" (1887:170). Raymond Lebègue distinguishes between "deux grands groupes: d'une part les moralités comiques et satiriques, d'autre part les moralités religieuses et mystiques," with further subdivisions within these two large groups (1929:82). Lebègue devotes a brief but dense chapter to "Le Comique dans les moralités et les histoires" (1972:14-16).

<sup>8</sup> Despite their title "farce" in the MS or earliest printing, the following plays (among others) all contain serious elements and resemble (or are classed among) morality plays in most cases, *sotties* in others: *Bien Mondain, Honneur Spirituel; les Brus; Deux Galants et Santé; Trois Galants, Le Monde et Ordre; L'Inquisiteur* and *le Malade* (by Marguerite de Navarre); *le Maistre d'école; Marchandise, Métier, Peu d'Aquêt; Métier, Marchandise, le Berger; Pattes-Ouaintes; Trois Pélerins et Malice; Science et Anerie; Tout, Rien, Chacun;* etc. Lebègue notes (with an additional two dozen examples) that until mid-16th century, not only were the terms "farce" and "comédie" (*comoedia*) interchangeable, but were used as well to designate what were, in fact, serious morality plays (1972:57-60).

<sup>9</sup> "Le fond de cette pièce est celui des mystères, mais le cadre et la forme sont ceux des moralités [-allegorical]...Le Fou a son rôle dans cette pièce comme dans plusieurs *Passions*..." (Petit de Julleville 1886:94).

<sup>10</sup> The pervasiveness of this structure of self-accusation in medieval drama (a structure which, as Edelgard DuBruck [1973] has shown, can also be implemented by the dramatic "hero" or main character) has yet to be studied in all its ramifications, perhaps most importantly (as Payen [1967] suggests) in relation to the increasing regularization of auricular confession after the Fourth Lateran Council (1215).

<sup>11</sup> Moshé Lazar takes a similar approach in arguing for a typological permanence of the comic and didactic functions assumed by the devils in the Mystery plays. Lazar reasons that in the theater of all ages, the dramatic antagonist maintains an ideologically constant function, the surface realizations of which include, in medieval religious drama, "des personnages humains diabolisés" (Herod, Pilate, pagan kings, Jews, Antichrist), as well as "diabolized" allegorical personifications (*Gluttonie, Luxure, etc.*), and--most important for the discussion here--diabolized *foils*, as in the *Mystère de Saint Quentin*: "Le Fol est devenu ici un personnage central et dominant. A l'égal de Lucifer qui dirige sa troupe infernale, le fol est le chef d'une troupe de *foils* ou de *sots*; et tout comme Lucifer il rassemble son groupe par des hurlements..." (65). In his comparison of "les diables et les hommes diabolisés d'une part, les *foils*, les vilains et les paysans d'autre part," Lazar inventories a large stock of interchangeable verbal and paraverbal dramatic devices which run "toute la gamme du comique du langage,...de gestes et de mimiques" (66).

<sup>12</sup> Known also as *Le Monde et Abus* (Petit de Julleville 1886, no. 154).

<sup>13</sup> Aubailly was prepared to concede that the Navarre play had certain features of the morality (1976:330). But he still preferred to see it as a *sottie*, though vacillating as to which subclass it belonged ("sottie-action" or "sottie-judgement"; 1976:321, 329, 352; 1975:189). Similarly Bossuat: despite his earlier affirmation that "nous avons affaire à une *sottie de collègue*" (96), he was not totally convinced. He opts for the title *Moralité de 1427*, and constantly refers to the play in his Introduction and Notes as "notre moralité" or "la moralité" (92, 94, 96, 99, 101, 102, 105, 107). The epitome of equivocation occurs at 172: "Cette moralité de 1427 qui, par le caractère de ses personnages et le ton du dialogue, s'apparente à la *sottie*, peut être considérée comme un des plus anciens spécimens du genre."

<sup>14</sup> E.g., Gustave Cohen and Eugénie Droz (both of whom edited numerous medieval plays), and, more recently, Félix Lecoy in his notice on Lewicka's assessment of the state of the question as of 1974: "Il s'agit là...d'une question...qui n'est point susceptible d'une solution raisonnée, et il me paraît vain de vouloir imposer aux choses (et aux gens) du Moyen Age la rigidité proprement anachronique de classifications dont ils ne se souciaient guère" (*Romania* 97 [1976]:139). David Hult (1983) argues the same point in a more nuanced and energetic critique of the traditional genre classifications.

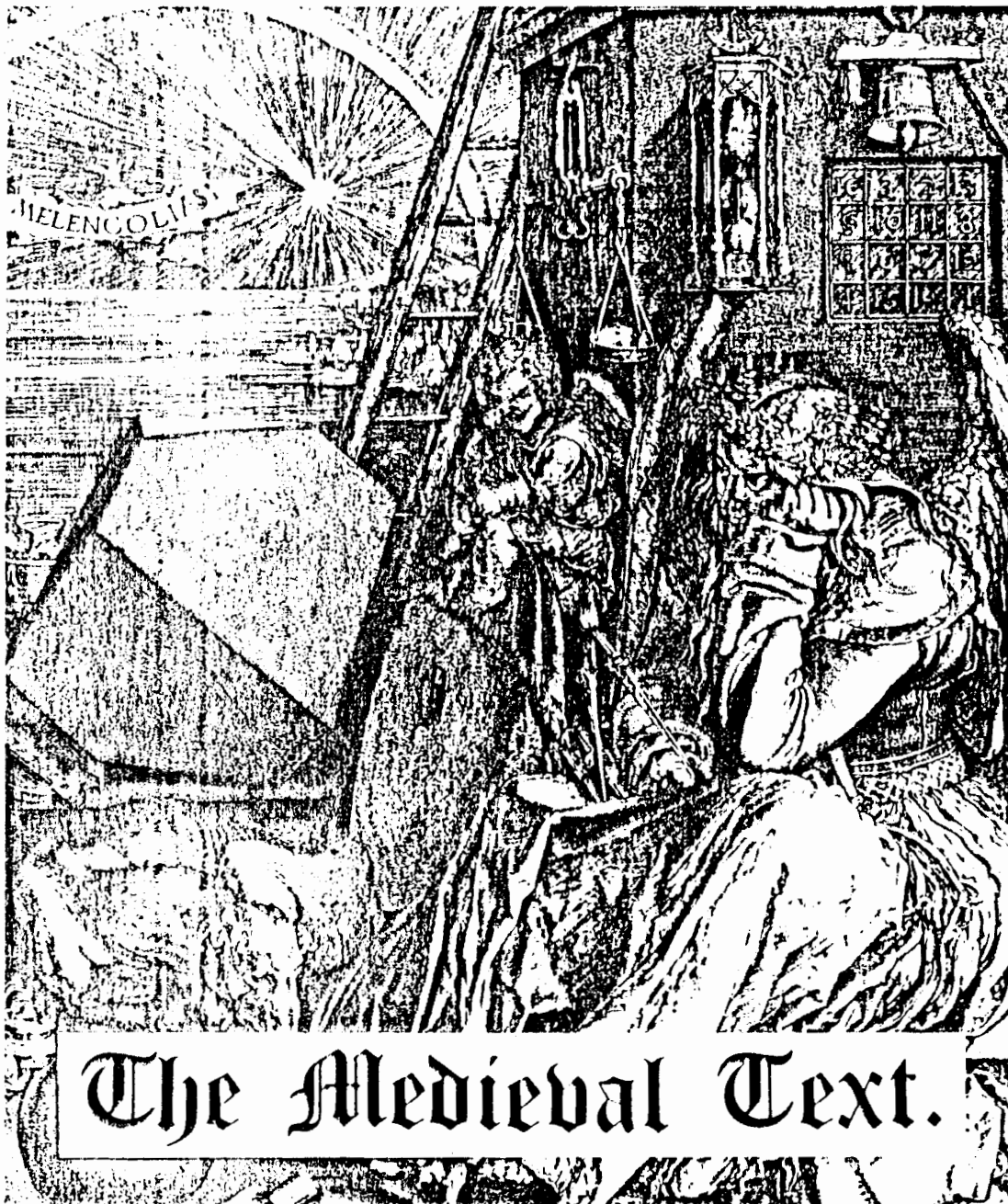
<sup>15</sup> "Second-hand" repetition, or hearsay, can be expressed as eisegesis expanding exponentially ( $e_1 + e_2 \dots e_n$ ): a simple representation of the "snowball effect" familiar to narratologists and trial lawyers.

<sup>16</sup> The theme is repeatedly stressed throughout the play. Not only *le royaume* (as here, and again at 1067-68: "Ce royaume ne se cogneut,/Pour quoi le roy devint tout nu / Et tout son pays a destresse"), but also *le monde* does not "know itself" (386, 399, 401, 413, 1180).

17 "La dénonciation du rôle maléfique de l'argent n'est pas neuve dans la littérature médiévale. . . . De "*Philosophique*" et générale qu'elle était dans la moralité de 1427 (vv. 1398-1411 cited here), cette satire prend un caractère plus mordant et réaliste dans les *sotties ultérieures*" (Aubailly 1976:419-20, emphasis mine).

18 "Secretarius et familiaris." *Chartularium universitatis parisiensis* III:454n10. See Coville 1934:233.

19 Renaudet 1953:77-78n5.



# The Medieval Text.

## Methods and Hermeneutics

A Volume of Essays in Honor of  
Edelgard E. DuBruck

Collected and Edited by

William C. McDonald & Guy R. Mermier