

Ideological Drama in 15th Century France

by Jonathan Beck

The 15th century in France: war, famine and plague; corruption and disorder in the political and ecclesiastical hierarchies; a moribund culture, a civilization in decline, a literary burial ground in which were laid to rest or toward which were declining the final enfeebled expressions or the decadent Medieval imagination. This image of the French 15th century, a battleground and graveyard conveniently separating the "Middle Ages" from the "Renaissance", originates in the 16th century. Later elaborated and given an air of finality by Romantic and Positivist literary and cultural historiographers, the same image remained for a long time the most pervasive among the abusive fictions of traditional literary-historical mythography. As a consequence, important aspects of the literary culture of the French 15th century have been inaccurately assessed, while others remain—even today after the thorough-going reevaluation of the vitality and originality of the fifteenth century by the late Franco Simone—largely or totally unexplored. This is especially true of the drama.¹

More truly and closely than any other means of artistic expression, the drama in the 15th century reflects the aspirations, preoccupations and limitations of the society which portrays itself therein.² And of all the developments in the literary culture of 15th century France, one of the most significant is the creation of an entirely new form of drama: the political morality play. An offshoot of the didactic morality play, it redefines the social function of the theatre, perceived now for the first time as an ideological instrument, a forum for the propagation of militant partisan religious and political doctrines. I shall briefly sketch how this invention

in the 15th century of a new dramatic form came about, and, more important, how this specific example of the vitality and originality of the 15th century drama bears out Lanson's dimly perceived inference, cited above, concerning the importance of the theatre as "a basic element typical of a whole literary culture" --a culture not in decline, but moving forward with the times, adapting and remolding traditional forms and modes of thought and artistic expression to meet the requirements of an age of political and religious turmoil, an age dominated on the one hand by the English wars (Hundred Years War, 1337-1453) and the civil war (Armagnacs and Bourguignons, 1407-1435), on the other by the Great Schism (1378-1417), the conciliar movement (Pisa 1409, Constance 1414-1418, Basel-Florence, 1431-42), and the prereformation.

The first play to adapt the motifs and dramatic conventions of the Middle Ages in such a way as to permit the drama to confront the problems of the wars in France and the turmoil in the Church was the Moralité du Concil de Basle.³ The play was written in 1434 by an anonymous French churchman, anxious to advance and defend the positions of the conciliarist reformers in their struggles against the pope at the Council of Basel, and to urge the resolution of the Hundred Years War through trilateral negotiations (France, England and Burgundy) initiated and coordinated by the peace-keeping delegations of the Council.⁴ The Concil de Basle recounts in painstaking detail--and in the same style and often the same terms as one finds in narrative works from the same period (Christine de Pisan, Jean de Montreuil, Alain Chartier, Jean Juvenal des Ursins etc.)--the devastation and suffering brought about by the war, and the problems and dangers of the corruption and anarchy in the Church (also in the same terms as one finds in contemporary narrative works: conciliar treatises, sermons, pamphlets

etc.). The political morality play is thus a work of creative synthesis, brought about by the combination of disparate but already existing narrative and dramatic materials and techniques: lyricism, satire and polemic from diverse types of narrative poetry, propaganda from sermons, pamphlets, juridical and ecclesiological treatises--all bound together in a dramatization through the conventional use of allegorical personifications, both collective (France, Eglise, Concil) and abstract (Paix, Reformation-Justice, Heresie). Daniel Poirion points out that this play, and others like it (e.g. La Complainte du Povre Commun, 1435, by Michault Taillevent) reflect very accurately not only the doctrinal positions of the French clericulture, but also the state of public opinion in France with respect to the war.⁶ Most important, these plays reflect as well the vitality of a dramatic tradition evolving and renewing its means of expression and persuasion.

The importance of the Concil de Basle in the history of French dramatic literature has gone largely unnoticed. Grace Frank mentions the play only as an example of an "historical morality",⁷ which it is not, or at least was not when it was written; it is "historical" for us, not for the people for whom it was written. The Concil de Basle is a political play, written to influence opinion in favor of the conciliar reforms of the Church, and the conciliar solution to the problem of the war in France. The fact that as early as 1434 (the Concil de Basle is one of the earliest morality plays known) it occurred to an author to use the framework of the edifying morality play for purposes other than moralistic or celebratory, is of immense significance, marking a turning point in the development of serious drama in France. For the Concil de Basle is the first in a long line of plays belonging to the reformist theatre of the 15th and early 16th centuries,

a tradition which begins to merge by almost imperceptible doctrinal mutations into the Protestant theatre (morality plays, farces and "tragédies") of the mid- and later 16th century.⁸ The development is unbroken and, indeed, because many of the plays are undated, it is often difficult to tell from the allusions they contain whether they belong to the late pre-reformation or to the early Reformation. At any rate, no case need be made here for the importance and impact of the Protestant theatre in France.⁹ It is a theatre which spans the entire 16th century and continues even into the early 17th.¹⁰

Moreover, the number of Protestant plays far exceeds that of the learned pseudo-classical plays of the Renaissance (Jodelle, La Taille, Garnier etc.). Finally, the power and efficacy of these plays is well known, as Professor Lebègue pointed out, noting that a "Protestant theatre" is in itself a paradox, since the Protestant reformers usually shunned dramatic representations as bordering on idolatry. "En théorie, ils s'en méfient et le considèrent comme un divertissement dangereux; en pratique, ils usent largement de ce moyen de propagande".¹¹ In the same vein, G. Jonker concludes his study of Le protestantisme et le théâtre de langue française au 16e siècle with the following summary of his findings:

Avant la Réforme proprement dite, le théâtre a souvent exprimé le mécontentement de ceux qui voyaient les fautes de l'Eglise. Peu à peu les attaques deviennent plus violentes, on ne critique pas seulement les mœurs dissolues d'une partie du clergé, mais encore la doctrine. Le théâtre devient un moyen de propagande considérable des idées nouvelles (p. 236).

Some 200 pages earlier, Jonker began by noting that "la première pièce de théâtre qu'il convient de mentionner est la Moralité du Concile de Bâle. . ." (p. 4), and he is surely correct in placing the Concil de Basle at the origins of the ideological partisan drama in France.

What precisely is "new" in the partisan ideological play? Remarks on form, content and tone

As has been stated, all of the formal and structural raw material (the morality play with its allegorical characters) necessary for the emergence of the partisan ideological play was present long before 1434, and yet no such plays exist in French prior to the Concil de Basle. Indeed as early as the 13th century, satirical and polemical allusions and ideological elements may be found in the drama, but the development of political drama as an independent genre was, as we shall see, either nipped in the bud by historical events, or inhibited by censorship, whether official or self-imposed. Nor was there lacking, prior to 1434, the specific type of subject matter necessary for the emergence of the political drama, namely a certain widespread discontent of an ideological nature which would entail the delineation of opposing constituencies. These two complementary factors are the sine qua non for there to be partisan political literature of any sort: an ideological split (opposing doctrines) entailing a polarization of the society, or significant parts of the society, into adversary parties (opposing constituencies). A specific combination of historical events in the 15th century precipitated the crystallization of this subject matter and these opposing constituencies, and the partisan ideological play, the oldest surviving example of its kind in French, came into being. But the subject matter of the Concil de Basle was not new. The Hundred Years War dates from 1337, the Great Schism from 1378, and the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries were certainly not devoid of partisan conflicts; but they are devoid of drama in which these conflicts appear. There was, moreover, no dearth of literature—narrative literature, not drama—devoted to the Schism and the Hundred Years War. Thus for the public of 1434 the Concil de Basle could not have seemed more than a slight deviation from the

normal moralistic and satirical treatments (often hostile) of abuses in the ecclesiastical and secular hierarchies.

This brings us, after form and content, to the third and most important constituent element characteristic of the ideological drama: tone. There are important distinctions which need to be drawn, first between the various types of satire and the various types of polemic, second between polemic on the one hand, propaganda on the other. In the drama of the 15th and 16th centuries there is perceptible a definite movement from gentle irony in the satire of clerical foibles to bitter polemic directed against heresy, simony, idolatry, "papalardise" and so on. Indeed one of the most common themes in medieval literature is the satire of licentious monks and profligate priests. But "satire" is a term very broad in scope, it can be benevolent or violent. Only when violent, and directed against a specific target, does satire become synonymous with polemic. And while there exists, from the late 12th to the late 14th century, some small amount of anticlerical and specifically antipapal polemic, there is much less of this vigorous type of criticism than there is of satire. However the satire of the clergy, from the 13th to the 15th centuries, does become more virulent, less benevolent, escalating at times to a genuine anticlericalism. This escalation in the degree of satiric virulence is not merely a literary phenomenon; it corresponds to--and is to some extent a gauge of--an evolving social reality. The legislation which, throughout Europe in the 13th and 14th centuries, limited or prohibited gifts of land to the Church, points up the economic roots of much of the lay hostility toward the clergy. In an agrarian economy, destabilized in a vicious circle by plague, famine and war (decreased population bringing about labor shortages and vice versa), clerical endowments

in the form of land holdings were strongly resented. Also important in this movement, in the drama, towards a more open and more violent satire of the clergy is the fact that by the end of the 14th century the activity of writing and putting on non-liturgical plays falls more and more into the hands of clerks in the lower law courts, and members of the lower levels of the clergy—i.e., people in a position to be aware of abuses, but themselves not in a position to profit from them. Thus it comes as no surprise that alongside the gentle mocking of priests and monks familiar from the farces (and already present in the fabliaux and the R. de Renart, not to mention Boccaccio and Chaucer), there arises, with worsening economic conditions and the general disgrace of the clergy following the Schism and all the reformist literature it generated, a much more virulent brand of satire, genuinely polemical—in plays such as the Farce des Theologastres, la Moralité de la Maladie de Chrestienté, la Moralité du Pape malade etc., most of which figure among the plays discussed by Emile Picot in his study entitled Les Moralités polémiques, ou la controverse religieuse dans l'ancien théâtre français.

15

This brings us to the distinction which needs to be drawn between partisan ideological plays (propaganda plays) and what Picot calls "polemical morality plays". Picot used the term "polemical" simply because it enabled him to group together in a single category a large number of plays (28) which have nothing other in common than a high degree of critical satire (polemic). But a polemical play is not necessarily an ideological one, since polemic can be personal, directed against ^{an} individual, with no partisan or political overtones. An example is the Jeu de la Feuillée, written around 1276 by Adam de la Halle. In this play there appear certain discreet, veiled allusions directed against the Count Robert d'Artois, and against certain corrupt and powerful patricians

of Arras whom the Count maintained, or allowed to remain, in power. But the allusions in question, while critical on the personal level, even possibly polemical on the level of a small circle of initiates, are more properly considered satirical, and in any case too discreet, too veiled to make of Adam, as one critic would have us believe, "le porte-parole de l'opposition anti-praticienne de la moyenne et petite bourgeoisie arrageoise, ... le poète de l'extrême gauche des communards, du parti de la révolte".¹⁶ There are other plays which contain a certain dose of personal polemic, e.g., La Farce des Theologastres, but which are also partisan in their destination. Partisan polemic, i.e., polemic generalized and belonging to a group with a definite (or definable) ideological identity and directed against another group consciously opposed to it, is synonymous with propaganda. But while propaganda often expresses itself polemically, the reverse is not necessarily true; e.g., the Moralité de la Paix de Péronne (1468) is a Burgundian propaganda play, but not at all polemical. Conversely, the morality of Hypocrisie, Feintise et Faux Semblant (no. 3 in Picot's study) on the subject of the Pragmatique Sanction is polemical, in that the interdiction of the fête des fous pronounced by Charles VII is vigorously protested by the author of the play. But since his protestations are directed against local members of the clergy and limited in scope to the specific question of the interdiction of the fête des fous, they are too parochial to constitute partisan propaganda; this is an example of non-political polemic. A play like the Nouveau Monde (no.6 in Picot), also on the subject of the Pragmatique Sanction, is on the other hand a genuine partisan ideological play, as are, in subject matter and scope, many but not all of the other plays in Picot's Moralités polémiques. Beginning with the Concil de Basle of 1434, Picot's selection offers a panorama mirroring the beginnings

and full blossoming of, on the one hand a reformist (not yet "Protestant") consciousness, and, on the other, a conservative and obedient orthodox consciousness. Those in the latter camp accuse their adversaries of being "novateurs" (revolutionaries), each side accuses the other of heresy, and the theatre is the battleground (but not the graveyard) on which the preliminary ideological skirmishes of the Reformation are reflected in a new dramatic genre, the partisan ideological play, attesting to the originality and vitality of the theatre in 15th century France.

The creators of the partisan ideological play in France in the 15th and 16th centuries were not bothered by the question of whether or not a work of the creative imagination could be intentionally propagandistic and at the same time a work of art. This is a problem for modern scholastics. Far more important is the fact that in the 15th and 16th centuries social problems of the utmost seriousness, both practical and philosophical (for ultimately at stake was nothing less than salvation or damnation), could be formulated in dramatic terms and portrayed on a theater platform. Rudimentary as many of these plays appear from an aesthetic or dramaturgical viewpoint, their mere existence testifies to the imaginative vitality of a dramatic tradition usually remembered in this period for its farces and sotties, often licentious and amusing, more often banal, or for its sacred drama (mystery plays, saints' lives, edifying morality plays), usually pious, more often boring.

But that the theatre in the 15th century in France was not always trivial, that it could vividly represent on a stage its own profoundly felt dilemmas, that it could do so by means of dramatic conventions which were

not those of Rome or Greece, but which were its own, this is the particular importance of the plays I have described. To appreciate their vitality as well as their seriousness (a seriousness underlying even the most apparently frivolous of them), we must not be put off the track by the allegorical convention. Obviously in a play characters such as Reformation, Church, Peace and so on will appear strange and hopelessly abstract to an audience steeped as we are in conventions far different but no less arbitrary. The attempt must be made, however, to see through the external superficial trappings of dramatic convention to the human problems and motivations beneath. To do this will enable us to participate in the life of an age far different from our own, and yet very much the same on the deeper levels of human conflict and suffering, where problems of moral responsibility and political coercion remain forever poised on the precarious seesaw of provisional solutions.

NOTES

1

See, in particular, Franco Simone, The French Renaissance, trans. H. Gaston Hall (London: Macmillan, 1969), Ch. 3: "The Originality of the French Fifteenth Century". Simone notes that Gustave Lanson, while generally accepting the prevailing view of a "decadence throughout the century", did, nonetheless, "stress the importance of the theatre over all the other literary genres active in the fifteenth century. In the fortune of the sacred and profane theatre, and more in the latter than in the former, Lanson already discerns —shrewdly, and following the scholars most actively concerned with the problem at the time— a basic element typical of a whole literary culture" (pp. 117-118). This point was recently raised again by Professor Lebègue at the 22nd Congress of the Association Internationale des Etudes Françaises. Addressing himself to Professor Simone, organizer and president of the session devoted to "l'Originalité du XVe siècle", he began as follows: "Dans le programme d'aujourd'hui, il y a un vide que je remarque, . . . il n'a pas été question d'une partie extrêmement importante de la littérature du XVe siècle: le théâtre. Sur ce théâtre, j'ai proféré des jugements assez sévères autrefois. . . . Je crois que, si je recommençais aujourd'hui, . . . je ne serais pas aussi sévère. J'admire maintenant la valeur de ce théâtre, son étonnante variété, son éventail depuis la sottie jusqu'aux mystères, . . . et je voudrais signaler toutes les espèces de moralités: les farces moralisées, les moralités historiques etc. Je crois que rarement en France le théâtre a été aussi prospère qu'à cette époque-là. . . ." The complete discussion is printed in the Cahiers de l'ALF (CAIEF), XXIII, (1971), 345-348, and followed up in more detail in "Traditions renouvelées et synthèses créatrices: l'originalité du théâtre au XVe siècle", in Mélanges . . . Franco Simone, edd. Gianni Mombello and Lionello Sozzi (Turin, forthcoming).

2

"Une époque n'est bien connue que si l'on connaît bien les choses que cette époque a particulièrement aimées. Qui saura la passion du Moyen Age pour son théâtre, sera prêt à convenir que, si l'on ignore ce théâtre, on ignore en même temps une partie considérable du Moyen Age. . . . Le Moyen Age, au moins dans sa décadence, s'est peint dans ce vaste tableau. L'histoire des moeurs et des idées au XVe siècle n'a pas de source plus abondante" (Petit de Julleville, La Comédie et les moeurs en France au moyen-âge [Paris, 1886], pp. 4-5). Jean Frappier, some 80 years later, echoed this sentiment: "Plus que les autres genres, le théâtre peut refléter la réalité sociale, les rapports et conflits des classes, la 'riote du monde', pour reprendre une expression médiévale que Charles-Victor Langlois traduisait avec bonheur par la 'mêlée sociale'" (Le Théâtre profane en France au moyen-âge [Paris, 1965], pp. 4-5).

3

Le Concil de Basle (1434): les origines du théâtre réformiste et partisan en France. Edition, introduction, glossaire et notes critiques par Jonathan Beck, préface de Daniel Poirion (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming in 1978 in the series "Studies in the History of Christian Thought").

4

On the rôle of the council of Basel in the peace negotiations, see J. G. Dickinson, The Congress of Arras of 1435, A Study in Medieval Diplomacy (Oxford, 1955), in particular pp. 78-79, 86-87, 202; and Joseph Gill, Constance et Bâle-Florence (t. IX in l'Histoire des conciles oecuméniques, gen. ed. G. Dumeige [Paris, 1965]), p. 193: "La paix d'Arras fut pour une grande part l'oeuvre du concile [de Bâle]. Mais ce dernier étendit également son action bienfaisante à plusieurs pays: l'Espagne par exemple, aussi bien que l'Angleterre et l'Allemagne. D'autres demandèrent son aide: la Lituanie en conflit avec la Pologne . . ." etc.

5

References in Beck, "La moralité du Concil de Basle: 'polémique' théâtrale ou propagande?", Actes du IIIe Colloque international sur le théâtre médiéval, Alençon, 10-14 juillet 1977, ed. J.-Ch. Payen.

6

Op. cit. supra n. 3, p. vi.

7

The Medieval French Drama (Oxford, 1954), p. 248.

8

See Fritz Holl, Das politische und religiöse Tendenzdrama des 16en Jahrhunderts in Frankreich (Erlangen, 1903), and Gerard Jonker, Le Protestantisme et le théâtre de langue française au XVIe siècle (Paris, 1939).

9

See, in particular, Raymond Lebègue, La Tragédie religieuse en France (Paris, 1929).

10

La tragédie de François Spera, attributed to Joseph Duchesne, was published in 1608. "C'est un avertissement aux Protestants de ne pas abjurer leur religion comme le fit François Spera", concludes Jonker, following Holl (p. 94, n. 4).

11

Jonker p. 1 (from Lebègue, op. cit., p. 290 n. 1).

12

See "Secular Literature in France in the Age of the Great Schism and the Conciliar Movement", in "The Great Chain of Being" After Forty Years, edd. Paul and Marion Kuntz (Kalamazoo: The Medieval Institute, forthcoming).

13

Thus it was, writes Denys Hay, that "the endowment of the Church after 1300 was a mere trickle of what it had been before 1200. And it went with sporadic attempts by laymen to recover or at any rate to enjoy church lands" ("The Background to the Reformation" in The Reformation Crisis, ed. Joel Hurstfield [New York, 1965], p. 16).

14

Described here is a general trend, not an absolute progressive hardening of playwrights' attitudes toward the clergy. In general the satire of priests and monks becomes more harsh and bitter as the Reformation approaches and progresses, but the more violent polemics do not entirely replace the older, more benevolent satire which is not at all reformist in spirit. Examples of this gentler type of satire in plays from the 15th and 16th centuries are La Farce du Curia, La Farce du Savetier, Le Sermon joyeux des Quatre Vents (nos. 94, 187 and 251 in the Répertoire of Petit de Julleville).

15

Bulletin de la société de l'histoire du protestantisme français, XXXVI (1887), XLII (1892). The collected articles were reprinted as a monograph by Slatkine in 1970.

16

Marie Ungureanu, La Bourgeoisie naissante: société et littérature bourgeoise d'Arras aux XIIe et XIIIe siècles (Arras, 1955), pp. 229-230, 204. In the course of the play Adam identifies Fortune, both good and bad (symbolized by the Wheel), with "being in good with the Count" ("bien estre du conte"), vv. 790, 798. The allusions are clear, but do not betray the kind of radicalism Ungureanu attributes to Adam. More plausible explanations have been offered. See, e.g., Jean Dufournet in Romania, LXXXVI (1965), 199-245. Jean-Charles Payen recently added his voice to those (numerous, at times raucous) refuting or moderating Ungureanu's vision of Adam. Prof. Payen's note on "l'Idéologie dans le Jeu de la feuillée" appeared in Romania, XCIV (1973), 502-503.

17

Recently, the most vehement condemnations of the partisan ideological play have come from the pen of Eugene Ionesco, notably in a polemical exchange he calls the "Controverse londonienne" (Notes et contrenotes [Paris, 1966], pp. 137-164). In a rather doctrinaire formulation of "le rôle du dramaturge", Ionesco affirms that "une oeuvre d'art n'a rien à voir avec les doctrines. J'ai déjà écrit ailleurs [see, e.g., pp. 22, 40-41, 55-58, 173, 192] qu'une oeuvre d'art qui ne serait qu'idéologique, et rien d'autre, serait inutile, tautologique, inférieure à la doctrine dont elle se réclamerait et qui trouverait meilleure expression [?] dans le langage de la démonstration et du discours. Une pièce idéologique n'est rien d'autre que la vulgarisation d'une idéologie" (p. 141). Ionesco does allow, however, that certain ideological works may also be works of art, to the extent to which they transcend their ideological

content: "Tous les auteurs ont voulu faire de la propagande. Les grands sont ceux qui ont échoué, qui, consciemment ou non, ont accédé à des réalités plus profondes, plus universelles" (p. 55). Is the influence waning of those who hold views similar to Ionesco's in the debate over the (in)compatibility of ideology and literary art? Such is the assessment of Erich Köhler, speaking from the vantage point of his long experience with the question in various applications: "Die Ansicht, dass auch 'schöne' Literatur sehr wohl mit politisch-ideologischer Dienstleistung zu tun haben kann, mag vielen noch immer als unziemlich erscheinen. Der Umstand, dass sich in dieser Frage seit sehn Jahren ein gewisser Wandel der Meinungen vollzieht, ermutigt mich, meine These [in this case, the thesis "das anglonormannisch--angevinische Königtum habe nicht nur die pseudohistorische Artuslegende der Chroniken, sondern auch die Artusliteratur bewusst in den Dienst einer politischen Propaganda gestellt] grundsätzlich aufrechtzuerhalten" (Ideal und Wirklichkeit in der höfischen Epik, Beihefte zur ZRPh, Heft 97, 2, ergänzte Auflage [Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1970], pp. 266-67.

Emory University

Fifteenth Century Studies

Volume 1

Edited by
Guy R. Mermier
The University of Michigan
and
Edelgard E. DuBruck
Marygrove College

Published for
THE MEDIEVAL INSTITUTE
WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
by
UNIVERSITY MICROFILMS
INTERNATIONAL
1978

