

WERE THEY LISTENING OR WATCHING?
Text and Spectacle at the 1510 Châteaudun *Passion Play*
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‘Drama is not literature.’ Those present at this colloquium (and *a fortiori* readers of *Medieval English Theatre*) will not need reminding that this striking, though hardly original sentence, contains a good deal of truth. Perhaps it needs to be nuanced slightly; perhaps one should say that drama is not just a literary genre. But the basic idea expressed in this sentence is correct. The text is but one of the component parts that make up a play performance. However, for those of us who teach or research into the theatre of the relatively distant past, the written text is, in most cases, almost all that remains for us to work on. Unless one is interested in plays that still form part of the repertoire of dramas frequently produced in modern theatres, we are condemned to concentrate largely on the written text, on the play’s linguistic dimension. The non-linguistic aspects — visual and acoustic, etc. — are the most ephemeral aspects of a performance.

Moreover, the stress that critics are often obliged to put on the language of a play from the distant past results in a situation in which it seems that those playwrights which are the most frequently studied and the most highly regarded today are those whose *forte* is their linguistic genius. It is the language of a Shakespeare, a Racine or a Hugo that distinguishes him from his apparently less gifted contemporaries.

The same situation applies to medieval France. The medieval French plays which are best known today are those whose texts have proved the most rewarding to study but about whose original performances we know virtually nothing, for example, the *Jeu d’Adam*, the *Jeu de saint Nicolas*, the *Jeu de la Feuillée*, the *Farce de Maistre Pierre Pathelin*, and Arnoul Gréban’s *Passion*.

However, it is at the very least arguable that, in the Middle Ages even more than today, the dimensions of sight and sound in a play performance were more important than the words spoken. In other words, I would argue that, at least as far as the large-scale mystery plays were concerned, the medieval theatre was a place where the spectacle was considered to be more important than the text. In this essay, I aim to look into this question more closely and try to examine the relative importance of text and spectacle in French drama at the end of the Middle Ages.

The information I will base my arguments on is provided not so much by mystery play texts as by archive information throwing light on mystery play performances. Given the need for concision in a brief essay like this, I will concentrate largely on the performance of one particular mystery play, one which is not well known, but about which a considerable amount of information is now available. This is the *Passion Play* performed at Châteaudun in 1510. A French colleague, Marcel Couturier, and I have recently rediscovered and published the Book of Accounts, the *Compte*, of this performance. It might seem dangerous to claim that one single play can be taken as being representative of the almost 250 religious plays that have come down to us from Medieval France. But, as we will see, it is reasonably certain that the Châteaudun *Passion Play* is typical of most of the large-scale mystery plays performed in France towards the end of the fifteenth and in the early sixteenth centuries.

Before tackling the question which concerns me, a brief *résumé* of the circumstances of the Châteaudun performance is called for. The first person to think of organising the performance was the Duke of Longueville, who was *seigneur* of Châteaudun. Having heard of the successful performance of a *Passion Play* in the town of Amboise, which had taken place in 1507 whilst he was abroad — he was involved in the wars in Italy — he decided that ‘his’ town of Châteaudun should do the same thing, as soon as possible. His further absences, again in Italy, meant that the performance could not take place until 1510. But once he was free of his military commitments, he urged the most influential inhabitants of Châteaudun, the ‘Dunois’, to put on a similar play. His contribution was not only moral, it was also financial. He gave the town a gift of money, 175 *livres tournois*. (*l.t.*); he also exempted the town from various taxes that were due to him; these totalled about 500 *l.t.* Significantly, he also had ideas about the text; he decided to borrow the Amboise play. He wrote to the *échevins* of Amboise, asking them to send him the manuscript of their play. These plans began to be put into action in November and December 1509. The performance of the mystery play itself was spread over 18 different days (*journées*) between 26 May and 8 August 1510, in a huge theatre built in the square in front of the main Châteaudun church, the *Église de la Madeleine*. The text used at the performance, which must have been about 50000 lines long, is now lost, but, fortunately, the Book of Accounts, containing a list of all the expenses and income related to the 1510 performance, has been preserved. It consists of about 250 folios and

provides information on almost every possible aspect of the financing and organising of a large-scale mystery play.

This kind of document is extremely rare in France; only two other similar documents have come down to us, the accounts of the *Mons Passion Play* of 1501 and those of the *Mystère des Trois Doms* performed at Romans, in the Rhône valley, in 1509. Although these three sets of accounts have a number of elements in common, there are many differences between them; however, when they are compared amongst themselves and examined along with the partial and anecdotal archive evidence relating to many other mystery play performances, they enable us to conclude that, towards the end of the Middle Ages, most major mystery plays in France were organised along similar lines. The *Châteaudun Passion Play* can thus be seen to be typical. However, this particular Book of Accounts is unique in the degree of detail it provides; its richness allows critics to examine many of the problem areas associated with play performances. My aim in this essay, therefore, is to use the *Compte de la Passion de Châteaudun* in order to shed light on the issue that is the subject of this essay.

How, then, might one go about trying to find out about the attitude of the medieval French public to the question of the relative importance of text and spectacle in play performances? One can start by asking what degree of importance people in Medieval France attached to the text of a play. There are several ways of answering this question. The text of a mystery play was not only the versified literary composition of a playwright — of a *fatiste* as they were often called in medieval France. It was also a physical object, a lengthy manuscript written out and copied up by one or more scribes. So, what was the attitude of the medieval public towards the *fatiste*? Was he looked upon as a great artist, an individual whose literary skills were a crucial element in determining whether a performance was successful or not? And was the manuscript containing the text of the play considered to be an object of great value?

At Châteaudun, as in the case of many performances of French mystery plays, the text used was not an original work. The Duke of Longueville wanted to borrow the text used in Amboise in 1507. After a certain amount of delay, the *échevins* of Amboise sent him a copy of their play (not the original version), which had been written up specially for him, at the cost of 15 *l.t.*; it was 480 folios long. The Amboise text was borrowed in November 1509, for a play that was planned for the following summer. But it soon became obvious that the text that had been sent from Amboise was not satisfactory. The reason for this conclusion is not made explicit in the

Compte, but it was probably because an 18-day performance was envisaged, whereas the Amboise play had only lasted 8 days; it is possible that the organisers felt that the income from more than 8 days' audiences would be needed to cover the costs of the performance. So the text had to be revised and expanded. It was at this point that Châteaudun invited the famous *fatiste*, Aignen Charuel, to come to Châteaudun and create a new version of the Amboise text. Charuel lived in Evreux, a town about 120 kilometres away. He arrived in January and stayed there until the play ended in August. He was paid between 40 and 60 *l.t.*, and was given free board and lodging during these eight months. His job was to correct, adapt and augment the Amboise play. In order to do this, he led a team of seven scribes who, along with Charuel himself, were responsible for copying up the drafts and the fair copies of all the manuscripts required by the performance.

The *Compte* provides much information about the manuscripts used in the course of the Châteaudun performance. My calculations, based on this information, suggest that the manuscript of each of the 18 days filled about 60 folios, which would give a total of about 1100 folios for the complete play. But in fact the equivalent of three copies of the full text was required. Firstly, we learn that there were two *conducteurs du mistere*, who each needed their own copy of the complete text. Then, each actor had to be given his *rollet*; the *rollets* were narrow scrolls of paper, written on one side only, which contained only the text to be spoken by the actor in question; each of his speeches was preceded in the *rollet* by a cue, i.e. the last half-line of the speech that immediately preceded his own. This half-line, which was usually indented to halfway across the width of the *rollet*, often rhymed with the first line of the following speech; hence it acted as a visual and rhyming cue. Obviously, a complete set of *rollets* amounted to at least the same as (if not slightly more than) one of the full copies of the text. All this means that the scribes had to provide about 3500 folios; they were paid at the rate of 6 *deniers tournois* (*d.t.*) per folio. The cost of these manuscripts came to 87 *l.t.* and 10 *sols tournois* (*s.t.*). To the cost of this labour one must add the cost of the paper itself; this reached almost 3 *l.t.* The *fatiste* and his scribes seemed to have worked almost non-stop between January and August; they were even having to adjust the text at the last minute, just before the performance, when some of the actors (who included some influential individuals) insisted on modifications to their rôles.

The total cost of the creation and copying up of the text used at the Châteaudun *Passion Play* was between 145 and 165 *l.t.* It is now possible to

compare and contrast this sum with the amounts of money spent on the staging of the play, the spectacle proper. We need to be clear as to what is included under this somewhat imprecise term of staging. I take this expression to cover three closely linked things: the theatre itself; the sets, the props, the spectacular effects, the costumes and the actors; and the input of the stage designer and the directors, the *conducteurs du mystere*.

The building of the theatre was no doubt by far the greatest expense. Since there were no permanent theatres in the Middle Ages, a new theatre had to be built for each stage performance. It is obvious that building the kind of theatre required by the large-scale mystery plays in late Medieval France was a massive undertaking, costing a large amount of money and requiring an immense amount of time and manpower. The *Compte* of the Châteaudun *Passion Play* provides rich and detailed information on the construction of the theatre, which was erected in the a former cemetery in front of the Church of the Madeleine in Châteaudun. (The church is still there today.) Between December 1509, when the cemetery was measured, until September 1510, when it was taken down and the wood and almost everything else was sold off by auction, we know exactly who was doing what, how much they were paid, how much wood and other materials were used, and how much it all cost.

As early as January 1510, a team of navvies began the no doubt disagreeable work of clearing the former cemetery, flattening the surface and removing the earth — and anything else they might dig up! These navvies provided 195 man-days of labour; they were paid 2 *s.t.* per day. Then the carpenters and joiners arrived, along with their apprentices; they provided about 300 man-days of labour, at 3 *s.t.* per day. They used up a huge amount of wood of various shapes and sizes: 7000 metres of beams, 4000 metres of planks, 400 metres of steps, 2500 metres of lattice and 400 metres of ‘big wood’. Then came the locksmiths and metal workers to strengthen and enclose various parts of the building. Using the information in the *Compte* in combination with old town plans of Châteaudun, it is possible to reconstruct with a high degree of accuracy what the theatre must have looked like. It was in the shape of a huge oval, about 50 metres long and 35 metres wide. There were two large masts holding up a large awning which covered most of the playing area. This tent alone cost 130 *l.t.* There was probably enough space for about 5000 spectators, who sat either on rows of benches or else in one of the raised boxes surrounding the playing area. Entry to the seats on the benches probably cost about 2 or 4 *deniers* for each *journée*. The 39 boxes or *loges*,

set above the benches and laid out in two curving rows on each long side of the oval, were each big enough to take half-a-dozen spectators; they were rented out for the whole run of 18 *journées*. The price of each *loge* was determined by an auction held in public just before the start of the performance. The most expensive cost 9 *l.t.* and the cheapest were sold at 2 *l.t.*; the price depended on the position of the *loge* in relation to the playing area. In most cases, one can see that the more central the *loge*, the more the occupants had to pay for it; however, those with a good view of Paradise and Hell were also expensive. The total cost of erecting the theatre — including both material and labour — was about 600 *l.t.*; and it took over 1500 man-hours to build.

Although, in theory, it is possible to distinguish between the theatre proper and the stage, in the case of Châteaudun, as with many other medieval theatres, the two were very closely linked. This is because the playing area often included not only a 'stage' but also other parts of the theatre, for example, the *loges*, which were occupied by actors as well as spectators. This is explained partly by the fact that, in Châteaudun as in many other cases, spectators *were* also actors; for example, see Fouquet's famous miniature. At Châteaudun, before the construction of the theatre had started, the organisers decided to hire Guillaume Brudeval, who was a man of many talents. Described in the *Compte* simply as the *paintre*, he was indeed a painter, as well as a sculptor; but he was also the stage- and set-designer and the *machiniste* responsible for most of the special effects. Indeed, he was the person who determined the shape of the theatre and who invented the sets and most other aspects of the staging. Brudeval, like the *fatiste* Charuel, came from Evreux; like Charuel, he arrived in Châteaudun in January and stayed there until September. It is highly probable that the two of them formed a regular team of mystery play creators. (I have found evidence that they were both involved in the organisation of the texts and spectacles used for royal entries in Evreux in 1516–1517.) Charuel dealt with the words of the play and the manuscripts that contained them; Brudeval concentrated on the staging. These two men, in fact, actually embody the two parts of the opposition which interests me, for in one sense Charuel 'is' the text and Brudeval 'is' the spectacle.

Brudeval was, apparently, much better treated by the organisers than Charuel. A special house was rented on his behalf, for himself and his family, at the cost of 25 *l.t.*; and his salary is 175 *l.t.* (as opposed to Charuel's 40 or 60 *l.t.*). His responsibilities were, however, proportionately

greater. Between January and August, he masterminded the building of the theatre — or at least the major parts of the theatre. He was responsible for preparing the *eschaffaulx* (i.e. the sets), the *fainctes* (the props and special effects) and the machinery. He also had to make a large number of statues — of angels, archangels, prophets, etc. — which were to be placed in Paradise. In April, he hired one Perrinet Riffart, from Beaugency, who was appointed as *gouverneur d'enfer*. Riffart was clearly well-known as a 'Hell-specialist'. He was not only a technician; he was a pyrotechnician. During the performances, he managed a team of 20 men who, working underground in tunnels, produced the flames, smoke, explosions and thunder traditionally associated with the staging of hell. Riffart was paid 22 *l.t.*

We are at last getting close to the heart of what is normally understood by the term *spectacle*. We now have to examine the special effects routinely used by medieval stage-designers. These effects were not simply visual; they appealed not only to the eye, but also to the senses of hearing and smell.

Paradoxically, one of the most spectacular features of the Châteaudun *Passion Play* was not the performance proper, but the publicity which preceded the performance. This was the so-called *monstre*, the 'demonstration', which consisted of a procession of all the actors in the play, dressed in their costumes; it began, traditionally, with the devils and ended with God the Father and the angels. At Châteaudun in 1510, the most expensive item in the *monstre* was a great dragon spitting flames, smoke and noise, and ridden by Lucifer. This device, which was several metres long, moved along on three sets of wheels: 'un grant serpent monstrueux sur lequel seroit monté celluy qui joueroit Lucifer, lequel serpent jetteroit le feu par tous les conduitz de luy. Surprisingly, perhaps, this dragon was not used in the course of the play itself.

Apart from the *monstre*, the main features of the staging of most large-scale mystery plays were (a) Paradise and Hell and (b) the *fainctes* and the *secrez* — the special effects.

Many aspects of Medieval French staging were fixed by tradition. Paradise was usually presented as a luxurious set, raised in relation to the main playing area, and inhabited by God the Father, together with various angels and prophets. The essential prop was a throne, whence God the Father could witness everything that happened down below, on earth. At Châteaudun, Paradise was part of the main theatre building, rather than a separate, independent set. The *Compte* refers frequently to the *paradis des eschaffaulx*. Its dimensions can be seen from the fact that it was covered

with a roof which required 24 metres of gutters. God's throne had to be firmly fixed to the floor by iron bars and a lock. Paradise was occupied not only by the actors playing the rôles of God and the angels, but also by a number of statues of angels and prophets. Brudeval's *chef d'œuvre* at Châteaudun, however, was a *faincte* consisting of a great sun and a number of clouds, which kept turning in a cyclical movement, to give an idea of God's created Universe. This device was controlled by a system of gears and pulleys. It was used not only during the Creation episode, but right the way through the play. The *Compte* informs us that staff had to be employed on regular occasions to oil the *mouvements et apparucions*. As one might expect, Paradise was a colourful set; its surface was covered with over 40 cotton sheets, bought from local housewives, which Brudeval and his wife had spent many hours painting; here Brudeval did live up to his title of *peintre*. Fitting out and decorating Paradise cost 30 *l.t.*

Hell was probably even more expensive and spectacular than Paradise. In theory, for symbolic reasons, Hell was placed lower than Paradise. One entered Hell by a dragon's mouth at the level of the main playing area. But it also had a crenelated tower, surrounded by *mâchicoulis*, whose wooden walls were coated with a kind of plaster, no doubt to reduce the danger of fire. This set, which, like Paradise, was an integral part of the theatre building, was linked to a network of underground tunnels, which enabled the devils to pop up all over the place in the playing area, through trap-doors. Perrinet Riffart, as *gouverneur d'enfer*, was the person in charge of the special effects in Hell; these consisted mainly of fire, flames, smoke, noises and smells. He spent a lot of time and money making fireworks of various sorts. He had to buy gunpowder and saltpeter, as well parchment and metal cylinders, which he turned into rockets. In order to avoid the risks inherent in such work, a special room was hired for him, well away from the theatre, where he was able to store his pyrotechnic devices.

The importance of these two sets is reflected not only in the time and money devoted to them, but also in the prices fetched by the spectators' boxes; those that were nearest to Paradis and Hell cost more.

Space prevents a detailed description of all the spectacular effects used in the Châteaudun performance; I shall just select some of the most striking.

a) During the episodes of the Transfiguration and of the Temptation in the Desert, a machine was used which enabled the actor playing the rôle of Jesus to disappear suddenly and then immediately reappear in a different place, much higher or lower, perhaps wearing a different costume. The

device used, not fully described, consisted of two or three large planks; it must have worked with a system of pivots and weights.

b) Another *faincte* was the *panse de Judas* (Judas's stomach). In the version of the Passion performed at Châteaudun, Judas commits suicide by hanging. At the moment he dies, his guts burst open and the devils come and seize his soul. The *Compte* informs us that organisers paid 7s. 6d. to a locksmith and a tailor who made the breeches and tunic worn by Judas.

c) For the red robe worn by Jesus whilst being interrogated by Pilate, the Duke of Longueville paid the enormous sum of 8 *livres* 15 *sols tournois*.

d) A special wig for Jesus was fetched all the way from Amboise (90 kilometres away).

e) A band of 7 musicians were employed; three were *menestriers* from Chartres, two from Châteaudun — a father and son who played fife and drums — and two trumpet players. These musicians played on 20 occasions all told — the 18 days of the play, one day when the play was postponed because the Duke could not be present, and once for the *monstre*. The total salaries for the musicians came to 117 *l.t.*; in addition, they all received a free livery.

f) The performance was almost regularly interrupted by banquets, written into the text of the play; these included not only the obvious ones, like the marriage at Cana and the Last Supper, but a dozen others as well. The *Compte* tells us exactly what was eaten at each banquet and at what point in the action it occurred; they included pies, some with two chickens in, others with three in, bread, cakes, and large quantities of wine. One wonders what the effect of these interludes was upon the performance.

Let us now return to the problem of deciding whether the Châteaudun *Passion Play* was a spectacle rather than a text. At first glance, there seems little doubt that the spectacular side dominates.

First of all, if we examine the overall financial balance as revealed in the accounts, we see that the total cost of the performance was about 2000 *l.t.*, whereas the cost of the text and the manuscripts that contained it did not exceed 165 *l.t.* Moreover, we have observed that the two men responsible for the performance of the play, Charuel the *fatiste* and Brudeval the *paintre*, were rewarded very unequally. Both came from Evreux and spent about 8 months in Châteaudun; but Charuel got no more than 60 *l.t.*, whilst Brudeval got 175 *l.t.* Of course, Brudeval's responsibility was enormous; his decisions determined most of the expenses incurred by the

production. If we try to place Charuel's 60 *l.t.* salary in the context of some of the production's other component costs, we can see that Perrinet Riffart, the *gouverneur d'enfer*, employed for only three months got 22 *l.t.* The music alone cost 117 *l.t.* Even the price of the awning, at 113 *l.t.*, was twice as high as Charuel's pay.

It is equally revealing to ask who exactly read the complete manuscript of the Châteaudun *Passion Play*. No doubt Charuel himself and the two *conducteurs du mistere*, and probably Brudeval as well. But the actors only read their own *rollet*. Obviously, the spectators never read the text; many of them were probably illiterate. But it is even worth wondering to what extent the spectators could actually *hear* the words of the play. After all, we have to envisage a theatre about half the size of a modern football pitch, an area 50 metres long by 35 metres wide, surrounded by spectators ('fans') on raked benches or in *loges* ('executive boxes'). Can football supporters today hear what football players say to each other, even if the crowd remains silent? Did the acoustics in the Châteaudun theatre allow the spectators to hear everything that was spoken by the actors? Moreover, was it even necessary to hear? Everyone knew the story.

One can thus see that the text seems to possess much less importance than the spectacle. The *fatiste* is less well paid than the *paintre*, the cost of the manuscripts is barely 10% of the total expenditure, the text is only read by about four or five people at most, and it is probable that the spectators did not pay a great deal of attention to it.

However, such a conclusion would not be completely justified. In the Middle Ages, as was the case until the invention of photography and film, a spectacle was something ephemeral. The day after the performance, it was gone for ever; it could not be recovered — other than with the help of the text. For the text was all that remained, and its monetary cost is not the only criterion relevant for judging its true contemporary importance. It is therefore worth looking briefly at the fate of mystery play manuscripts after the performance was over.

Firstly, it is evident that a mystery play manuscript *was* looked upon as an object of considerable value. We have already seen that, for most *Passion Play* performances, a pre-existing text was used, usually in an adapted form; this also applied to many mysteries based on saints' lives. The organisers of a mystery play had to find a text on which to base their performance. They could, of course, commission a new one, but often they preferred to use an already tried-and-tested play. In the case of Châteaudun, it is clear, from the correspondence still surviving in the

Amboise archives, that the inhabitants of Amboise were not at all keen to give the text of their *Passion Play* to the Duke of Longueville; they considered it their own property and it was only with great reluctance that they were finally persuaded by the influential Duke to part with it — however, what they gave him was not their original text, but a copy (which, in the end, proved unsatisfactory). Obviously, the inhabitants of Amboise and of other towns that put on mystery plays took the view that it was worthwhile keeping the texts of their plays. Usually what was kept was the *livre original*, the ‘fair copy’ used by the producer in preparing and directing the performance. Sometimes, however, this *livre original* was copied up into a much more luxurious manuscript, with double columns, rubrics and illuminations; this type of manuscript was often presented as a gift to a famous individual. Later, when the printing industry was well established in France, the *livre original* was often sold to printers and publishers. We know that the Parisian printer Antoine Vérard regularly bought mystery-play manuscripts from a bookseller in Tours.

For the medieval spectator, however, I suspect that it was the spectacle that really counted and that the *fatistes*, as much as the play-producers, were well aware of this. Even one of the most literary of *Passion Plays*, Arnoul Gréban’s 35000-line play, opens with this sentence addressed to the audience: ‘Ouvrez vos yeux et regardez!’. And all the *fatistes*, in the prologues to their plays, emphasise that their task is to *monstrer* or *demonstrer* their story to the public. If, during the performance of a mystery play, a medieval spectator compared the impact upon himself of the words being spoken with those of the sights and sounds of the actors and of the effects achieved by the medieval producers, it would not be surprising if he decided that the spectacle was more important than the text. But without the text, the modern critic would not find it so easy to guess what the spectacle was like.

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RÉSUMÉ EN FRANÇAIS

Lire, ouïr, vèoir?

Texte et spectacle à la Passion de Châteaudun de 1510

Dans une représentation de mystère français de la fin du Moyen Age, quelle était l'importance relative du spectacle et du texte? Quelle valeur attachait-on aux paroles des acteurs? Nous cherchons à répondre à cette question en étudiant en détail la représentation de la Passion jouée à Châteaudun en 1510, dont le *Compte* vient d'être redécouvert. Les critères utilisés comprennent les sommes d'argent dépensées pour créer le texte et rédiger tous les manuscrits nécessaires (pour le metteur en scène, pour les acteurs), pour payer le fatiste et le metteur en scène, et pour construire le théâtre, ainsi que d'autres facteurs moins financiers, comme le destin du manuscrit et la répugnance d'une ville à prêter 'sa' *Passion* à une autre ville.