

THE ROMAN 'SAINT'S PLAYS' OF LILLE

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For over 500 years one of the most important events for the citizens of Lille in Flanders was the annual procession in honour of the Virgin Mary. Called simply *La Procession de Lille*, it was founded in 1270 by the countess Margaret of Flanders and took place each year on the octave of Trinity Sunday. By the fifteenth century the procession had developed into a great religious and civic spectacle, which drew pilgrims and other visitors to the city until it was finally suppressed by the Revolution. From the early fifteenth century until 1565 neighbourhood youth groups staged plays on the day of the procession. The plays that were judged to be the best were awarded prizes, usually by a personage called the Bishop of Fools. The latter, who was usually a canon of the collegiate church of St Peter, sponsor of the procession, organised this dramatic contest during much of the fifteenth century. Each year, apparently, he issued a proclamation in which he invited the youth groups to participate in the contest by staging plays newly written for the occasion. Though only one such proclamation survives, dated 1463, it is quite specific about the types of plays that could be associated with the procession. Each group had to enter two plays in the contest in order to be eligible for a prize: a serious play to embellish the procession itself and a farce to entertain the crowds in the evening or the day after the procession. The serious plays were first mimed on wagons set up along the route of march as the procession passed on Sunday morning. Then in the afternoon the wagons were pulled into the main square where the same plays were performed *en bonne et vraie retorique* ('in good and true rhetoric'). The proclamation says nothing about the content of the farces, but the plays more closely linked to the procession had to be *histoires de la Bible, tant du Viel Testament comme du Nouvel, vie ou passion de saint ou de sainte approuvee par nostre mere Sainte Eglise, ou aultres histoires rommaines contenues en anchiennes croniques* ('stories from the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, the lives or passions of saints approved by our mother Holy Church, or Roman histories from ancient chronicles').¹ Thus the solemn, religious character of the procession was reflected and reinforced by the edifying nature of the plays.

Of the many hundreds of plays that must have been written for the Lille procession in the late Middle Ages, 72 have survived in a single manuscript from the second half of the fifteenth century.² These plays conform very closely to the requirements of the Bishop's proclamation in that there are 43 Old Testament plays and 21 New Testament plays. There are also 3 plays based on Christian legend that may be categorised as saint's plays, depending upon one's definition, which include the life of St Euphrosyne, a miracle of the Virgin Mary, and a play of Octavian and the Sibyl. In addition, there are 4 plays derived from Roman history or ancient chronicles, as the proclamation requests. Only the morality play of the Assumption fails to fit the prescribed categories, since it contains no human characters. Yet even this play with its allegorical abstractions shares with all the others the principal goal of edifying the spectators.

From the first centuries of the Christian era, the passions of martyrs and the heroic deeds of confessors of the faith have been recounted in stories designed to inspire others to follow their examples of courage and steadfastness in the face of adversity. Gregory of Tours, one of the earliest hagiographers, undertook the task of recording the stories of Christian heroes 'because the life of the saints encourages the minds of listeners to follow their example'.³ It was in much the same spirit that the authors of the Lille plays selected the stories they would dramatise. As the Prologue to *La destruction de la cité de Ai*, one of the Joshua plays, expresses it:

C'est tresbelle occupation
de remoustrer choses honnestes,
plaines de edification,
de exemple ou de devosion,
ou beaux faix et vertueux jestes. (8-12)

'It is a worthy endeavour to show honourable behaviour,
great deeds, and virtuous acts filled with edification, example,
or devotion.'

As we know, however, not all edifying stories tell of virtuous deeds to be emulated; some of them exemplify vicious deeds to be avoided. The Epilogue of the play about the rape of Dinah advises the male spectators to learn a lesson from Sichem, who allowed a lustful glance to prod him on to rape: *notez le histoire et tellement / que a Sichem exemple prenez* ('take note of the story so that you learn a lesson from Sichem'). As the spectators have just seen, the consequences of that glance were indeed disastrous. Apparently the selection of exemplary stories to dramatise was

one of the conditions imposed by the Bishop of Fools for entering the contest. Though this requirement is not stipulated in the one surviving proclamation, the Prologue to the Roman history play, *Le juge d'Athènes*, seems to allude to another of the Bishop's proclamations when he says:

Le filz de Dieu omnipotent
 veuille garder generalment
 tous ceulx qui sont chy assambléz,
 devant, derriere et a tous léz,
 et principalement le Prelat
 des Folz et son joieulx estat,
 qui, pour la decoration
 de la sainte procession
 qui aujourd'hui se fait a Lille,
 a envoiét avant la ville
 ses lettres et ses mandemens,
 en requerant a toutes gens
 de faire nouvelles histoires
 contenans euvres meritoires,
 qui soient aux gens exemplaires
 du mal fuïr et du bien faire. (1-16)

'May the Son of God omnipotent protect all who are here assembled, before, behind, and on all sides, and especially the Prelate of Fools and his merry band, who, for the embellishment of the holy procession taking place today in Lille, sent his letters and mandates around the city, entreating all to write new history plays containing meritorious works that are examples to people of doing good and avoiding evil.'

We may conclude, then, that the subjects of the Roman history plays, like those of the biblical plays and saints' lives, were selected and dramatised in order to provide the spectators at the Lille procession with examples of virtuous behaviour to emulate or vicious behaviour to avoid. Considered from this point of view, the plays in which the great deeds of Roman heroes are re-enacted may be seen as analogues of the plays in which the heroic deeds of the saints are represented for the spectators' edification.

Of the four Roman history plays in the Lille collection, only *Le juge d'Athènes*, based on an anecdote in Valerius Maximus's chapter on severity

(6.3.ext.3), presents an example of vicious behaviour to be avoided. In that play the Roman senate condemns a thoroughly corrupt judge to death and orders his son, the judge's successor, to sit on his father's flayed skin while in the judicial seat as a reminder to avoid similar corruption. The three other Roman plays present stories of heroism and courage that were dramatised in such a way as to inspire the spectators to practice analogous Christian virtues. It was evident, of course, to both playwrights and spectators that the two heroes and one heroine in these plays were not Christian saints, that they were not filled with and motivated by God's grace as saints would be. Yet the playwrights contextualised the stories, making them directly applicable to the spectators, by posing the question: If pagans could endure great suffering with such patience and fortitude for mere worldly glory, should not Christians be far more willing to do the same for an eternal reward?

One of the Roman 'saint's plays' from Lille is entitled *Le tourment inhumain d'Actilius Regulus*.⁴ It concerns Marcus Atilius Regulus, who was a Roman general and consul during the First Punic War. Historically, we know that in 256 B.C. his forces severely defeated the Carthaginians at Adys. A year later, however, Regulus himself was defeated and taken prisoner by Xanthippus, a Spartan mercenary commander. Nothing is certain about his story after this event. The traditional accounts of his subsequent heroism seem to be an admixture of historical fact and legendary motifs, if not a complete fiction. Regulus's elevation to the status of Roman hero parallels that of Roland and other warrior heroes who were made to embody the values of their culture. In much the same way many saints' lives have been embellished with legendary material in order to provide heroic examples of Christian virtue.⁵ In any case, the Carthaginians, having suffered more defeats, are said to have sent Regulus to Rome in 250 to negotiate a peace or at least an exchange of prisoners, making him swear before the gods that after completing the mission he would return to prison in Carthage. Regulus, however, instead of negotiating peace, urged the Roman senate to reject both proposals and to continue prosecuting the war, which apparently it did. Though his friends pleaded with him to remain in Rome, Regulus kept the promise he had made to the gods and to his enemies, returning to prison with the full knowledge that his punishment would be severe and final. The Carthaginians, angered by what they saw as his betrayal of their peace mission, devised a slow and cruel torture to exact their revenge. They enclosed him standing in a narrow box, which was studded with sharp nails

so that he could lean nowhere without extreme pain. According to some accounts they also cut off his eyelids. Thus they killed him by keeping him awake.

For later Romans Atilius Regulus was the ideal type of heroic endurance and was greatly admired for his fidelity to Rome and to the gods. Every Roman historian recounted his exploits, and public figures such as Cicero frequently held him up as an example for all to emulate. Subsequently his story was passed on by historians of the Middle Ages, during which time his fame seems never to have ceased. Erving Mix has drawn up a bibliography of historical sources and other accounts of Regulus's heroic deeds dating from the second century B.C. — the earliest surviving account is that of Polybius — to the mid nineteenth century.⁶ The list contains almost 100 references from the centuries prior to 1500, which indicates that the story of Regulus was well known throughout the Middle Ages. Also noteworthy from our point of view is the fact that this bibliography lists thirteen tragedies based on the story of Regulus that were staged in the centuries following 1500. The fifteenth-century Lille play, then, is the earliest surviving and possibly the very first dramatisation of the Regulus story. The playwright identifies Valerius Maximus as one of his two sources, specifically the chapter on the observance of religion (1.1.14) and that on cruelty (9.2.ext.1). The other source is Book I of Augustine's *City of God*, in which the Bishop of Hippo praises Regulus for enduring captivity for religion's sake (chapter 15) and for refusing to take his own life, as Cato had done, in order to avoid the suffering inflicted by the Carthaginians (chapter 24).

If the name of Regulus were preceded by the appellation *saint*, the account of his martyrdom would fit easily into any martyrology or especially into the *Legenda Aurea*. His virtuous qualities are clearly admired by the playwright, who has the Prologue introduce the play's hero to the spectators as an *exemple de ung vaillant Romain / qui pour maintenir verité / fut mis a tourment inhumain* ('example of a valiant Roman who, for upholding truth, was subjected to barbarous torture'). He is called a *preudomme sans faulte nulle* ('faultless man of integrity') and is shown to be a man who respects religion and reveres the gods. At the end of the play the Epilogue explains that he died *pour foy et loyauté garder* ('to maintain his faith and loyalty'). Regulus is not, of course, made into a Christian. The playwright closely follows his sources by presenting the hero's motivation as worldly glory: *Mais se le corps s'en est dolu, / du bien demoura la memoire* ('but if my body has suffered pain, the memory of the

good will endure'), says Regulus, explaining that he submitted voluntarily to his cruel fate. Nevertheless, suggests the Epilogue, Christians have much to learn from this virtuous pagan. If he suffered such inhuman torment merely for earthly fame, *par plus forte raison doit bien / ung cristien faire devoir, / quant la gloire Dieu veult avoir* ('then a Christian who seeks the glory of God has all the more reason to do what he should'). The Epilogue seems to speak for both playwright and actors in concluding the play: *Ainsy, pour donner exemplaire / de bien, tel est nostre pourpos* ('Thus, to give an example of good has been our goal').

The second Roman play from Lille, which we may entitle *Mucius Scaevola* for brevity,⁷ concerns another of the legendary heroes of ancient Rome, dating from a time when, in fact, most of Rome's history is legendary. In the sixth century B.C. the Etruscan king Lars Porsenna is said to have marched against Rome in order to restore the banished Tarquinius Superbus to the throne. After his initial attack was repulsed by Horatius Cocles, Porsenna laid siege to the embattled city. According to Livy (2 12–13), a band of 300 young Romans vowed to assassinate the Etruscan king, the first of whom to make the attempt was Gaius Mucius. Having stolen into the Etruscan camp, Mucius faced a dilemma when he encountered the king and his secretary together, both wearing regal robes. Not daring to reveal himself by asking which was the king, he killed the secretary by mistake. When Porsenna threatened Mucius with torture by fire, the young hero thrust his right hand into the flame that was burning on the altar of sacrifices and held it there until it was consumed, saying (in the play, which follows Livy very closely): *ceulx qui considerent gloire / reputent le corps vile chose* ('those who aspire to glory consider the body to be worthless'). Porsenna was so astonished by the young Roman's bravery and by his indifference to pain that his vengeance turned to admiration and he set him free. Ultimately, because he feared being killed by one of the 299 other young patriots, Porsenna lifted the siege and made peace with Rome. Mucius later took the name of Scaevola, which means 'left-handed'. It is possible that the account of his exploits was invented by the Scaevola family to explain the origin of their name. In any case, the legend of Mucius was for the ancient Romans an exemplary tale of a hero who embodied some of their most cherished values.

The Prologue of the play describes Mucius as a *noble homme franc et corageulx ... sans crainte de mort ne de paine* ('noble man, valiant and courageous, fearing neither pain nor death'). Porsenna admires his daring and his constancy. As Mucius holds his hand in the fire, the Etruscan king

exclaims: 'O *mervilleuse pasiense!*' ('O admirable endurance!') Later the Epilogue returns to the theme of *pasiense*, which he defines as *forche a souffrir paine et tourmens* ('strength to endure pain and suffering'), and attributes the saving of the city of Rome to this virtue. The motif of protecting a city from an invader is also found in the stories of certain Christian saints. In 451 St Genevieve is said to have saved the city of Paris from Attila and his Huns by prayer and fasting. In the following year, when Attila was marching on Rome, St Leo the Great met him outside the city and persuaded him to turn back. The play about Mucius Scaevola must also have had special meaning for the citizens of Lille and the visitors from nearby towns, since in the unsettled years after the death of Philip the Good (1467), the cities of the region became more vulnerable to attack by competing powers.⁸ Again, the playwright reminds the spectators of the principal distinction between Roman heroes and Christian saints, which is that the former acted out of a desire for worldly glory, while the latter acted in the expectation of heavenly glory. At the same time, however, he seems to imply that the number of Christians willing to suffer for that eternal glory has diminished from the early days of the great martyrs and heroic confessors. The Epilogue, quoting Augustine in *The City of God*, puts this question to the spectators:

Ou est aujourd'hui le crestien
 qui pour l'amour de Dieu souffrist
 son poing ardoir, sy conme fist
 pour sa liberté che paien —
 non pas le poing mais ung seul doit?
 Toutesfois il n'en attendoit
 pour loier que gloire mondaine,
 ne autre chose avoir ne pooit. (435-42)

'Where is today the Christian who for the love of God could bear to burn his fist, as this pagan did for his liberty — not even the fist, but just one finger? And yet he expected nothing in return except worldly glory, nor could he have anything else.'

The playwright, however, has modified and thus changed the meaning of Augustine's question, which was: 'Then who will reckon up his services to the kingdom of heaven, even if for its sake he sacrifices, not a hand, and that of his own volition, but his whole body, which, at the demand of a persecutor, he gives over to the flames?'⁹ Augustine is warning Christians

not to boast of the pain they suffer for the city of God, when pagans are willing to suffer as much if not more for the glory of the earthly city. The playwright, on the other hand, has sensed in his day a cooling of Christian zeal for the kingdom of God and is attempting to inspire, perhaps even to shame the spectators into imitating the virtues of an ancient Roman hero, who exhibited a Christian-like contempt of the body for no other reason than to achieve worldly fame.

The third Roman 'saint's play' is *La captivité d'Orgia*,¹⁰ which the playwright took from Valerius Maximus's chapter on chastity (6.1.ext.2). It concerns the wife of a Gallic chieftain, who was taken prisoner (the wife, that is) by the Romans during the Galatian campaign of Gnaeus Manlius Vulso in 189 B.C. The episode was first narrated by Polybius (frag. 21.38), who claims to have met the woman, whose name was Chiomara. Livy took the story from Polybius, but without giving a name to the chieftain's wife (38 24). Nor is she named by Valerius, who derived his narrative from Livy.¹¹ The Lille playwright, however, names the woman Orgia and her husband Genitis, based apparently on a misreading of Valerius, who like Livy introduces the heroine as *Orgiagontis reguli uxor* (the wife of the chieftain Orgiago). Perhaps in the manuscript of Valerius that the playwright consulted, the scribe had left a space in the middle of this strange name. In any case, he understood Valerius as saying: *Orgia, Gontis reguli uxor*. As a prisoner of the Romans, the chieftain's wife was raped by the centurion assigned to guard her. Later, overcome with greed, the centurion decided to ransom his captive for a large quantity of gold. As the centurion was weighing the gold that was brought by two of the woman's kinsmen, she signalled to the latter to kill him, at which point one of them cut off his head with a sword. Taking the head with her, she returned to her husband and threw it at his feet, explaining that she had been violated and had thus taken revenge on the man who committed the act. Valerius ends his narrative in complete admiration of the woman's virtuous behaviour throughout her ordeal: 'What part of this woman can anyone say was in the power of the enemy but her body? For neither could her will be vanquished nor her chastity taken.'¹²

The fifteenth-century playwright, apparently, was equally impressed by the brave deed of this woman of antiquity and wanted to inspire the spectators to imitate her virtuous conduct. The Prologue opens the play by saying:

Pour les bons a bien exciter,
valent moult nobles fais et dis

en leurs presences rechiter,
qu'on exerceoit ou temps jadis. (1-4)

'Retelling the noble words and deeds of former times is of great value in stimulating good people to be virtuous.'

Then, speaking of Valerius's chapter on chastity, he says:

La est grandement augmenté
le los des femes mariees
qui leurs maris en loiaulté
servent sans villaines pensees. (13-16)

'In it he greatly adds to the praise of married women who serve their husbands in loyalty without unworthy thoughts.'

Orgia herself echoes Valerius's judgment of the incident, when she says immediately after the beheading of Centurion (a proper name in the play):

L'on sara qui je sui.
Mes fais mousteray aujourd'hui,
que se le corps est enforchié
du cruel outrage de lui,
faute n'a mon franc ceur touchié. (352-56)

'People will know who I am. Today I will reveal my actions and show that, if my body was violated by his cruel abuse, no fault has stained my pure heart.'

There are many examples among the saints' lives of virgin martyrs who were threatened with rape, but I have found no case of a recognised saint who was actually violated. Two Old Testament women, Dinah and Tamar, were sexually assaulted, but they disappear from the stories very soon after the assaults, which seem only to serve as catalysts for the disastrous acts of vengeance inflicted afterward by their brothers. In any case, neither woman has ever been considered a saint. Orgia, then, is seen by the playwright as the type of the good and faithful wife, whom he presents to the women spectators as a person worthy of emulation in that regard. The Epilogue, however, addresses the men, enumerating the vices of Centurion, which, he says, they must avoid. And yet the relationship between the ancient Roman story and Christianity is still uppermost in the playwright's mind, for at the close of the play the Epilogue provides an allegorical interpretation of the rape of Orgia :

Premier la dame on peult tenir
pour sainte eglise par figure,
qui souffert a mainte peinture
par Arrius, l'ort hereticque,
et aultres de faulse nature,
contempnans la foy catholicque.
Mais elle, constante et pudicque,
leur a fait la teste trenchier. (443–50)

'First, one may take the lady as a figure of Holy Church, who suffered many a sting by that filthy heretic Arius and other falsifiers, despising the Catholic faith. But she, constant and chaste, cut off their heads.'

The kinsmen who aided Orgia represent saints like Augustine and Jerome who have struggled to combat heresy in all its forms and who in this way have kept the church pure for her spouse. Genitis, who longs for the return of his wife and whom the playwright has made a king, thus represents Christ longing for his bride, the church. Then, after being purified of heresy, the church

est a son mary presentee,
juste, sainte et vraie en tous pas,
erreur devant les piés jettee. (458–60)

'is presented to her husband, incorrupt, holy, and true in every way, casting error at his feet.'

The Roman plays of Lille are not miracle plays, such as one finds associated with some saints; nor can their principal characters intercede for anyone in heaven. But to the extent that saints' lives were intended to provide their audience with exemplars of virtue and good behaviour, these plays can be thought of as analogues of saint's plays. For it was clearly the intention of the playwrights to propose models of Christian conduct to the spectators by dramatising the heroic and virtuous deeds of ancient pagans.

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NOTES

- 1 The full text of the proclamation may be found in Léon Lefebvre *Histoire du théâtre de Lille de ses origines à nos jours*, 5 vols (Lefebvre-Ducrocq, Lille, 1901-07)
1 9. For excerpts see Alan E. Knight 'The Bishop of Fools and His Feasts in

- Lille' in *Festive Drama* edited Meg Twycross (Boydell and Brewer, Cambridge, 1996) 157–66.
2. Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Codex Guelf 9 Blankenburg.
3. Gregory of Tours *Life of the Fathers* translated Edward James (Liverpool University Press, 2nd edition 1991) 1–2.
4. The complete title as written in the manuscript is: *Coment ceulx de Cartaige mirent a tourment inhumain Actilius Regulus; et fut content ledit Actilius de morir pour le bien publicque de Romme et ne volt point faulser son serment.*
5. On the presence of legendary motifs in saint's lives, see Hippolyte Delehaye *Les légendes hagiographiques* (Société des Bollandistes, Brussels, 1955) 12–38.
6. Erving R. Mix Marcus *Atilius Regulus: Exemplum Historicum* (Mouton, The Hague, 1970) 56–62.
7. The complete title is a résumé of the plot: *Coment noble home Mucius Sevola se partit de Rome et fist ung entreprinse en l'ost du roy Porsenne; car comme home immortel cuidoit occire ledit roy, faillit et tua son scribe, dont il brula son poing; et leva ledit roy le siege.*
8. See Alan E. Knight 'The Image of the City in the Processional Theater of Lille'. *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 30 (1988) 153–65.
9. St Augustine *The City of God Against the Pagans* translated William M. Green (Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1963) 5, chapter 18. The Latin reads: *Quis regno caelorum inputaturus est merita sua, si pro illo non unam manum neque hoc sibi ultro faciens, sed persequente aliquo patiens totum flammis corpus inpendit?*
10. The title in the manuscript is: *Coment Centurion romain tenoit en captivité une dame nonmee Orgia et la viola par force, dont laditte Orgia print vengeance terrible dudit Centurion.*
11. I am indebted to Paul B. Harvey, Jr, of the Pennsylvania State University for these details of the origin and transmission of the story.
12. *Huius feminae quid aliud quisquam quam corpus in potestatem hostium venisse dicat? Nam neque animus vinci nec pudicitia capi potuit.*