Text and performance: medieval religious stage quacks and the commedia dell’arte


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Inhaltsverzeichnis

INGRID KASTEN
Transformationen des Religiösen. Performativität und Textualität im geistlichen Spiel .......................................................... VII

I. Das geistliche Spiel als cultural performance

ERIKA FISCHER-LICHTE
Theater und Fest – Anmerkungen zum Verhältnis von Theatralität und Ritualität in den geistlichen Spielen des Mittelalters .......... 3

ECKEHARD SIMON
Geistliche Fastnachtspiele. Zum Grenzbereich zwischen geistlichem und weltlichem Spiel ...................................................... 18

JUTTA EMING
Simultaneität und Verdoppelung. Motivationsstrukturen im geistlichen Spiel ................................................................. 46

GLENN EHRSTINE
Präsenzverwaltung: Die Regulierung des Spielrahmens durch den Proklamator und andere expositores ludi ......................... 63

WERNER RÖCKE
Maria Magdalena und Judas Ischarioth. Das Alsfelder Passionsspiel und die Erlauer Spiele als Experimentierfelder des Bösen und soziokultureller Standards im Spätmittelalter ..................... 80

II. Performativität und Textualität

M. A. KATRITZKY
Text and Performance: Medieval Religious Stage Quacks and the Commedia dell’Arte ....................................................... 99

JODY ENDERS
The Devil in the Flesh of Theater ............................................. 127

CHRISTIAN KIENING
Präsenz – Memoria – Performativität. Überlegungen im Blick auf das Innsbrucker Fronleichnamsspiel ..................................... 139
INGRID KASTEN

Transformationen des Religiösen

Performativität und Textualität im geistlichen Spiel


Die Tagung konnte an die seit einiger Zeit deutlich belebte Diskussion über die Spezifik theateraler Formen in Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit anknüpfen.

1 Das Konzept wurde in Zusammenarbeit von INGRID KASTEN, ERIKA FISCHER-LICHT, Jutta EMING und ELKE KOCH entwickelt.
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Text and Performance

Medieval Religious Stage Quacks and the Commedia dell’Arte


Introduction

Quacks were the least respectable and respected medieval healers. Themselves significant promoters of professional stage spectacle, they are the earliest and most prominent non-biblical characters in religious drama, where they make an increasing contribution from the twelfth century onwards (see Appendix). Situated on a broad continuum seamlessly bridging the gaping chasm between the solidly respectable municipal merchant or medical practitioner and reviled, rootless charlatans and mountebanks, quacks combined, in widely varying proportions, three elements: the medical, the itinerant, and the theatrical. They sold herbs, drugs, patent miracle-cures with closely guarded secret recipes, and cosmetics. Some also prescribed and administered medication and treatment to patients, either for a variety of ailments or as specialists. They were itinerant, in that they went to their customers, rather than waiting for customers to come to them. Some travelled continuously across the length and breadth of Europe, from one annual fair to another, some within their own country or region, others only intermittently, or hardly at all. Above all, quacks were performers. They used theatricality, in its widest possible sense, to attract customers and to promote and advertise their pharmaceuticals and
health care services. Contextualized within the deceitful economy of the marketplace, religious stage quacks provide a profane secular counterpart to the healing Christ of the Gospel miracles. As grotesques and gargoyles proliferated in late medieval Northern church decoration, so comic episodes caricaturing the medical inadequacies, capidity and crude humour of quacks came to dominate its religious drama. Typically, they feature during the *Visitatio sepulchri*, or visit of the three Marys to the tomb of Christ. Here, in an episode known as the merchant scene, an itinerant pedlar, variously characterized as a *mastickár, medicus, mercator* or *unguenterius*, with or without a wife and troupe, sometimes sells the Marys herbs and spices before they go to embalm Christ’s body, and discover the empty tomb.

Religious quack episodes occur most frequently in connection with the three Marys’ need for unguents at the tomb of Christ, and they are often considered primarily in terms of a response to this single liturgical requirement. The present investigation seeks to develop a pan-European holistic approach recognizing that by no means all religious stage quacks are confined to the merchant scene, and accommodating their varied narrative contexts. The fluid boundaries and synergies between the medieval religious stage and secular performance practice are perhaps nowhere more apparent than with respect to dramatic quack episodes. The present article overviews religious quacks as a whole, with a view to highlighting their resonances with the early modern professional stage (see Appendix). Specialists have sought the origins of the commedia dell’arte in a wide range of contexts, not least in classical drama, but never in any systematic way in the quack episodes of the religious stage. To a certain extent, these may even be viewed as precursors of the characteristic stage business, or *lazzi*, of the professional stage. The comic hallmark of the commedia dell’arte performances of Italian secular professional players, *lazzi* were self-contained expandable units of improvised stage business. Featuring stock characters, they were designed to be expanded or contracted in response to specific audiences, and to be transferrable from one play to another with minimal modification. Many centuries before their adoption by professional performing troupes, religious quack episodes pioneered stock roles with predictable verbal, visual and physical comic routines, and the clear potential for improvisation. Although such dramatic strategies foreshadow the professional stage in several significant ways, only one has received wide-

spread recognition. This concerns the stock quack assistant *Rubin*, often identified as a forerunner of the stock stage fools of the itinerant professionals, such as the English troupe’s *Picklehering* or *Jean Potage*, or the Harlequin or *Zanni* of the Italian commedia dell’arte. These stage fools made a major impact as the servant character who joins his master and a young female as one of the three stock roles whose stars rose in the sixteenth century, just as the power of church drama was fading. They dominated professional Italian drama throughout the early modern period as the central commedia dell’arte trio of master, servant and inamorata. One of the most important comic configurations of professional drama, this trio was heralded by the three main stock roles of the merchant scene. These are not “the eternal triangle of the doctor, Rubin and Pusterpalk”, but a far more significant, widespread and rarely identified group, the mixed-gender threesome of the quack couple and their chief assistant.

The merchant scene

The Gospel of John relates that, directly following the Crucifixion, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus wound the body of Christ in linen and spices on that same evening, using a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes provided by Nicodemus. Matthew does not mention spices at all. Luke relates that the Holy women prepared the spices on the Sabbath but observed the traditional day of rest, waiting until early on Sunday morning to take them to the tomb. Only Mark indicates that the spices for embalming Christ’s body were not purchased until after Good Friday and the Sabbath: “when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him”.

Notwithstanding such tenuous New Testament indications, onstage speaking quacks had already established themselves on the religious stage by the eleventh century. They were pioneered in Latin and macaronic mystery plays preserved in texts dating from around 1100 onwards, some of which specify a merchant or spice merchant, and became extremely popular, sometimes dominant non-biblical characters in the *Visitatio sepulchri*, the pivotal scene of medieval Easter observances and Passion performances. Widely regarded as crucial to the emergence of religious theatre from church ceremony, the *Visitatio sepulchri* and
the quacks of its so-called merchant scene have attracted considerable scholarly attention.5 By the fourteenth century, standardization of the merchant scene and its stock cast and comic business was setting in. French, Bohemian and especially German Easter plays increasingly supplemented the lone spice merchant with members of an itinerant troupe. Indisputably, the vast majority of genuine quack troupes were led by men. However, it was profitable to provide, in parallel to the quack’s often very public marketplace practice, a more discrete private consultation facility for female patients.6 Numerous early modern documents refer to male healers who shared their medical practise with a female healer capable of providing such a service, generally their wife. A similar pattern had already marked the activities of some quack troupes of the religious stage.7 Here, as the vernacular increasingly replaced Latin, merchant scenes gradually expanded to dominate a whole section, often featuring a troupe led by a married couple, each actively contributing to the commercial success of the business, and aided by one or more servants. Although religious stage quacks drew on vernacular literature, as well as directly on the orality, performativity and crude humour of the genuine quacks, attempts to prove their precedence in secular plays founder on chronological issues. The unreliable, fragmentary pre-eighteenth-century evidence concerning English ‘hero combat’ mummers’ plays, and numerous surviving texts of ‘Arztspiele’ or secular German carnival farces featuring the doctor and his attendant, all postdate the earliest merchant scenes.8 If the exact connections between the Eng-

5 JABRAIJA VELTRUSKÝ summarizes the most significant French and German merchant scenes in A sacred farce from medieval Bohemia: Masticháck, Ann Arbor 1985, p. 78-117. See also appendix, below.


7 The family-based quack troupe explicitly specified by the texts of some religious quack episodes, including the Sponsat, and featured in certain others whose texts include only a single speaking quack (for example the 1583 Lucerne play), reflects traditional economic practice in the itinerant healthcare industry. As such, its constituent members are neither, as suggested by some specialists, primarily dictated by religious imperative (HELMUT DE BOOR: Die Textgeschichte der lateinischen Oesterfier, Tübingen 1967, p. 389) nor by etic pagan precedent. WARNING (note 3), p. 85, elegantly turns this last theory on its head, suggesting that religious stage quacks provided a foothold for pagan elements to enter Christian drama.


lish plays and religious drama are obscure, it is clear that the surviving German plays draw heavily on religious drama, often freely basing their healers on the merchant scene’s quack couple and their servants.9 Even the French literary sources which get closest to the orality of genuine medieval quack harangues, dramatic monologues of the type pioneered in the mid thirteenth-century by Rutebeuf and Adam de la Halle, postdate the earliest merchant scenes by over a century.10 In possibly the earliest known French secular drama, Halle’s Li jus Adan ou de la Feullée de 1262, a quack boasts of his travels and diagnoses urine.11 MATHIEU’S compelling textual investigation into the interrelationships between the merchant scene and secular literature establishes beyond doubt the dependence of French merchant scenes of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries on Li diz de l’erbe, De la goutte en l’aïne and other quack monologues by Rutebeuf. Less convincing is his attempt to identify Rutebeuf as the secular source of the comic and satirical elements in the merchant scene, and to categorize all earlier religious stage quacks, such as those of the thirteenth-century Prague, Benedikteuvian and Tours merchant scenes, as respectable sedentary ‘urban merchants’ lacking any comic elements.12 Religious stage practice was almost certainly a major influence on the dramatic quack monologues of Rutebeuf, himself author of the religious play Miracle de Théophile. His ‘secular’ monologues are likely to have drawn on his observations of stage quacks as well as genuine charlatans, and his creative and economic impetus may well have come from an awareness of the growing importance of quacks in religious drama. Hard and fast distinctions between the categories of quack and merchant, of the type proposed by MATHIEU, cannot take account of the ways in which these roles were interpreted on the stage. If some specialists suggest that comic elements first entered the merchant scene with the early fourteenth-century Passion Pa-


Latinus, others, more open to non-textual factors, already detect a comic dimension to that of the thirteenth century Tours text. It seems highly probable that well before being explicitly recorded in scripts, at least some religious productions visually exploited the comic possibilities of the quack through costume or gesture. The verbal comic possibilities are richly reflected in many later scripts. Where they are not, as in the merchant scenes of the fifteenth-century Wolfenbüttel and sixteenth-century Hall and Lucerne cycles, this may as often be a prudent response to censorship in the written version, as an accurate reflection of an absence of any comic dimension in the actual performances. In the earlier, largely Latin productions, even performing in the vernacular gave quacks, from those of the eleventh-century Sponsus onwards, hugely comic resonances for an audience used to hearing physicians mock itinerant healers for their lack of Latin.

In the merchant scene's most fully developed versions, the lone quack was replaced with a couple-led troupe, and his essentially brief selling routine to the three Marys was padded out with bawdy comic interchanges of total biblical irrelevance. In a lengthy comic scene of a largely secular nature, the troupe typically prepare and market their products. They puff their skills, barter and banter with the Holy women, crack jokes of a surprisingly robust nature, and conclude by packing up to continue their travels, often going their separate ways after a quarrel between the quack couple. In the fourteenth-century Brandenburg quack troupe, the familiar wife and second servant supplementing the stock roles Meister Ypocrates and his servant Pusterback bear the non-standard names Baptonia and Surgan, and the troupe starts with a comic drinking routine not found elsewhere. Later plays, such as those of Innsbruck (1391), Vienna (1472), Alsfeld and Erlau (fifteenth century) and Bozen (1514) increasingly standardize both the names and comic stage business of their quacks (see Appendix). The merchant scene of the Erlau Easter play, thought to originate from early fifteenth-century Kärnten in Austria, takes up the first 940 of the 1331 verses of the play's third scene. A stage direction at its very beginning, instructing the quacks' senior assistant to announce the merchant scene in prologue form, underlines its optional and improvisational nature. The Erlau merchant scene is particularly informative concerning the troupe's medical products, and the division of labour between the quack couple, Medicus and Medica. Offstage, the couple has young children and a maid, Greedlein. Onstage, they have two male assistants, a senior one called Rubinus and a junior called Pusterpalck. Medicus introduces himself at the beginning of the merchant scene as a skilled master of noble birth from Asia, lately come from Paris. He claims to have brought the troupe's medicines from Milan, Flanders and Arabia, and ends the merchant scene by leaving the stage with Pusterpalck, to "return to Arabia."

When the Erlau play's Medicus gives Rubinus the task of publicising his medical products and services, he starts by describing the troupe's self-manufactured pharmaceuticals and cosmetics. Assuring the crowd that they were brought by his master from distant lands, he offers them eight individually described unguents. Two are purely medical, respectively for healing wounds and physical disabilities, one is an ointment aimed at men with slothful or nagging wives, another at women with physically abusive men, and a fifth restores women's virginity. Three others are cosmetic, namely a face rouge and hair bleach for women, and a hair restorative for men. Rubinus' eulogy includes many of the standbys familiar from quack monologues, handbills and pictures. Tooth extraction, lithotomies and the administration of enemas are all alluded to in a speech which is an early and lengthy example of the quack harangue. It even includes the interpretation of urine, identified by some as the main additional comic theme differentiating the secular dramatic quack epistles of carnival farces from their closely related religious counterparts. Unusually, the Erlau play's merchant scene includes a counterpart to this speech, giving detailed insights into the abilities of the quack's wife, whose appellation, Medica, indicates her active and informed involvement in the family business. She interrupts Rubinus to request the second assistant, Pusterpalck, to enumerate her medical skills. This second monologue is largely disregarded in the older scholarship, or dismissed as a minor addition, a mere bawdy encore of Rubinus' harangue included only for comic repetition. In fact, comparison of the two monologues suggests a genuine division of labour between husband and wife, with the former covering routine surgical operations, including dental care, and the latter offering marriage guidance, coun-

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17 RUPRECHT WIMMER analyses typical textual components of several German merchant scenes in Deutsch und Latein im Osterspiel, Untersuchungen zu den volkssprachlichen Entsprechungs- texten der lateinischen Strehlinder, München 1974, p. 78-104.
19 Here p. 54-5, 75, 80.
20 Here p. 65-6.
21 HAMMER (note 8), p. 251.
selling, and a women's clinic. Toward the end of this merchant scene, Medeca's indignation at Medicus' underselling of his medications to the three Marys leads to a verbally and physically abusive row between the couple. While not missing this opportunity to poke fun at the foolish behaviour of his master, Rubinus defuses the couple's row by persuading Medicus to take a nap. But the disloyal young servant has his own agenda in mind. Instead of following Medicus' instructions to guard his wares while he sleeps, Rubinus uses this opportunity to seduce Medica into abandoning her elderly husband, and elope with him.

The scribes who recorded medieval religious plays rarely wrote out their texts in full. Familiar passages were often indicated in cursory form, and knowledge of the traditional liturgical chants was generally assumed. The Erlau play offers an exceptionally detailed scripted merchant scene featuring many standard elements. Some merchant scenes appear to have been played from pre-existing scripts, others were written specially for one production or performance, yet others seem to have relied, to a greater or lesser extent, on improvisation. Even in the Erlau play, a stage direction at the beginning of its merchant scene confirms that it was regarded as a self-contained play within a play, even that it could, perhaps, be improvised by the players themselves, rather than being fully formally scripted in advance. In the so-called 'Raber Passion', the scripted play thought to have provided the textual basis for the 1514 Bozen Passion cycle, there is no merchant scene at all, and no reference to quacks in the play's text, or the stage plan for the first day. Michael notes, without further explanation, that the stage of the 1514 production's Sunday Resurrection Play required a 'mansio of the Medicus'. Others, reflecting a widespread acceptance that merchant scenes were not permitted inside churches, and that plays such as the Muri Easter Play, which did include quacks, could not be performed within churches, erroneously suggest that the Bozen Passion's Christ the Gardener stands in for the quack scene. Unequ-

23 Suppan/Janota (note 18), p. 66.
24 Here p. 77-81 this exchange is raised for the quarrelling quack couple who tend the injured old female magician of Ain guot Viamacht. Keller (note 8), vol. II, p. 510-11: no. 57.
26 Suppan/Janota (note 18), p. 54: Tunc veniet Rubinus proclamando ludum ("Here comes Rubinus and announces the play").

vocal evidence that the 1514 production did feature a merchant scene, significant for establishing that the absence of quacks from religious dramatic texts does not rule out their presence in performance, has been largely overlooked. This evidence is four quacks listed in the cycle's cast lists as being played by two pairs of relatives, and a fifth player. The quack (Medicus) and his servant (Servus medici) were played by Marx Pader and the cutler Jacob Ballirer. The quack's wife (Uxor medici) was shared by Sigmund Ballirer (who lived on the main square) and the Mullerin der Heil, and her maid (puella medici) was played by "Plasy Paders tochter". Although members of both families took on several other roles too, it is surely no coincidence that the 1514 merchant scene was played by the Paders and the Ballirers, and highly likely that their performances drew heavily on the medical connections suggested by their family names. Barber-surgeons, whether attached to bathhouses ('Bader') or not ('Ballirer') were sedentary health practitioners whose commercial practice overlapped considerably with that of the quack troups who competed directly for their clients. Numerous urban by-laws restrict the activities of itinerant performing quacks. Far from showcasing guest appearances by professional players from visiting troupes, as some have suggested, the merchant scene appears to have represented a welcome opportunity for medical practitioners of a particular community and local citizens close to them to rally against outsiders who commercially threatened them, and to ridicule and undermine the commercial credibility of their itinerant rivals. 21


30 Michael Pader was cast as both Quatras emptor and Simeon propheta, his son as a peasant, and Jorg Pader as Primus miles Heroidis, while Jacob Ballirer was also cast as the servants of Simon and Joseph, and his kinsman Sigmund Ballirer played Rabbi Samuel and John the Baptist.

31 Raber's casting supports the suggestion made by Linke, Unstattige Opposition (note 8), p. 102, that the increasing secularization of such interludes is marked by a notable change of emphasis, from contrast to the perfection of Christ and Heaven, to ridicule of itinerants.
The text of the 'Raber Passion' follows that of the 1511 Hall Passion closely enough to suggest that this may have provided the model for its unscripted merchant scene. 32 The four-strong troupe of the 1511 playtext, the quack Ippocras, his servant Rubein, wife Medica, and her maid Virgo, corresponds to the generically named foursome of the 1514 cast list. As scripted, the 1511 merchant scene is virtually free of scatological or sexual innuendo, portraying the quack couple and their maid and manservant not as an anarchic roving troupe, but as a polite and well-run municipal household. Although for the older scholarship, the simple, unhawardy nature of this scene points to an early version of the merchant scene, hints of the hard-sell patter and robust comic dialogue that are such a dominating feature of some Easter plays gleam through its speeches. In fact, early German versions of the merchant scene feature especially robust humour, and it is not impossible that the 1511 version was sanitized for publication. 33 Although the hugely popular merchant scene is completely absent from the 1514 Bozen Passion cycle, as from most South Tyrolean texts, this does not mean, as some specialists have assumed, that quacks only rarely featured in actual performances of the region. Like the 1511 Hall Passion, Vigil Raber's 1520 Ludus Paschalis features a fully scripted merchant scene. 34 An explanation for the presence of quacks in the 1514 Bozen cast, despite their complete absence from the play text, is offered by the single mention of quacks in yet another South Tyrolean play text. A sentence at the appropriate point in the 1486 text of Lienhard Pfarrkircher's Passion notes, in Latin: "here you may introduce the doctor and his servant, if you wish". 35 This is significant for establishing both that merchant scenes did not exclude mystery plays from being staged within churches, and that the absence of quacks from their texts does not rule out their presence on the stage. Evidently, the bawdy merchant scene, hugely popular with audiences but rather less so with the clergy, could be introduced into specific performances of mystery plays as an optional extra, unscripted in the text. The obvious starting points for tracing the geographic origins and diffusion of merchant scenes and other religious quack scenes are the flawed but magisterial works of Karl Young and Walther Lipphardt. 36 Some five percent of Lipphardt's thousand or so Latin and largely Latin Easter texts note unguents or spices being taken to the tomb of Christ by the three Marys. Of these, only thirteen explicitly feature merchant scenes with one onstage mer-

34 Roloff/Traub/Lipphardt (note 29), vol. III, p. 211-218, 313-316.
36 Young (note 14); Walther Lipphardt: Lateinische Osterfeiern und Oster spiele [= LOO], 9 vols., Berlin 1975-90.

chant, and just two specify more than one merchant. 37 These last, both dating to the thirteenth century, are the Tours Ludus paschali, with two male quacks, and the Benedikttbeurer Easter play, perhaps the earliest text to specify a quack couple in its merchant scene. The theory that the Visitatio sepulchri provided the initial impetus, from which the merchant scene grew quasi-organically from the liturgy, and that it only "gradually abandoned also the Latin of the liturgy in favour of the language of ordinary life", 38 is widely accepted as a convenient truism. Overwhelmingly, female religious stage quacks occur in one well-defined narrow contextual range, that of mixed-gender quack troupes in the merchant scenes of the German or Bohemian Visitatio sepulchri. From the start, male quacks also featured in other narrative contexts, and no serious enquiry into religious stage quacks can ignore their sporadic appearances outside the Visitatio sepulchri (see appendix). Plays unrelated to the Easter story including merchants or medical practitioners unlikely to have been played as quacks, because they were clearly sedentary physicians, surgeons, midwives or apothecaries on the one hand, or not obviously medically active on the other, include numerous late fourteenth-century Italian rappresentazione sacre. 39 Rarely, as in the Limoges Sponsoris or The Blissed Sacrament of 1461, plays of this first category feature indisputable quacks. Secondly, a few quacks occur in plays presenting the Easter story without a merchant scene, either because it has not survived or because they were written or played without one, as with the Magdalene quack scenes of the Benediktbeurer Passion Play or Wiener Passion Fragment. A surprisingly popular feature is a second quack scene before or after the merchant scene, as in the Muri, Pfäffers, Erlau III, Villinger or Semur plays (or even a third, as in the Text of the Berliner (rheinisches) Osterspiel). This third category demonstrates a significant structural element of medieval religious plays, particularly apparent in, for example the Semur Passion, namely the repetition of roles, locations, props and other visual elements through the use of parallel scenes. 40

37 Fifteen texts in LOO specify onstage quacks (one male: LOO nos. 799, 801-4, 804a, 805, 822-3, 825, 827-9; two males: LOO no. 824; or a couple: LOO no. 830).
39 The appendix, below, can only indicate a random few examples for this category, peripheral to the present argument. Obstetricies, or midwives, for example, represent a significant religious comic stock role; see Allarographer Nicoll: Masks, mimes and miracles, studies in the popular theatre, London 1931, p. 184. For other healers in religious plays, see also here p. 186. Midwives feature in eleven of the seventeen French nativity plays analysed by Revol (note 15), p. 530. He also analyses the roles of twenty-four French Easter plays and seven other biblical plays. Only two of each, respectively those of Origny and Tours, and the Sponsorus play and Laon Ordo Joseph, include one or more merchants; see here p. 529, 531.
Although YOUNG, unlike LIPPHARDT, does not restrict his collection entirely to Latin Easter texts, gaining any kind of systematic overview of vernacular and non-Easter quack-related texts is surprisingly unstraightforward, especially as much of the vast secondary literature predates significant recently-discovered sources. Whether or not the monastery of St Martial of Limoges is, as has been claimed, "the true creator of the liturgical drama in France and perhaps in Europe," it seems likely that the religious quack episode was created at St Martial. By 1200, it was spreading from there through France, Spain and further afield. Taken as a whole, its distribution pattern, in Latin and macaronic religious texts, indicates a rapid initial diffusion to Eastern German-speaking Europe during the thirteenth century, complimented by a much slower spread north and southwards, and back into the central German-speaking regions, continuing into the sixteenth century. Quacks became increasingly, though never exclusively, associated with the Visitatio sepulchri, and the merchant scene became more and more important to the Easter play. The mercator tuvenis who shares the stage with the three Marys at the tomb of Christ in Verses pascales de III Máraris, a text of c. 1100 from Vich in Spain, has been identified as "the earliest example of an extra-biblical addition to the Easter Visitatio play", in "the oldest extant scene in the biblical drama", namely the Visitatio sepulchri. The Vich Easter performance is widely regarded as containing "the original literary kernel of the merchant scene", and despite the numerous religious and secular non-Easter quack episodes known to specialists, for many, it is beyond question that the quack episode originated with the dramatic Easter ceremonies. However, indisputably one of the earliest speaking stage quacks is an oil-seller whose script is recorded not in Latin but in the Romance dialect. He is associated not with the Visitatio sepulchri, but featured in the macaronic Sporsus, a mystery play from Limoges based on the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. Because of the Limoges and Vich plays' similar dating, there is no agreement on which is ear-

41 The highly important Melk, Brandenburger and Pfäferser texts, for example, were first published only in 1948, 1986 and 2006. My thanks to Max Siller and Klaus Aman for drawing this last to my attention; SCHRAPPE/PENZEL (note 16); CURT F. BÜHLER & CARL SELMER: The Melk Salbenkränzerspiel, an unpublished middle high German mercator play. In: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America 63 (1948), p. 38-62; KLAUS AMANN: Das Pfäferser Passionsspiel. Edition, Untersuchung, Kommentar, Innsbruck 2006; see also Appendix, below.

42 EDITH A. WRIGHT: The dissemination of the liturgical drama in France, Bryn Mawr, Penn. 1936, p. 31.


50 NICKEL (note 39), p. 186.

51 HARDIN CRAIG: English religious drama of the middle ages, Oxford 1967, p. 34. CRAIG incorrectly suggests that the role of the religious quack became a speaking part only in the fourteenth century.

The dramatic function of religious stage quacks

Specialists, who have mainly concentrated on the merchant scene in this as in other aspects of the study of religious stage quacks, long widely favoured the view that their foremost dramatic function was as a vehicle either for realism of a very literal, naive type, or for bawdy comedy. Earlier generations of historians, shocked that merchant scenes could be so heavily larded with a broad humour based squarely on profanities, scatology and sexual misconduct,
discounted the possibility that they could be a coherent part of any sophisticated dramatic or didactic strategy. Typically, they denounced them as indecent, "loatsome smut", whose "vile filth" was of possible appeal only to the lowest social strata.  

Similar views were far from unknown at the time of the performances themselves. In her twelfth century tract, *Hortus Deliciarum*, the Abbess of Hohenburg, Herrad of Landsberg, concludes that, despite their didactic value, the disorder and fooling around they precipitated justified the prohibition of religious plays.  

In his *Tractatus de praecipuo Dei*, John Hus bitterly regrets his youthful involvement in the "outrage and infamy" of the late fourteenth century religious plays staged inside Prague cathedral.  

The belligerent peasant actors of Eulenspiegel's thirteenth tale, and the subversive, unruly devils of François Rabelais' fictionalized account of François Villon's passion play rehearsal, offer extreme literary examples of the religious stage's potential for ungodly folly.  

Comparable folly was denounced in Martin Luther's detailed critique of the comic elements of Passion and Easter plays:

Und sonnderlich ist das uncristlich, wo man solche narretvendig treyht von der gemyne, da man zu samen kompt Gotts wort zu horen und die schrift zu lernen, wie sichs denn alle zeyt begibt, wo viel zu samen kommen, ob sie gleich zu erst anfanhen von ernsten sachen, doch bald fallen auff leichtfertige, lose, lecherliche teydinge, damit man die zeyt verleuret und bessem verseuemet. Wie demn bisher geschehen ist, das man auffs osterfest cyn nerreesch lecherlich geschwezzt unter die predigt gemengt hat, die schleifferen damit wacker zu machen [...] und mit reymen affenspiel getrieben hat, gleich wie auch mit [...] der passio Christi [...].

Medieval precedents notwithstanding, the disgusted reaction of modern scholars to the obscenity of religious stage quacks is now viewed as unhistorical, and they have long since achieved recognition as one of the more complex products of medieval performance culture. The merchant scene has been re-habilitated within a flourishing literary tradition, and increasingly, non-textual approaches are providing further perspectives, by reclaiming the visual record, and performative aspects of religious plays such as dance, acrobatics and above all music.

While there is no consensus concerning the dramatic function of religious stage quacks, and those outside the Easter context continue to attract little critical attention, a dazzling spectrum of theories attempts to account for the merchant scene’s inclusion in mystery plays. The former frontrunner, that it reflects elements of pre-Christian Germanic pagan folk ritual, although heavily tainted by ideological concerns, still informs suggestions that the merchant scene integrates pagan and Christian aspects of the Easter resurrection festival. In an article first published in 1974, JAKOBSON identifies one episode, of one merchant scene, as the key to their interpretation as burlesque analogues of Christ’s resurrection, namely the mastickar’s restoration to life of the boy Isaac, in the fourteenth century Bohemian ‘Museum fragment’. For him, the quack is the quasi-shamanic star of a scene, combining liturgical and folklore elements grounded in the common substratum of ‘pre-Christian rites’. He suggests that they are intended to burlesque and ridicule the liturgy, to promote in spectators the death-defying risus paschalis or ritual laughter traditionally associated with religious celebrations of the triumph of life over death. Deftly avoiding the central (and insurmountable) dilemma of having to prove a direct, unbroken performative continuity between shamanistic ritual and religious stage quacks, he interprets the merchant scene as saluting Easter “not as a compromise with paganism, but as a Christian tradition in its own right”. This viewpoint has proved extremely influential.60 Others variously promote the merchant scene as a diverting counterbalance to the religious tension of the plays’ biblical content, as social satire, or as a device for drawing spectators into the dramatic action on a personal level.61 Yet another perspective identifies the religious quack episode as a quasi-autonomous secular farce, with origins inspired by literature or popular drama. Some scholars view it as a stepping stone towards artistic freedom, a ‘ready made’ play within a play, even as a “comic carcinoma”.62 They suggest that it was written and perhaps performed not by the amateurs responsible for mystery plays as a whole, but by mountebanks drawing on their own professional stage repertoires, or by

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52 CREIZENACH (note 13), p. 244, 357.
57 JAKOBSON (note 54), p. 681.
58 Published with an English translation by VELTRUSKY, A sacred farce (note 5), p. 333-57.
59 Here p. 330.
itinerant theology students (*clerici vagantes*). The Latin content of many merchant scenes weighs against the authorship of professional quacks, if not students. The castlists of the 1514 Bozen Passion confirm that quack roles, no less than any others, could be assigned to respected members of the local church community. Although variants of this theory still receive sporadic support from some quarters, it is clear that merchant scenes were not acted by genuine performing quacks.

LINKE lucidly explains the theological reasoning behind the comic elements of the Easter quack episode. He plausibly identifies the dramatic function of the merchant scene as the provision of a secular setting, within the biblical story, that serves to heighten the intensity of religious plays’ theologically motivated contrast between profane and spiritual concerns, not by glorifying worldly pleasures, but by ridiculing them. Viewed in this perspective, the merchant scene occupies a significant place in the tradition of *Narratloggeratur* (Folly Literature), in which court or stage fools stand as powerful metaphors for the frailties and temptations of the human condition. Its quacks exemplify human folly by demonstrating concrete examples simultaneously intended as secular entertainment, didactic and religious instruction, and in the medical sense of therapeutic laughter, intended to actively promote healing in its audience. This tradition’s multiple intentions are demonstrated with unusual clarity by a medical treatise of 1610, in which the deeply religious South Tyrolean physician Hippolytus Guarinonius frames, within a moralising context, over thirty descriptions of professional stage business performed by marketplace commedia dell’arte-performing quacks. Several concern scatological comic stage business, or *lazzi*, considerably more explicit than anything offered by the Easter play texts, that evoke the sheer exuberant physicality of quack stage business in a way that no play text can. Thus they provide dramatic *exempa* offering his readers a literal cure for folly, by warning them against the sins and the vices. Despite concerning the textual use of secular dramatic descriptions in a seventeenth century medical treatise, the passage of 1612 in which Guarinonius explicates this intention affords valuable insights into the reasoning behind the use of bawdy quack humour on the late medieval religious stage. In it, Guarinonius robustly admonishes a reader who challenges the comic epi-

sodes and *lazzi* of his treatise of 1610. Drawing parallels with obscene and scatological behaviour described in didactic passages of the Holy Scriptures, he concludes that every time he, Guarinonius, laughs in his book, any reader misguided enough to criticize this literary strategy should weep at his own folly:

```
Der Doctor schreibt das Buch unser lieben frawen zu / unnd beynebens seyn allerley lächerliche unnd kuntzelweige Bossen / wie auch theils abschlueche sachen darinn / etc. Anwort. Kaum ist etwas lächerlicher unnd abschluecher / als dein grosser Unverständ und Narheit. Lieber ist nicht Pontius Pilatus ein abschluecher / falscher Heyd / unnd ver dampelter Richter gewesen? Was macht er aber im mitten deß heiligen Christliche[n] Glaubens? Unnd hat die heilige Sara im Alten Testa-
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The religiously-motivated didactic agenda of the robustly ‘sex ‘n shopping’ orientated comic routines of the mixed-gender quack troups of the religious stage was broadly comparable to that of Guarinonius. In effect, these comic stage quacks were deployed to lure mystery play spectators in as quasi-extras with their sales-pitch. Through them, the churchmen who sponsored and supported these plays aimed to inspire their congregations to recognize and laugh at their own human folly, and to reject it in favour of spiritual redemption. But ultimately, religious quack episodes were so successful and persistent because they worked on many levels. They contrasted the oral rhetoric and physicality of street performers with the literary approach of religious drama, and drew on community, congregational and guild loyalties, and carnivalesque, folkloric, commercial and medical as well as didactic resonances. As pure entertainment, the episode can be enjoyed as a hugely popular quasi-secular attraction that widens the base of spectators for religious plays. It does this by evoking the atmosphere of the earliest, most longstanding and most successful form of commercial promotion, namely the harangues and theatrical shows offered by marketplace quacks. To a certain extent these are parodied in literary forms such as Rutebeut’s mid thirteenth century quack monologues. But self-parody was in any case a traditional component of all but the least sophisticated quack harangues. Marketplace quacks understood that laughter promotes

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66 Hippolytus Guarinonius: *Die Gewol der Verwüstung Menschlichen Geschlechts [...]*, Ingolstadt 1610.


68 **BAKHTIN** (note 10), p. 160.
economic success, by engaging audience attention and encouraging relaxed spending, and they pitched their performances accordingly. As parody, religious quacks worked not by inventing genuine quack rhetoric, but by heightening it. Nor did they rely on wholesale borrowings from ‘secular’ literary quack parodies, transplanted into religious plays with minimal regard for liturgical issues. Genuine medieval quacks created their wide spectrum of performative comic business and monologues within a thriving interdependent literary tradition, that produced texts geared to the didactic and economic agendas of the religious and secular stage, as well as to the robust orality of marketplace rhetoric.

Conclusions

The confinement of religious stage quacks to the merchant scene, and the standardization of its familiar cast and comic business within the Visitatio se-pulchri, was never complete. Rather than as one unique response to the specific liturgical situation of the three Marys at the tomb of Christ, the religious quack episode has a self-contained, improvisational nature reminiscent of the professional stage. It shares this and other characteristics of the transferable popular secular comic stage business or lazzi that are the stock in trade of the commedia dell’arte. However disparate their liturgical contexts, the possibility that the earliest religious quack episodes, and notably those from Vich and Limoges, were independent literary creations, seems remote enough to be completely beyond coincidence. Questions concerning the precise dating or linguistic analysis of the surviving manuscripts are obscured by the fact that many are based, to whatever extent, on significantly earlier texts or performance practice. Although issues of precedence surrounding early stage quacks remain unresolved, it is clear that their development on the medieval religious stage is crucial to an understanding of their impact on literature and drama. Religious stage quacks mark a significant early milestone in the development of the quack harangue and the quack quarrel as literary conventions, and cast long shadows over the figure of the quack in early modern literature. Additionally, they may be viewed as foreshadowing several significant strategies of the professional comic stage. Their three central stock characters, the quack, his wife and their servant, may be compared to the commedia dell’arte stage master-servant-inamorata trio. Their popular comic set-pieces share the characteristic potential of lazzi for improvisation, transferal from one play or dramatic situation to another, and extension or curtailment according to the requirements of individual audiences or sponsors. The comic stage business and stock roles of religious quack episodes deserve recognition as a significant potential source for certain of the most characteristic and popular dramatic strategies and roles of the early professional stage.

Appendix: Chronological overview of some medieval religious stage quacks

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<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>NAME / TYPE</th>
<th>DOCUMENT / LANGUAGE / REFERENCE</th>
<th>QUACKS</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11th-12th cent</td>
<td>Le Sponsus (Mystère des Verges nages et des Verges folles)</td>
<td>Text (30 of 105 verses) [Latin &amp; Romance: YOUNG (note 14), II, p. 362-4]</td>
<td>5x foolish virgin 2M or couples or more than 2 [Mercatores-merchaams]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13th cent</td>
<td>Incipit Ordo paschalis Klosterneuburger OS, nr Wien</td>
<td>Text [Latin: LOO 829]</td>
<td>3x Marys 1M [Specionarius]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1230</td>
<td>Benediktbeurer PS (Carmina Burana) Seckau, nr Knittelfeld, Austria</td>
<td>Text [Latin &amp; German: HARTL, p. 12-23]</td>
<td>M. Majg in house of Simon the Pharisee buys cosmetics / repents / returns to buy unguents Couple [mercator-venditor-chramer-mercator iuvenis / uxor sua]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1230</td>
<td>[&quot;Großes&quot;] Benediktbeurer OS (Carmina Burana) Seckau, nr Knittelfeld</td>
<td>Text [Latin &amp; German: LOO 830]</td>
<td>3x Marys Couple [Apothecarius-mercator iuvenis / User apothecarius]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid 13th cent</td>
<td>Ludus paschali [Tours] Normandy</td>
<td>Text (54 of 315 verses) [Latin: LOO 824]</td>
<td>3x Marys 2M [mercator-mercator iuvenis / alius mercator-Domine]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1250</td>
<td>Kloster Muri OS-Fragmente Swiss (Kanton Aargau or Zurich)</td>
<td>Text, 8 fragments: [Alemannic: MEIER, p. 128-135, 146-4]</td>
<td>2 quack scenes: 1. Pilatus issues quack licence 1M &amp; clients [Institor-vill lieber paltenere / shonen vrouwen, Johannes Chrume, Rülin Stacin] 2. 3x Marys &amp; Antonius 1M [liever paltenere-Institor]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13th cent</td>
<td>Berthold of Regensburg (d.1272)</td>
<td>Sermon</td>
<td>3x Marys identifies servants of merchant scene as devils [Pusterbalk / Lasterbalk]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

69 My thanks to Matthew Peacock for advising on the Latin.
70 EDOUARD HARTL: Das Benediktbeurer Passionsspiel, das St. Galler Passionsspiel, nach den Handschriften herausgegeben, Halle/Saale 1952.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Name / Type</th>
<th>Document / Language</th>
<th>Quacks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Late 13th or 14th century</td>
<td>Gerona, Barcelona</td>
<td>Text [Latin: LOO 822]</td>
<td>3x Marys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14th century</td>
<td>Prague, St George Convent</td>
<td>Text [Latin: LOO 799]</td>
<td>3x Marys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early 14th century</td>
<td>Prague, St George Convent</td>
<td>Text [Latin: LOO 801]</td>
<td>3x Marys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early 14th century</td>
<td>Prague, St George Convent</td>
<td>Text [Latin: LOO 802]</td>
<td>3x Marys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early 14th century</td>
<td>Prague, St George Convent</td>
<td>Text, silent part, v14</td>
<td>3x Marys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early 14th century</td>
<td>Prague, St George Convent</td>
<td>Text [Latin: LOO 804]</td>
<td>3x Marys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early 14th century</td>
<td>Prague, St George Convent</td>
<td>Text [Latin: LOO 804a]</td>
<td>3x Marys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early 14th century</td>
<td>Prague, St George Convent</td>
<td>Text, v7</td>
<td>3x Marys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frankfurter OS-Fragment</td>
<td>14th century</td>
<td>Text, v532vv: v. 279-94</td>
<td>M. Magd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14th century</td>
<td>La Passion du Palatinus France</td>
<td>Text, 1996vv; v1864-1942</td>
<td>3x Marys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1315-17</td>
<td>Ludus paschalis</td>
<td>Origony, St Benoîte Convent, nr St Quentin</td>
<td>1. Text (79 of 261 verses) [Latin &amp; French: LOO 825]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. An account of c. 1312-14 summarizing the convent's Easter ceremonies for the nun Hehisa de Conflans does not note the merchant scene, perhaps introduced by her to this convent [French: Wright (note 42), p. 184-6]</td>
<td></td>
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<th>Name / Type</th>
<th>Document / Language</th>
<th>Quacks</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st half of 14th century</td>
<td>Frankfurter OS-Fragment</td>
<td>Text [Latin &amp; German: JANOTA, 10, p. 422-4]</td>
<td>3x Marys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1340</td>
<td>Quarante Miracles de la Vierge (Cangé MS)</td>
<td>Confrérie Saint Eloi (Goldsmiths' Guild), Paris</td>
<td>1 Miracle of the Virgin; midwife in birth scene [sage femme]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1345-50</td>
<td>Le Mystère Provençal de la Passion (Passion 'Didot')</td>
<td>Provençal: CHABA- NEAU, 19, p. 146-9</td>
<td>3x Marys</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

77 MARIUS SEPET: Origins catholiques du théâtre moderne, Paris 1899.
78 CAMILLE CHABANEAU: Sainte Marie Madeleine dans la littérature provençale, recueil des textes provençaux, Paris 1887.
<table>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14th cent Berlin-thüringisches OS-Fragment</td>
<td>Text, 160v. [Latin &amp; German: Seeßmann, 1829, 1926]</td>
<td>3x Marys Couple &amp; 2nd M &amp; old female client [Mercator: here meyster min arzt-eyme Kunstigen man / Rubinie-liechter min jungere jungenlieber jungenliec seliger knappe iung / min vroue vor Auctorina / eyme alden wibe]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd half of 14th cent Bohemian of Mastichk</td>
<td>Text, 298 lines [Latin &amp; Bohemian: Veltrusky: A sacred farce (note 5), p. 365]</td>
<td>[3x Marys] 3M &amp; 2x clients [medicus / Rubenius / Pustpalk / unnamed Jew &amp; son]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15th cent Early 15th cent Pasion d'Arras</td>
<td>Text, v. 21419-41 [French: Richard]</td>
<td>1M: [apothecary]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1425 Wolfenbütteler OS</td>
<td>Text [Latin &amp; German: Froben (note 70), 60-2]</td>
<td>3x Marys 2M [mercator-mercator iuvenisgude man-ramer-Meister / Robin-leve jungelin]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1440 La Passion Notre Seigneur Seigneur</td>
<td>Text, 4476v: vv. 4112-4263 [French: Gallier]</td>
<td>3x Marys 1M [l'espiecer-Sire]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbey Sainte-Geneviève, Paris</td>
<td>p. 303-10</td>
<td></td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2nd half of 15th cent</td>
<td>La rappresentazione dell’ortolano elenosieni</td>
<td>Text [Italian &amp; Italian: BAFI (note 83), p. 511-36: 327-33]</td>
<td>L’ortolano 3M [primo medico-maestro / secondo medico / terzo medico-reverende magister]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd half of 15th cent</td>
<td>Lübener OS-Fragment</td>
<td>Text [German: see STEEL-MANN (note 78), p. 259-61]</td>
<td>3x Marys 3M &amp; 1F [medicus / Rubin / Pusterbalg / mercatix]</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1486</td>
<td>Jehan Michel (based on Arnozl Gréban, 1452)</td>
<td>Text, 29924v-vv, 29175-29302 [French: MICHAEL, p. 428-30]</td>
<td>Nicodemus buys spices offstage while onstage the widowed cloth-merchant Julye (who also appears in several other scenes) sells Joseph Jesus’s grave-cloth 1F [Jylje, veulfte, mere de l’adolescent-marchande des suaitures]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1491</td>
<td>Egmund nr Utrecht, St Aldebert</td>
<td>Text [Latin: LOO 827]</td>
<td>3x Marys 1M [mercator iuvenis-speciagniarius]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<th>DOCUMENT /LANGUAGE /REFERENCE</th>
<th>QUACKS</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| 1495  | Johan Michel:  
Mystère de la Résurrection de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ | Text [French: ABRAHAMS (note 10); p. 116; MATHEU (note 12), p. 66-7] | 3x Marys & Johanna (Herod’s wife)  
1M [apoticaire-espicier] |
| 1495  | Antonia Pulci (1452-1501)  
La rappresentazione di Santa Guglielma  
Florence, Italy | Text [Italian: BANTI (note 83), p. 537-81; 569-75] | Santa Guglielma cura le puer  
2M [uno medico / uno altro medico] |
| 1496  | Harleem Fragment  
Delft, Netherlands | Single role text [Latin: LOO 828] | 3x Marys  
1M [Pulchius] |
| 16th cent |  |  |  |
| 1500  | Egerer Fronleichnams-spiel  
(Eger, Hungary, formerly Erlau) | Text, vv. 7864-7901 [Latin & German: MILCHSACK²] | 3x Marys  
2M [mercator / Rubin] |
| 1501  | Alsfelder PS  
with additions to 1517 | A. Text, v. 7483-7631; incl. additions for 1517 production by ‘Schreiber C’; Hültscher’s 5 extra speeches for medics, see below, 1517 [Latin & German: JANOTA (note 72), II, p. 96, 98, 100, 201, 841-7, 905] | 3x Marys  
Couple & 2nd M [medicinam magistri-magister Ypocras-meister Ypocras-medicus]  
Vor mercatoris-vor |  |
|       |             | B. Castlist (damaged):  
NO quacks  
B. Plan:  
NO quacks |  |
| 1503  | Le Mystère de Saint Antoine de Viennois  
Briançon, France (copy) | Text: 3966 vv / vv. 1590-2290 [Provençal; GUIL-LAUME, p. 67-83] | A courtier sells St Anthony’s belongings to comic (but non-medical) merchants  
3M [Primus mercator / secundus mercator / tertius mercator-Johan dal Molis] |
| 1504  | St Merisiek  
2M |

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91 GUSTAV MILCHSACK: Egerer Fronleichnams-spiel, Tübingen 1881.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
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<th>DOCUMENT /LANGUAGE /REFERENCE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>c. 1580</td>
<td>Mikołaj de Wilkowski</td>
<td>Text [UDALSKA, p. 177]</td>
<td>3x Marys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&amp;</td>
<td></td>
<td>3M [Ruben]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1583</td>
<td>Renward Cysat (apothecary and 'Stadtscrheiber')</td>
<td>[German: EVANS (note 92), p. 144, 166, 219]</td>
<td>3x Marys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&amp;</td>
<td>Director's notes</td>
<td>1M [Appentegger]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&amp;</td>
<td>Plan (Day 1)</td>
<td>Apotheker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&amp;</td>
<td>Notes (Day 1)</td>
<td>Apotheker / knaben</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&amp;</td>
<td>Cast (Day 1)</td>
<td>Serius / Appothegker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&amp;</td>
<td>Plan (Day 2)</td>
<td>Die Apothegek</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or 1590s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&amp;</td>
<td>Villinger PS</td>
<td>1M [Appenteecker]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&amp;</td>
<td></td>
<td>Day 2: 3x Marys</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&amp;</td>
<td></td>
<td>1M [Appenteecker-Kraemer]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&amp;</td>
<td></td>
<td>B No quacks / apothecary (wrong day or place?)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&amp;</td>
<td></td>
<td>C 3. Die appenteck-6. die appenteck-15. der appentecker</td>
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**JODY ENDERS**

The Devil in the Flesh of Theater

How dangerous was religious theater? Not just as words but as action? Not just as drama on the page but as acts on the stage? If we believe several chroniclers of Metz, something happened in 1485 that offered, quite literally, living proof that medieval theatrical life was very dangerous indeed, albeit not necessarily in the ways that one might expect.

According to the exceptionally loquacious Philippe de Vigneulles, it all happened one fine day when a certain actor, whose name is unknown, returned home after his performance in the city of Bar-le-Duc (about 250 kilometers east of Paris). We happen to know that a play was performed at all for one reason only: the terrible thing that happened afterward. One of the actors, still wearing his devil-suit, apparently proceeded to force himself on his wife:

> Or avint que, en ce meisme tamps, fut juez ung jeux à Bar le Duc, auquelle estoient aultuns hommes pourtant le personnage de dyablez. Et, entre eux, et y olt ung que en son habit voulit avoir la compaignie de sa femme. Et elle le différé, et demandoit qu’il volloit faire; et il lui respondit: ‘Je veult’, dit il, ‘faire le dyable’. Et, quoy que sa femme se sceut deffrance, force luy fut de obéyat.1

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1 La Chronique de Philippe de Vigneulles. Ed. by CHARLES BRUNEAU, 4 vols., Metz 1927-33 (vol. 3), pp. 114-115. Hereafter CPV. Compare with the version that appears in Les Chroniques de la Ville de Metz, recueillies, mises en ordre et publiées pour la première fois. Le Doyen de St. Thibault. – Jean Aubrion. – Philippe de Vigneulles. – Prailloon. – Annales Meas-