11 Medieval Actors and the Invention of Printing in Late Medieval France

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The new invention of printing reached Paris from Germany in 1470. Within a
couple of decades, there were printers and booksellers established in most large French
cities, and by the early sixteenth century Paris and Lyon had become major publishing
centers. The social and cultural effects of the spread of printing are still hotly debated. For
many critics, it led not only to the main religious, scientific, and political developments of
the first half of the sixteenth century, but also to a change in mentality. And, of course, for
some, the arrival of printing marks the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the
Renaissance.

Theater historians are well aware that what is usually called medieval drama was
performed long after the end of the “official” Middle Ages. Much of the best, and best-
known, medieval drama dates from the second half of the fifteenth century and the first
half of the sixteenth. In other words, it overlaps with the spread of printing across Western
Europe. Yet it is arguable that critics have not always paid sufficient attention to the
impact of printing on the drama of this period. On the surface, at least, one might expect
the move from a manuscript culture to a print culture to have had a significant
effect both on the way in which plays of all sorts circulated around a country and on the
manner of their performance. I have been working on the impact of printing on
mystery plays in France, the results of which appear in a recently published book.¹ My

¹ Graham A. Runnalls, Les Mystères Français Imprimés (Paris: Champion, 1999), which
provides further information and evidence for some of the statements below.
research has led me to a number of conclusions, some of which I propose to resume in this article and then extend to two texts, one religious and one comic, not discussed in my book. In particular, I will look at the subject of actors’ rôles and their relation to printed play-texts.

Of the approximately 180 surviving French mystery plays, the majority are preserved only in manuscripts. However, thirty-six have come down to us in printed form, although many of these went through a number of different impressions, resulting in a total of about 125 surviving mystery play editions. The earliest printed mystery plays date from 1484; the majority were printed between 1510 and 1542. However, perhaps significantly, the last mystery play edition was published as late as 1630, well after mystery plays were no longer being performed. However, in order to study the impact of printing on medieval drama, one has to start by looking at play texts before printing arrived—in other words, at play manuscripts.

French mystery play manuscripts were, in several major respects, very different from those that preserved the texts of other medieval French literary genres. Most of the major chansons de geste, romances, lyric poetry, and didactic works survive in numerous manuscripts. Philologists can usually reconstruct the often complicated relationships

between the different manuscripts of these works, and produce detailed stemmas to illustrate the manuscript tradition. In contrast to this situation, French mystery play manuscripts were in almost every case unique. Certainly, today, virtually all of the 150 surviving unprinted mystery play texts are preserved in only one manuscript.³

However, these manuscripts are extremely varied. Their diversity is at least as great as those of the other genres, if not more so. They can be written on large folios or very small narrow ones; they can be of parchment or of paper. They can be richly illuminated, with scores of miniatures, or semi-legible scrawls; they can be copied on one side only of the sheet of paper, or on both sides. The pages can be ruled and text evenly spread out, or the size of writing can vary, as can the number of lines per page. The writing can be in two columns per page or just one. There can be large numbers of stage directions or there can be none: these can be either in French or in Latin, and placed in the margin or in the center of the page. The manuscript can be roughly contemporary with the play’s composition, or much later. A manuscript can contain one play, or two, or six, or twelve, or forty, or seventy-three.

It is possible to group these manuscripts into about seven types⁴ of which the most important are:

(a) The fair copy (known as the original, livre original, or registre). copied

³ There are two notable exceptions to this rule (Greban’s Passion and Millet’s Destruction de Troye), where ten or more manuscripts survive, but these are special cases and can be accounted for. Two others survive in two copies. For full details, see my Mystères Français Imprimés.

⁴ Runnalls, “Toward a Typology of Medieval Play Manuscripts,” 96–113.
up before the performance, containing the full text, with each speech preceded by the name of the appropriate character, and major stage directions.

(b) The actors’ rôles (known as the *rooles, rollets, rollets, or billets*), based on the original, containing all the speeches of just one actor/character. Each speech is preceded by a cue-line, which is usually the last half of the line spoken by another character immediately before the speech in question starts. In French plays, the cue-line often (but far from always) rhymes with the first line of the following speech; this is the so-called *rime mnémonique*. Since French actors’ rôles will be referred to frequently below, a full description will be useful.

The typical rôle consisted of a long narrow strip of paper, the top and bottom of which were attached, by some kind of stapling or pinning device, to two narrow sticks. To begin with, the complete scroll would be wound around the bottom stick. As the text was read or spoken, it would be progressively unwound from the bottom stick and rewound around the

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top stick. The actor could decide how many inches of text were visible at any one time.

The length of the scroll was obviously dependent on the number of lines the actors had to speak. But the size and number of pieces of paper that made up the scroll were determined by the normal size of sheets of paper. Although there was not complete uniformity, generally in late medieval France paper was sold in reams (rames) of 500 feuilles or bifolios, each measuring about forty centimeters by thirty centimeters or just over. Each feuille was folded in half to make two feuillets each measuring about thirty centimeters by twenty centimeters. The feuillet was the normal page size, used for example in most mystery play originaux. For actors’ rôles, the feuillet was folded lengthwise and cut down the middle. Each feuillet thus produced two oblong strips measuring about thirty centimeters by ten centimeters. Rôles were made from a variable number of these ten-centimeter-wide strips, joined together at top and bottom, either by glue or more usually with a thick bodkin or needle, or by zig-zag stitching.

As far as the written text is concerned, the heading of the rôle was simply the name of the character, sometimes followed by the word Incipit. The end of the rôle was marked by the word Explicit. Each line of the actor’s text filled the full width of the ten-centimeter strip. Each strip could usually contain between thirty and forty lines of text, depending obviously on the size of the writing. Each separate speech (réplique) was preceded by the cue-line, which was indented to the right, in order to be clearly visible. The only other

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7 Extremely long rôles could have used several separate scrolls of the type described. But it seems that on some occasions the same page lay-out was copied up in a cahier of folded sheets; see the rôle of St. Barbara in a mystery play performed in the Savoie: Jacques Chocheyras, Le Théâtre Religieux en Savoie au XVI e siècle (Geneva: Droz, 1971), 93–100.
writing which might be found in a rôle was: (a) brief stage directions, often copied into a little box; and (b) little horizontal lines, about an inch long, starting with a flourish, inserted between two lines of text at the left of the column, which usually referred to a more complex stage direction in the producer’s manuscript. For obvious reasons, the text of the rôle was only written on one side of the paper.⁸

Actors’ rôles were usually written up hastily and carelessly. It is generally assumed that they were used only during rehearsals. I do not think it impossible that they were also sometimes used in performance, though there is no hard evidence for this.

(c) After the performance, on a relatively small number of occasions, a final copy of the text was made, based on the original; the purpose of this might simply be to keep a record of the event, or else to present the text as a gift to a patron or person of influence. Usually this type of manuscript was attractive, even luxurious, and often illustrated; it contained the full text of the play, often laid out in double columns, but very few stage directions. It was intended primarily for consultation or private reading, and not meant to be used by actors or producers putting on a performance. Indeed, it would have been impractical for this purpose.

Although several other manuscript types can be identified, these three are the main ones. Most of the surviving mystery play manuscripts are of types a or c. Actors’ rôles,

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⁸ However, if there were only a few lines of the rôle left when the bottom of a thirty-centimeter strip was reached, sometimes the bottom of the scroll was turned over and the few lines were written there, apparently upside down, but in fact in the right direction for the actor winding the scroll back up again “the wrong way.”
which were seen by contemporaries as less important, were normally thrown away after
the performance, whereas the other two types of manuscript were kept. Although a fair
number of rôles have come down to us, their survival has been due more to chance than to
the intentions of their creators or owners.

French printers soon began to show interest in drama as a source of publishable
texts. The commercial motivation clearly sprang from the desire to capitalize on a
successful performance of a play. Most of the earliest editions of mystery plays claim, on
their title pages, that the play has recently been performed to great acclaim. Obviously, if a
printer wanted to publish a play, he had to acquire the manuscript; equally obviously, it
would be a manuscript of type a or c that he would need to get hold of.9

Large numbers of printed plays began to appear, mainly in Paris and Lyon, from
the 1490s onwards. To begin with, they were published, in fine beautifully illustrated folio
volumes, by the most famous printers of the time, Antoine Vérard and Jean Petit in Paris,
Mathieu Husz in Lyon. But gradually they appear to have lost favor with this kind of
publisher and were passed on to printer-publishers who dealt in smaller, less impressive,
but cheaper books, usually in quarto, gothic-character volumes, with a small number of
crude wood-cuts. In this latter format, mystery plays were commercially

9 This manuscript was then heavily marked, annotated, and scribbled over in order to give
the compositor instructions about character choice, page divisions, running titles, etc. It is
known that this preparatory process could virtually destroy the manuscript itself. After the
process of typographic composition it would have been quite illegible or unusable. Since
virtually all mystery play manuscripts were unique, it is not surprising that none of the
actual play manuscripts that were converted into printed editions have survived. The
printing process accounts for the fact that there is virtually no overlap between mystery
plays as manuscripts that have survived and those that have survived as printed editions.
successful for about half a century.  

Print-runs of plays of this sort were normally of about 600 copies, occasionally 1200. However, some of the most popular were frequently reprinted. Jean Michel’s Passion went through over twenty editions between 1486 and 1542. And although most were published in Paris or Lyon, copies are known to have circulated widely, to the furthermost comers of the French-speaking world. Moreover, they were not expensive. Various sources of evidence suggest that in 1530 a medium-length mystery play would have cost between ten and twenty deniers tournois, a good deal less than a laborer or an artisan would earn for one day's work.

Clearly, at least from 1510 onwards, there were large numbers of copies of printed texts available, at a reasonable price, for any group of people—a confraternity, a town council, a group of amateurs—who wanted to put on a performance of a mystery play. Although I have only worked on the evidence relating to mystery plays, I am sure the situation applied to other sorts of drama, especially farces and morality plays.

Before the spread of printing, play texts were rare—often unique, as I have argued. What was the effect of this sudden availability of printed texts, especially with regard to

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11 These genres arguably developed a little later than mystery plays. Certainly, the majority of surviving French farces, sotties, and moralities are preserved in printed editions, not manuscripts. Farces and sotties, since they were much shorter than mystery plays, would undoubtedly have been cheaper. The same printers who published mystery plays also published comic drama (e.g., the Trepperel family in Paris, the Chaussards in Lyon).
performance practice? One possible outcome might have been that preparations for a performance, whether of a short farce or of a long mystery play, would be much more similar to modern methods. In other words, instead of a situation where the producer uses the only complete manuscript original and where each actor is given his own rôle, might we not expect to see each participant in the play—producer and actors—buying (or being given) his own copy? The evidence from our knowledge of French mystery play performances leads to a perhaps unexpected conclusion. It seems that, although most participants could easily have afforded to buy a printed copy of the play they were performing, they did not do so, and that, to a large extent, “medieval” or manuscript-based performances continued well after the spread of printing and, in France at least, until the “end” of medieval drama.

Undoubtedly, the availability of printed editions increased the circulation of play texts. Before, with play manuscripts being so rare and jealously protected, if a provincial town or even a city confraternity wished to put on a play and was unable to get hold of one of these existing play manuscripts, then it had to arrange for a new play to be composed. After the spread of printing, it was easy to buy a copy of an existing play.

However, what seems to have happened is that no printed mystery play corresponded exactly to what people wanted to perform. First, printed editions contained on the whole very few stage directions; in this respect they were much more like manuscript type c than type a. Therefore they could not replace the original, necessary for any performance. More importantly, mystery play performances were always tailored to a particular community and to a particular (newly constructed) theater. It was the organizing group that determined the duration of the play (one day of several hours, or several days),
the number of actors, the size of the theater and the stage, the possible “special effects,” etc. It was always highly unlikely that any one printed edition would correspond exactly to all these local, specific requirements. So a new text had to be commissioned. But it was, after the invention of printing, very often a revision of one of the now easily available printed editions.

There are many examples in France of performances based on adaptations of printed plays. The little town of Bessans, in the Hautes-Alpes, put on a Passion Play several times in the sixteenth century, the last in 1583; the fragments of the manuscript used in 1583 reveal that the text used was an abbreviation of Jean Michel’s *Passion*; indeed, a comparison of textual variants even makes it possible to show which of the twenty editions of Michel’s *Passion* was adapted. Another example is the performance in Paris, around 1530, of a large-scale 30,000-line play based on the life of its eponymous hero, the *Mystère de Saint Denis*. The text was, like many others, a compilation rather than an original work; parts of it are found in much earlier manuscript plays. But more surprisingly, the 1530 manuscript includes, word for word, the complete text of a 3,500-line mystery play, the *Mystère de l’Assumption Nostre Dame*, which had been printed by the Treppererls between 1511 and 1519.

Printing made certain plays easily available in all four corners of France and thus influenced the choice of plays performed. But actual performances were still based on

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manuscripts. An _original_ was still required, even if it was far from “original” but an adaptation of an existing printed play. Therefore, actors’ rôles still had to be copied up and distributed.

In the remaining part of this article I will look at two different sets of manuscript actors’ rôles based indirectly on printed editions, one a mystery play, and one a farce.

The mystery play performance in question is one which at the time of this writing I had only just found out about.\textsuperscript{14} Although it has been established for some time that the Parisian Confrérie de la Passion put on a Passion play in 1539, we have known little about the actual details—the exact dates, the place, the text used, etc. However, my discovery of a fascinating document has enabled me to fill many of the gaps in our information on this performance. The document, which is now in the University Library in Bern, Switzerland,\textsuperscript{15} is a curious one. Within one binding are included three books in French, two printed editions of collections of poems, both probably printed by Antoine Vérard, and one manuscript. The latter contains the _Livre de Raison_ of the author and owner of all the three books, a Parisian silk merchant named Jaques Le Gros. A _livre de raison_ was a kind of semi-official family history, not a journal nor a diary, but a simple


list, with one entry to a page, of the major events in the life of the author’s family, copied up, in chronological order, as the events occurred. It therefore records his marriage in 1525, the births and baptisms of his fifteen children, and the deaths of eleven of them. When Jacques himself died in 1551, his death was noted in a similar manner, but by his eldest son.

However, one event recorded by Jacques Le Gros stands out from all the rest, both in its nature and in the space devoted to it. In 1539, his eldest son, also called Jacques, at the age of ten played three short rôles in the performance of the *Mystère de la Passion* organized by the Confrérie de la Passion in the Hôtel de Flandres. The father proudly describes the performances, the audience, the three rôles acted by his son, the dates when he acted them, and—most significantly, from the stand-point of this article at least—he copies out in full the lines that his son had to learn, in other words the actors’ rôles given to his son. The description of the performance is as follows:

[79v] L’an de grace 1539 on joua le Mistere de la Noste Seigneur en ceste ville de Paris en Hostel de Flandres, ouquel mistere mon filz Jacques Le Gros, agé de dix ans ung mois, le jeudi 19e juing 1539, feste Sainct Gervais, en la presence du roy Nostre Seigneur, la roine, meseigneurs [sic] le dauphin, monseigneur d’Orleans, aultres princes, princesses et seigneurs de France, commanca le jeu du petit Jhesus en l’age de xii ans; et le dimenche xxiië dudit mois, present ladite noblesse, fit la dispute entre les docteurs, fort aggreablec audit seigneur roy et tout le monde. *Laus deo.*

[80r] Item oudit mistere, mondit filz Jacques Le Gros joua par trois jounees ung enfant de l’entree de Jherusalem et y avoit en sondit jeu plusieurs aditions a la louange de Nostre Seigneur, lesquelles aditions sont escriptes au derriere de ce present livre.
Item ouden ledit le Gros joua le jour Saint Laurens x° aoust 1539 l’ame de Hjesus, estant vestu d’une robe de satin blanc enrichie de passementerie d’or de Chipre et frangie d’or de Chippre, nudz piedz, diadesme en sa teste, tenant une croix ou y avoit une enseigne de taffetas rouge a une croix blanche et garnie de frange d’or de Chippre, atout laquelle croix il rompit les enfers et en tira les peres. Et a ceste cause j’è gardé sa robe du petit Dieu, le diadesme, ses patins, la robe d’entree, sa croix et banniere, dont il rompit les enfers. Laus deau [sic].

(In the year of grace 1539 the Mystère de la Passion Nostre Seigneur was performed in this city of Paris at the Hôtel de Flandres, in which mystery play my son Jacques Le Gros, aged ten years and one month, on Thursday, 19 June 1539, the feast of St. Gervais, in the presence of our lord the King, the Queen, my lord the Dauphin, my lord of Orléans, and other princes, princesses, and lords of France, began playing little Jesus at the age of twelve years, and on Sunday the 22nd of the said month, in the presence of the same people, acted in the Dispute between the Doctors, to the great pleasure of the said king and everyone. Praise be to God.

In the said mystery play my son, Jacques Le Gros, on three occasions played one of the children in the Entry to Jerusalem, and in his rôle there were several additions in praise of our Lord. which additions are written at the end of the present book.

In the said mystery play, the said Le Gros, on the feast of St. Laurent on 10 August 1539. played the soul of Jesus, wearing a robe of white satin decorated with Cyprus gold embroidery and with a Cyprus gold hem, barefoot, with a diadem on his head and holding a cross on which there was a standard of red taffeta with a white cross with Cyprus gold hems, with
which cross he destroyed Hell and rescued the fathers. And for this reason,
I have kept the robe he wore as the little God, the diadem, his slippers, the
robe for the entry, and his cross and banner with which he destroyed Hell.
Praise be to God.)

At the end of his *Livre de Raison*, Jacques copied out almost five hundred lines of the
play. These include three different sorts of text: the rôles for the parts his son had to learn;
the full text of several additional scenes, in which his son was involved; and the final
epilogue of the play.

The play performed that year was based on one of the so-called *Passions Cycliques*, which were made up of Jean Michel’s *Passion*, preceded by the first day of
Greban’s *Passion* and followed by the fourth day of the same work. All three of the texts
had been printed many times before 1539. Michel’s *Passion*, as I have already noted, was
the most frequently reprinted of all mystery plays. However, Greban’s *Passion* was never
printed complete. His fourth day was printed separately and given the title of the
*Résurrection*. The first day, preceded by an opening 3,000 lines whose origin is unknown,
was published under the title of the *Conception*. The *Conception*, the *Passion*, and the
*Resurrection* were usually published separately, but one edition dating from 1507 survives
in which the three are treated as if they are one single work.16 The whole play was over
50,000 lines long. All the lines that Jacques Le Gros junior had to learn appear in these

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16 Jean Michel’s *Passion* has been edited by Omer Jodogne, who has also edited one of the
manuscripts of Gréban’s *Passion*; the latter contains the variants of the printed editions of
the fourth day, the *Résurrection*, but not of the *Conception*, which has never been edited.
See Jodogne, ed., *Jean Michel: Le Mystère de la Passion (Angers 1486)* (Gembloux:
Duculot, 1959), and *Le Mystère de la Passion d’Arnoul Gréban*, 2 vols. (Brussels:
Académie Royale de Belgique, 1965–83). The *Passion Cyclique* is the name given by
critics to the composite text which is made up of the *Conception*, the *Passion*, and the
*Résurrection*. 
three texts, except those of the additional scenes and the epilogue.

A comparison between the actors’ rôles copied out by Jacques LeGros and the various editions of the three plays mentioned above reveals that the text used for the 1539 performance was based on the editions of these three plays published in the mid-1530s by Alain Lotrian and Denis Janot. However, the 1539 text corrected some of the errors in the Janot-Lotrian edition, and, when Alain Lotrian published further editions of these plays in 1540–42, he incorporated many of these corrections.17

In a strict sense, of course, these are not true actors’ rôles; they are copies of actors’ rôles. They are not carelessly written out on narrow pieces of paper, joined together at top and bottom by glue or pins or stitches, and scrolled around a stick. However, Jacques Le Gros’s page lay-out does resemble that of genuine rôles and includes the cue-words indented to the right. He also includes numerous examples of the short horizontal line preceded with a small flourish, placed between two lines of text, which, in mystery play manuscripts of type a, as well as in actors’ rôles, refers to a stage direction in the producer’s special copy.18 There seems no reason to doubt that the father copied out, as accurately as he could, the rôles that had been given to his son. He also presumably helped his son rehearse and learn his lines.

I enclose a brief sample from the beginning of the second part of the rôle for Jesus with Doctors.19 The lay-out is meant to resemble as closely as possible the lay-out of the

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17 But none of the additional scenes discussed below.


19 This passage corresponds to Gréban’s Passion, ed. Jodogne, ll. 8,289ff; it will also be found in the (unpublished) gothic editions of the Conception (fol. 81a–83b). The full
The cue-words are in italics. The sign |_______ is used to indicate the short horizontal lines mentioned above.

La deuxiesme journee que fut le dimenche 22 juing 1539.
[The second day, which was Sunday, 22 June 1539.)

a nostre faict.

20 Puisque vers Dieu mon pere ay faict
Devoterment mon oraison,
D’icy m’en vois. Il est saison
Que j’ensuyve sa volonté.

24 Je voy des docteurs a planté
Assemblez pour ung grant mistere.

Il sera bon que je y compere,
Oûyr leurs propositions

28 Et leurs argumentation,
Qui seront de la loy divine.

[91r] vrais serviteurs.
Notables maistres et docteurs,

32 Qui sçavez toute l’escripture,
Que dictes vous de l’adventure
Qui advint puis dix ans en ça,
Au temps que Herodes commença

36 Ses petis enffans decoller?
N’ouÿstes vous point lors parler
D’un enfant né en Bethleêm,

transcription appears in my Romania article (see n. 14, above).
Dont par toute Hyerusalem
Il fut si grande mention?
N’en eut pas revelation
Saint Symeon et vray example,
Quant en ses bras le tint au temple,
Et le prescha publicquement
Qu’il estoit Christus proprement,
Venu pour raison et justice?
Et de Anne aussi la prophetisse
Vous souvient il point qu’elle dict?
[Pensez sur ce point ung petit
Et vous trouverés quelque chose.

maintenons nous.

Et, messeigneurs, que dictes vous
D’une tresholdte prophetie
Que mect, se me semble, Ysaye,
Qui au chappitre septiesme est.

Ecce virgo concipiet
Et pariet. Et cetera.

Dict il pas que le temps sera
Q’une vierge en faict triumphant
Doit concepvoir ung bel enffant
Et l’enffanter sans fraction
Ne chamelle operation?
(... [we will attend] to our business.
Since I have now prayed to God in true devotion, I shall leave here. It is
time for me to do God’s will. I can see many doctors assembled because of
a great mystery. It will be good for me to appear there, to listen to their
propositions and arguments, which will be about divine law.
... [God has revealed the fact to some of his] true servants.
Famous masters and doctors, who know all the scriptures, what do you say
about the event that occurred ten years ago, at the time when Herod began
to behead his little children? Did you not then hear people speak of a child
born in Bethlehem, about whom such great discussion took place
throughout Jerusalem? Did not St. Simeon have a revelation and true
example of him, when he held him in his arms in the Temple, and did he
not preach publicly that this was truly Christ, come for reason and justice?
And do you remember what Anne, the prophetess, said? Think a little about
this point and you will find something.
... we insist [on this].
And, my lords, what do you say about a very famous prophecy which I
think Isaiah puts in his seventh chapter: Ecce virgo concipiet et pariet. Et
cetera. Does he not say that the time will come when a virgin must
triumphantly conceive a fine child, and give birth to him without rupture or
carnal act?)
In fact, as far as the present investigation is concerned, the other two types of text
copied out by Jacques Le Gros senior are even more useful than the rôles in that they
enable one to see more clearly how printed editions were used in performances.

Why should Jacques Le Gros have copied out the words his son had to learn in two
different forms—i.e., some in the form of actors’ rôles and others in the form of complete
scenes? The answer is that some of these passages were considered by Jacques Le Gros to
be “aditions.” The first, headed Adition a l’entree de Jherusalem. Abel enfant que joua
ledit Le Gros, is followed by a cue-word and a thirty-line monologue for Abel, ending
Aultre adition jouee le jour de la cene par deux enffans estans avec Zachee pere de famille, desquelz Jacques Legros joua Abel premier.

[Another addition performed on the day of the Last Supper by two children with Zachee the father of whom Jacques Le Gros played Abel the first child.]

Abel premier enffant

Sire, il fault bien a ce soupper

Convýer Jhesus, le prophette,

Et ses apostres, pour la feste

Sollempnizer en ce beau lieu.

Benjamin deuxiesme

Jhesus Christ est le filz de Dieu,

Que de bon cueur debvons servir,

Tant que sa grace desservir

Nous puissons en ce mortel monde.

Abel

En Jhesus toute grace habonde,

Quant de Jhesus tiens mon devis.

Quant je le voy, il m’est advis

Que mon cueur est plain de liesse.
Zachee
Enffans servez Jhesus sans cesse
De couraige doux et humain.

Abel
368 Seigneur, nous y tiendrons la main,
Mon frere et moy, ne t’en soucie.
Puisqu’il est roy, le Messie,
[101r Nous devons estre ses amys,
372 Maulgré les Juifz ses ennemys,
Et nous deu on le chef coupper.

Tubal
Il nous fault penser du soupper,
Pour menger l’azime ce soir.

Zachee
376 Tubal . . , etc.\textsuperscript{20}

( . . . [Jesus does not want to spend time] doing this.

\textit{Abel first child}: We must invite Jesus the prophet and his disciples to this supper, in order to solemnize the feast in this fine place.

\textit{Benjamin second child}: Jesus Christ is the son of God, whom we must serve whole-heartedly, so that we can merit his grace in this mortal world.

\textit{Abel}: All grace abounds in Jesus, when I receive my intentions from Jesus.
When I see him, I think my heart is full of joy.

\textsuperscript{20}This passage is to be inserted between lines 17,877 and 17,878 of Jean Michel’s \textit{Passion} (ed. Jodogne). The cue-word \textit{occuper} is the last word of line 17,877.
Zachee: Children, serve Jesus unceasingly with a gentle and kindly heart.

Abel: My lord, we will do our best, my brother and I, don’t you worry. Since he is the King, the Messiah, we must be his friends, in spite of his enemies the Jews, even if our heads were to be cut off.

Tubal: We must think about supper, to eat our unleavened bread this evening.

Zachee: Tubal, etc.)

Jacques Le Gros is right to call some of the passages he has copied out additions, since they do not appear in any printed edition of the Passion Cyclique. The Confrères de la Passion clearly used the three Janot-Lotrian printed editions to provide them with their base text; but they equally obviously decided to incorporate a number of additions into the version they performed in 1539. Some of these additions affected the scenes in which the son of Jacques Le Gros had to appear.

But, even so, why copy some of the son’s lines out as one actor’s rôles and others as complete scenes? A clue to the answer lies in the last word transcribed in line 376 above: “etc.,” which marks the point where the interpolation ends and the scene performed in 1539 reverted to the text of the printed edition. The best explanation for Jacques Le Gros referring to the printed edition in this way is that he had a copy of it himself and did not need to write out any more.

Where the words that his son had to learn appeared in the printed edition, he simply copied out the lines his son had to learn. The lad could learn these at home, with his father’s help, using the cue lines and consulting the full printed edition to get the dramatic context of the speeches. However, when his son’s lines came in an interpolation, the printed edition would not help; he therefore needed the full scene to provide the dramatic context and the cuewords. In these cases, the father was able later to copy into
his Livre de Raison the full text of the additional scenes, but providing a reference to the base text at the end of each interpolation.

The picture that emerges from this evidence is of a performance based on a combination of a printed edition and several manuscripts. The base text—50,000 lines—was provided by an easily available printed edition. This particular performance, however, used an adaptation of the base text, but probably a superficial one. The base text would have needed to be divided up into twenty-five to thirty *journees*, each of which would require brief prologues and epilogues, and there were obviously a number of additions and possibly some cuts. It is, in theory, possible that the *original* used by the organizers was a combination of the printed edition itself and a number of manuscript additions. However, this seems unlikely, given that the producer needed a copy of the text with appropriate stage directions—in other words, a manuscript *original*. Either way, the actors were all given their rôles, copied out in the traditional way. Manuscripts of the newly interpolated scenes were also written out and distributed, but in the format of an *original*.

The second text which brings together a printed addition and a manuscript actor’s rôle could hardly be more different from the 1539 Passion Play. It is a short, inconsequential farce, usually known as the *Farce du Débat de la Nourrice la Chambrière*. The only known surviving copy of the printed edition of this farce is now in the British Library, one of a famous collection of sixty-four short comic plays which includes forty-seven farces and some short mystery plays, moralities, sotties, and “sermons joyeux.” This is one the three main collections of French farces, known to

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21 This figure is based on a comparison between the reconstructed complete base text and the dates when the passages copied by Jacques Le Gros were performed.

French scholars as the “Recueil du British Museum” or the “Recueil de Londres.” A modern, though not very satisfactory, edition of this collection was published by Anatole de Montaiglon in 1854 in the first three volumes of Viollet-Le-Duc’s *Ancien Théâtre François.* As far as I am aware, no other modern edition of the *Débat de la Nourrice et la Chambrière* has yet appeared. A facsimile reprint of the collection was published in 1970.

All the plays in the collection are in the narrow oblong “format agenda” (28.6 x 8 centimeters), usually associated with popular theatrical texts. One of the explanations for this unusual format is that the eight-syllable line, which was standard in comic drama, could easily be contained within half the width of the normal page. The British Library acquired the volume in 1845; it had apparently been found in a German attic. It is believed that the sixty-four texts had been bought in the late fifteenth-century by a German enthusiast, who had them all bound together within one parchment cover. The publishers of several of these plays remain anonymous, but those that do have a date and an address to show that they were published by several different printers, including Jean Cantarel in Lyon (1532–50), Pierre Sergent in Paris (1532–47), Jean Le Prest in Rouen (1542–49), and Nicolas Chrestien in Paris (1547–57). These dates would suggest that all the farces were printed between 1532 and 1559. However, it is certain that some, at least, were re-impressions of plays first published much earlier. Many have on their title page the expression “Farce . . . nouvellement imprimée . . .” which is a clear statement that it is a second or later edition. Moreover, three of the printers operated in workshops that they

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had inherited from predecessors who were famous for printing comic drama earlier in the century. For example, Nicolas Chrestien was a successor of Jean Trepperel (1505–11), and Jean Cantarel had taken over from Barnabé Chaussard (1515–27).25

The Débat is one of the anonymous editions in the collection, but it is probable, both for typographical and other reasons, that it was a text printed in Lyon by Jean Cantarel, but whose first edition was much earlier. The play, just 357 octosyllables long, involves three characters, a chambermaid, a wet-nurse, and a man (named Johannes in the printed text, though no name is found in the rôle). The action is extremely simple. The two women get involved in a slanging match, primarily over the respective morality of each individual and her chosen profession. A man, Johannes, appears and at first enjoys watching their argument from a distance. When the dispute becomes physically violent, he urges the participants on; then, pretending to be a sergent (a policeman), he tries to arrest them. However, the women suddenly bury the hatchet and turn on Johannes, who eventually gives up his attempt to stop them. The play ends on a note of reconciliation, in a drinking scene.

The actors’ rôles related to this play are among those that I published in an article in 1986–87 in the review Pluteus.26 The Archives de l’Etat in Fribourg, Switzerland, under the shelf-marks Fonds Aebischer Lit. 1 and Lit. 1 bis, possess two sets of over one hundred fragments of paper which had been used to stiffen the binding of a land register of the town of Saint-Aubin-en-Vully dating from 1515–18. It was Paul Aebischer who discovered these fragments in the early 1920s. The paper used to make the covers, obviously considered to be of no importance and thus discarded, had been cut up


26 Runnalls, “The Medieval Actors’ rôles found in the Fribourg Archives,” 5–68.
into lots of little pieces, the largest being about thirty centimeters long by ten to twelve centimeters wide, though many were very much smaller. These had then been glued together to form the stuffing of the *plats*. Aebischer took the binding apart and found that most of these pieces of paper had writing on them; they included letters in Italian, scraps of accounts, pharmaceutical recipes in Latin, French, and dialect, and a number of worthless sonnets and moral precepts. But they also included a number of fragments of play texts.

Initially, Aebischer’s interest was purely linguistic. He had been looking for examples of the local patois; and, indeed, many of the fragments were in a Franco-Provençal dialect. Over the next few years, he published several of these fragments, including the Franco-Provençal plays, three complete French farces, and a few Actors’ rôles. These articles are well known to scholars in the field; the complete plays he edited have since figured in all the inventories of French comic drama. However, when I went to Fribourg in 1985 as part of a project to examine as many surviving medieval French play manuscripts as possible, I discovered that Aebischer had failed to publish a substantial number of the play fragments in the collection. It would appear that he studied and edited only the largest and most legible fragments and, in particular, those from which he could reconstruct complete texts. There remained a number of pieces of paper which were often virtually illegible and mostly very small, but which clearly had play texts written on them. The transcription of these fragments, followed by an exercise rather like a jig-saw puzzle, enabled me to come up with fragments of seven

plays. One of these, different from the rest, was in fact part of a printed edition. The rest were manuscript actors’ rôles. I was able to identify two of these texts, one the *Passion d’Arras*, and the other the *Farce du Débat de la Nourrice*.

What is particularly interesting in both of these cases is that the rôles of two different actor-characters in the same play have survived. Moreover, in the *Débat de la Nourrice*, the two rôles are virtually complete; the chamber-maid has 170 lines and Johannes has 110 lines, in a 357-line play for three characters. Given that two-thirds of the play has survived in the form of these rôles, identification of the play was easy. Moreover, in scenes where the two characters address each other, the rôles overlap. The last words of Johannes’s speeches become the cue-words for the Chambrière’s, and vice versa.

The reason why the two rôles are not totally complete is that the top and bottom of each of the several strips of paper making up the complete scroll have been cut away. I am sure that the reason for this is that the person making the cover for the binding did not want to keep the joins between the various strips, since these were probably made with a thick bodkin or with zig-zag stitching, and were thus too bulky to be inserted inside the cover.

The text of the two rôles is virtually identical to that of the printed text; most differences are superficial, due either to careless spelling (for example, omitting final –s of plurals) or a dialectal variant. There are six cases where a word is different, one case where four lines are omitted, and one case where a réplique is given to a different character. One can therefore confidently state that there is a very close relationship between the printed edition and the actors’ rôles.

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28 There are fragments of the rôles of Notre Dame and of Baltasar, one of the Three Kings. Some, but not all, of their lines are identical to lines in the *Passion d’Arras*. 
But what is the nature of that relationship, both in terms of chronology and geography? The rôles themselves, though not dated precisely, must be older than the date of document whose binding they helped to make up—i.e., 1515–18. On linguistic grounds, Aebischer concluded that the fragments had been copied in Vevey shortly before 1520. My own examination of the few surviving watermarks led to a similar conclusion; the paper was probably made in Sion between 1490 and 1520. The edition of the farce in the British Library collection, though anonymous, was almost certainly published later than this. However, as I have suggested, the surviving edition of the Débat was almost certainly not the first. There is a strong possibility that an earlier edition preceded the copying out of the two rôles.\(^2^9\)

I would argue therefore that the Débat provides a second case of a play performance based on a printed text. Lyon, not Paris, was the main printing center for the Southeast of France and for the areas now known as French-speaking Switzerland, around the Lake Geneva. A farce printed in Lyon could easily make its way as far as Vevey. Another factor that strengthens this hypothesis is the virtual identity between the two versions of the play (where they overlap). Manuscript play texts are inherently unstable. By that I mean that if a play passes through several manuscript copies, the last form is often noticeably different from the first. The close resemblance between our two texts can be accounted for by only one of two explanations. Either the printed edition was based on the manuscript (original) of the play on which the rôles were based; or else the original (and therefore the performance at which it was used) was based on the printed edition. The

\(^2^9\) The fact that the printed editions in the British Library collection do not necessarily contain the first versions of the plays in question was demonstrated by Eugénie Droz, who showed that some of the farces and sotties published by Jean Trepperel in Paris between 1505 and 1511 were already over thirty years old (Le Recueil: Les Sotties [Paris: Droz, 1935]).
weight of argument seems to favor the latter explanation.

However, it is also worth noting that the format of the printed edition, the narrow oblong “format agenda” measuring 28.6 x 8 centimeters, is very similar to that of the sheets of paper that make up the actors’ rôles. As I have mentioned above, this printing format was often used for comic drama-farces, moralities, and sotties. It could well be that the original for the performance was the printed edition itself and that no manuscript version was copied out.

Although the two plays discussed above—a massive Passion Play and a brief farce—could hardly be more dissimilar in terms of genre, content, size, and place of performance, they obviously have a number of factors in common. Both illustrate my claim that, during the first half of the sixteenth century, by which time printing was well established, manuscript texts still played an important part in play performances. On many occasions, printed editions were reconverted into manuscripts to create a new original, and actors still needed to be given their own rôles for learning their parts and for rehearsals. In spite of the availability and low price of printed play texts, actors and other participants in plays did not buy their own copies but continued to rely on hand-written material. The existence of printed plays did, however, influence play performances in one major way. Printed editions circulated around the country much more freely than manuscripts, and would-be play organizers were able to use one of them rather than commission a new text. Printed plays could thus be used in two ways. On some occasions, the organizers paid a scribe to copy out a manuscript version of a printed text, sometimes, but not always, with considerable revisions and adding the essential stage directions. On other occasions, the printed edition itself became the original; but even when this happened, the organizers still had to use the traditional manuscript actors’ rôles. However, it seems that using a printed edition itself as the original was more likely in the case of a
short play, like a farce, which had less need for elaborate stage directions. In the case of complex mystery plays, the printed editions, which contained very few stage directions, would not have been satisfactory.

Printing manifestly affected the practice of medieval play performances in France, but less than one might have thought and in unexpected ways. Perhaps its least obvious, but most damaging, result was that it made the composition of new plays less necessary. Indeed, it is arguable that the spread of printing in France led to the death of mystery plays as a creative genre. With plenty of copies of printed editions of the standard texts, like the Passion Plays and the main saints’ lives, easily available, why should the organizers of a performance go to the trouble of commissioning an original play?30


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30 [Professor Runnalls indicated that he wished to consider this and other questions in a further article.—Ed.] Many mystery plays were already compilations and expansions of earlier plays. When was the last original French mystery play composed? Arguably, the last completely original Passion Play dates from about 1450, even though Passion Play performances continued for another century at least.