

THE PASSION OF OCCITAN

Wendy Pfeffer

In 1886, Petit de Julleville (t. 2, 40) first called attention to a Passion fragment in a manuscript now in Paris (BnF nouv. acq 462), a text known as the *Passion d'Auvergne*. The nineteenth-century scholar was more interested in French medieval theater than Occitan, but he is still cited by French scholars, notably for his chronology of medieval productions of plays. Runnalls has studied and edited this play, presented in Montferrand, a city with strong administrative ties to the Parisian court (Runnalls, "Théâtre à Montferrand" 468). The Passion play was composed in French, with a lot of Auvergnat influence on this language (Dauzat 244). Inserted into this French play, on pages written by a second hand, is an interlude, intended as an insertion in the production, perhaps to lengthen performance time.¹ Where this insertion would come in the production is clearly marked. Furthermore, the hand that copied the insertion and added the production notes as to where the insertion should be placed appears to have dated his effort: 1477 (Dauzat 245). Runnalls is convinced that this handwritten date, aligned with the water marks on the paper and the municipal records, documents a performance of this play in Montferrand in that year (see ed. 31-41). Rousse argues that the author labored to fit the insertion into the general tenor of the mystery, albeit in very artificial fashion (*Scène et tréteaux* 298).

In this inserted sketch, we see Simon the Pharisee preparing to be the good host. He sends his servants Maulbec and Mallegorge out for food (Dauzat 246, ll. 6-7; Runnalls ed. ll. 1289-1291). Simon names his servants in his speech, and we know these are comic figures from their names, "bad beak" and "bad throat"—

¹ "On a pris le manuscrit d'une version plus ancienne de la troisième journée, mais on l'a trouvé un peu court; pour l'étoffer, on a commandé trois scènes supplémentaires" one of which is the sketch of interest here (Runnalls ed. 54).

both names connect to eating (see Longtin 346 for a brief discussion of names such as these). The two head out, taking their hunting dogs with them. Medieval theater used fresh bread as a prop, and I have the sense that live dogs were used for the scene, that the setting is, as a result, somewhat noisy. The region of Auvergne is insulted, as Mallegorge relates that he has hunted all over the world, in Normandy, Poitou, France and Brittany; only here in Auvergne is there nothing to catch (Dauzat ll. 50-58, Runnalls ed. ll. 1332-1341). Maulbec assures his companion that there are animals to catch, one must just wait for the right moment and use the right language, which is Occitan. The two hunters spot something, an animal carrying a cage filled with birds and fish (sic, Dauzat ll. 102-3; Runnalls ed. ll. 1384-85, “vune cage / pleine d’oeseaulx et de poissons!”), an animal they succeed in catching. The beast, capable of speech, identifies itself as Mallegeype. Dauzat sees this personal name as coming from *mala guespa* (257), so we can expect this character either to be wild or stinging, like a wasp. All the lines spoken by this character are in Occitan (albeit somewhat contaminated by French, Runnalls ed. 57, referring to Dauzat’s study of the passage, 243-64), an Occitan passage in the midst of this middle French play.

Mallegeype relates his travels throughout the world, and how he would work to heat kitchen ovens if it would save his skin (Dauzat ll. 165-166; Runnalls ll. 1447-48). He offers to Maulbec and Mallegorge the contents of his baskets, filled with foodstuffs. The whole description is in Occitan, technically in Auvergnat, with French touches:

Yo porte ycy dau peysso
Et venaso qu’ès de sazo;
Lebres y ay, renars, counils,
Que l’on pré bé sens avec chis.
Par lous percuraires porte bramas;
Par lous advocas de las carpas;
Gendarmas voulont lous seighours;
Maquarels mangont lous flaitadours;
Troictas et perchas lous gentilshons;
L’elisse ame lous saulmons.
De ranas ay prou par lous paubres.

(Runnalls ed. ll. 1460-1470)

I bring here fish
 And venison of the season
 Hares I have, foxes, rabbits
 That one takes with a grain of salt.
 For procurers I have bream;
 For lawyers, carp;
 Lords want gendarmes²
 Flatterers eat mackerel
 Trout and perch [for] gentlemen
 The church likes salmon
 Frogs have I for the poor.

We must imagine an actor costumed so as to appear animal-like, playing a beast trying to sell its wares. I like the detail that Mallegeype has a fish appropriate for each type of individual: lawyers will want carp; gentlemen will want trout or perch, a somewhat more “delicate” fish. He has frogs for the poor. There is no class omitted from this list of consumers.³

² Dauzat suggested that “gendarma” referred to a kind of fish (256), perhaps sour herring (a usage attested in the late nineteenth century: <<http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/gendarme>>). In contemporary French, “gendarme” can refer to a kind of sausage, known as a landjaeger sausage: <http://www.granddictionnaire.com/btml/fra/r_motclef/index800_1.asp> s.v. gendarme.

³ There exists a late fifteenth-century text in German that compares certain fish to various members of society, a text which begins “Diß ist eyn schympfliche gleychnyß der vische.” In translation, the brief text reads as follows:

Item a stickleback is a king. A fresh-run salmon a lord. A carp a knave. A pike a robber. A barbel a tailor. An eel a trickster. A nose a scribe. A roach a cat. A dace a bastard. A perch a knight. A ruffe a goldsmith. A lampern a child. A gudgeon a virgin. A miller’s thumb a horse nail. A minnow a grocer. A bitterling the grocer’s helper. A brook lamprey a piper. A trout a forester. A grayling a count of the Rhine. A crayfish a grave digger. A spined loach a watchman. A burbot a thief. A bleak a launderer (Hoffmann, *Fishers’ Craft* 97).

The comparisons in this text relate the German name of each fish to related words in German or relate the appearance of the fish to the medieval occupation (see Hoffman, 109-110). Though not a critique on the

Maulbec and Mallegorge invite Mallegeype to join them, so that they can bring his foodstuffs back to their master Simon and thereby feed whatever guests might arrive, but Mallegeype leaves the stage at this point.

Runnalls observes that the scene is obviously filled with humor and satire (ed. 285; see also Bossuat, 333). In fact, Runnalls sees Mallegeype's speech as a commentary on the political situation in 1477 Montferrand, which did not please everyone (ed. 285). Lewicka uses stronger language to describe this scene: "The valets represent royal officers who pillage without mercy the people, incarnated by Maleguêpe" (355). She continues, "The segment, unique in its form, is a violent and barely disguised attack on the French lords ... and against those who serve those lords at the expense of the populace" (Lewicka 356).

Why insert a bit of Occitan in the midst of a middle French play? The Occitan is clearly used to mark "foreignness"—it is the language to use to trap wild animals in the Auvergne. That the "animal" trapped speaks Occitan confirms this. There's the clear intercomprehensibility of the two languages, perhaps as true for the audience as for those on stage—why else have the characters so clearly code-switch? As Runnalls notes, "Mallegueype's lines are filled with jokes and pokes which would have been, naturally, incomprehensible to audience members who did not speak the local language" ("Théâtre à Montferrand" 482). And at no point in the scene is there any paraphrase of the Occitan lines—to understand the scene requires an understanding of Occitan.

The three characters involved all have something of the comedic to them. The appearance of Mallegeype reminds me of the appearance of Papageno on stage for the first time in *The Magic Flute* (Runnalls made the same observation, ed. 285). Here's this strangely dressed personage, capable of speech, who provokes reaction simply by appearing on stage, which is what happens here. Michel Rousse describes the comic interlude in these terms: "He brings a complete break which is marked by his costume, his tone, his language, his gestures, his bearing. Where an orthodox religious teaching had dominated, he introduces liberty and

same order as the Occitan text, the German burlesque, as Hoffmann dubs it, confirms that such rhetorical games were common at the end of the medieval period.

exuberance” (*Scène et tréteaux* 288), an apt description of the change of spirit that occurs in this scene.

The parallels between Mallegeype and Papageno go beyond physical appearance. Papageno serves as comic relief, a contrast to the serious quest of *The Magic Flute*'s hero Tamino. Just as the theme of Mozart's opera is not catching birds with a flute, but the pursuit of true love and Masonic ideals, so too, the *Passion of Auvergne* seeks to educate its audience about the final days of Jesus Christ, a performance of six or seven days over a series of consecutive Sundays (Runnalls, *La Passion*, 17). How to fill food baskets with fish and venison is not the message the author seeks to deliver; he was probably hoping that the lighter moment would allow his audience to appreciate even more the treacherous behavior of Judas in the scenes to come.

In this *Passion*, Occitan is used for comic effect; it is an Occitan-speaking character who describes a number of foods and connects these different foods with different social categories; who, through the use of food, criticizes his contemporaries. That an author would want to make such distinctions is worthy of note. And there is surely an element of satire in the choice of fishes to go with different social states, “fairly acerbic criticism...appreciated especially by the lower classes” (Runnalls, “Théâtre à Montferrand”482).

A further explanation for the use of Occitan is that it served to localize the performance for the medieval audience. Even as I would like to valorize the use of Occitan in this play, in truth the language is represented as foreign, strange, comic—a contrast to the serious topic of the *Passion* performance. We see, in this insert, a comic depreciation of the local language and of speakers of Occitan. Some sixty years before the Edict of Villers-Cotterêts (1539), Occitan has already been displaced in Montferrand. The language of culture and of entertainment is French; Occitan exists for comic relief.

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Wendy Pfeffer is Professor of French at the University of Louisville. She has edited Old French texts, e.g. with Gloria Fiero, *Three Medieval Views of Women* (Yale UP, 1989); with Eglal Doss Quinby and others, *Songs of the Women Trouvères* (Yale UP, 2001) and is known for her work in paremiology, *Proverbs in Medieval Occitan Literature* (UP Florida, 1997). She has served as Editor-in-chief of the scholarly periodical *Tenso* for 27 years. Among her recent accomplishments figure a Fulbright Research Award (Toulouse, 2011) for work on Occitan literature and the publication, with Robert A. Taylor, of *Bibliographie de la littérature occitane: trente années de recherche (1977-2007)* (Brepols, 2011).

