

ROGER CHARTIER
TRANSLATED BY
LYDIA G. COCHRANE

The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France



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THE CULTURAL USES OF PRINT
IN EARLY MODERN FRANCE

ROGER CHARTIER

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Print in
Early Modern
France*

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LYDIA G. COCHRANE

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For my father

CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	ix
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	xi
INTRODUCTION	3
1. Ritual and Print. Discipline and Invention: The <i>Fête</i> in France from the Middle Ages to the Revolution	13
2. Texts and Images. The Arts of Dying, 1450–1600	32
3. From Texts to Manners. A Concept and Its Books: <i>Civilité</i> between Aristocratic Distinction and Popular Appropriation	71
4. From Words to Texts. The <i>Cahiers de doléances</i> of 1789	110
5. Publishing Strategies and What the People Read, 1530–1660	145
6. Urban Reading Practices, 1660–1780	183
7. The <i>Bibliothèque bleue</i> and Popular Reading	240
8. The Literature of Roguery in the <i>Bibliothèque bleue</i>	265
CONCLUSION	343
INDEX OF NAMES	349

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

I AM GRATEFUL to the following institutions, which have permitted the reproduction of the illustrations in this book: the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, for figures 1-11, 13, 15, and 18-19; the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires, Paris, for figure 12; the Société Archéologique et Historique de Nantes for figure 14; the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, for figure 16; and the Rare Books and Manuscripts Division of the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations, for figure 17.

1. Individual Judgment, woodcut, c. 1465-1475.	38
2. Collective Judgment, woodcut, c. 1465-1475.	39
3. The Moment of Death, with Angels and Demons, engraving, from the <i>Heures de la Vierge à l'usage des Dominicains</i> (Paris, 1542).	46
4. The Moment of Death, with Angels and Demons, engraving, from Léonard Gaultier, <i>Suite de onze pièces</i> (late sixteenth century).	46
5. <i>Memento mori</i> , engraving, from <i>Les Images de la Mort</i> (Lyons, 1562).	48
6. Resistance by Faith, engraving, from Georgette de Montenay, <i>Emblèmes ou devises chrétiennes</i> (Lyons, 1571).	50
7. Death Desired, engraving, from Georgette de Montenay, <i>Emblèmes ou devises chrétiennes</i> (Lyons, 1571).	51
8. <i>Comme le Roy Tres-chrestien Henry IIII . . . touche les écrouelles</i> , engraving by Pierre Firens (Paris, c. 1605).	162
9. <i>Histoire facécieuse de la Bigorne</i> , engraving, c. 1600.	164
10. The True Portrait of a Monster Born . . . near Abbeville, engraving, 1569.	165
11. The Terrible and Marvelous Sign . . . Seen above Paris, woodcut, 1531.	169
12. <i>Le Colporteur</i> , by an anonymous French painter, c. 1623.	177
13. The Library of Sainte-Geneviève in 1773, engraving by P. C. de La Gardette.	206
14. The Chambre de lecture de la Fosse, ink and wash drawing by Hénon, 1763.	211

ILLUSTRATIONS

- | | |
|--|-----|
| 15. Project for the Royal Library, engraving by Étienne-Louis Boullée, 1785. | 218 |
| 16. <i>La Lecture</i> , gouache painting by Pierre-Antoine Baudoin, mid-eighteenth century. | 220 |
| 17. Rotary Reading Desk, engraving, from Agostino Ramelli, <i>Le diverse et artificiose machine</i> (Paris, 1588). | 223 |
| 18. <i>La Lecture du soir</i> , engraving, from Nicolas Restif de la Bretonne, <i>La Vie de mon père</i> (Neufchâtel, 1779). | 227 |
| 19. <i>Le Grand Coesre</i> , woodcut, from <i>Le Jargon ou Langage de l'Argot réformé</i> (Troyes, 1660). | 254 |

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In the footnotes, Bibliothèque Nationale has been abbreviated as BN and Archives Départementales has been abbreviated as AD.

THE CULTURAL USES OF PRINT
IN EARLY MODERN FRANCE

INTRODUCTION

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THE EIGHT essays that compose this book, originally written and published in French, concern cultural cleavages that marked French society during the *ancien régime*, creating differences and tensions, oppositions and divisions. The book's coherence developed gradually as each successive study demanded the honing of concepts used in previous ones, the rethinking of conclusions that turned out to be less than definitive, and the opening up of other areas of research. These eight texts ought therefore to be taken as successive steps toward the definition of an approach that gradually claimed its own territory, and also decided what was to be excluded from it. From one text to another, a widening gap separated my approach from the axioms and viewpoints most widely accepted by the definition of cultural history (usually designated as French) that emphasizes a search for the texts, beliefs, and acts that best characterize popular culture in French society between the Middle Ages and the French Revolution.

This book has been constructed, then, primarily in opposition to this now classic use of the notion of popular culture. This notion involves three presuppositions: first, that it is possible to establish exclusive relationships between specific cultural forms and particular social groups; second, that the various cultures existing in a given society are sufficiently pure, homogeneous, and distinct to permit them to be characterized uniformly and unequivocally; and third, that the category of "the people" or "the popular" has sufficient coherence and stability to define a distinct social identity that can be used to organize cultural differences in past ages according to the simple opposition of *populaire* versus *savant*. Long accepted without discussion—and perhaps unknowingly—these propositions posed problems for me. Where they were thought to reveal strict correspondences between cultural cleavages and social hierarchies, I instead found evidence of fluid circulation, practices shared by various groups, and blurred distinctions. There are many examples (in the present book as well) of "popular" uses of motifs and genres and of objects and ideas that were never considered specific to the lower echelons of society. There are also many instances of forms of and materials from a collective culture of the

INTRODUCTION

greater mass of humanity from which the dominant classes or the various elites only slowly distanced themselves.

On the other hand, where a culture considered “of the people” had been identified and defined in terms of its literature, its religion, and its sociability—three terms to which the adjective “popular” was soon and enthusiastically affixed—my closer observation encountered mixed forms and composite practices in which elements of diverse origins found complex ways in which to intermingle. Each group of texts, beliefs, or modes of conduct that I considered attested to intricate cultural mixtures of discipline and invention, reutilizations and innovations, models imposed (by the state, the church, or the market), and freedoms preserved. “Popular” literature, “popular” religion, and “popular” sociability were thus not radically different from what was read, practiced, or experienced by men and women of other social strata. This means that it is illusory to attempt to set up such categories on the basis of the use, supposedly peculiar to each, of certain objects, codes of behavior, or cultural motifs.

Finally, where the very category of the “popular” identified a homogeneous social level to be grasped through its fundamental unity, a finer analysis of cultural practices brought differentiations to light. Thus I have preferred to set aside macroscopic divisions, which often define “the people” in *ancien régime* societies, by default, as all those situated outside the sphere of the dominant groups, and to inventory the many cleavages that divided prerevolutionary society. These cleavages functioned in deference to several principles (not necessarily superposable) to manifest oppositions or gaps that existed not only between men and women, city dwellers and rural folk, Catholics and Protestants, or masters and workers, but also between generations, crafts and trades, or city neighborhoods and country districts. Cultural history—in France, at any rate—has for too long accepted a reductive definition of society, seen strictly in terms of the hierarchy of wealth and condition. This view forgets that other differences, founded upon membership in a sexual category, a territorial population, or a religious group, were just as fully “social” and just as capable (perhaps more so) of explaining the plurality of cultural practices as was position on the socioprofessional scale—especially when judged in light of the one great opposition of dominators and dominated.

In this book I have attempted to profit from these preliminary reflections and, to begin with, to avoid as much as possible the use of the

INTRODUCTION

notion of “popular culture.” All too frequently, this notion assumes from the outset that the basic problems posed by all examinations of a cultural object or a cultural practice—of defining the areas it covers and identifying the modalities of its use—have been resolved. It seems to me a poor methodology that supposes, a priori, the validity of the very divisions that need to be established. When, on the one hand, the concept of popular culture obliterates the bases shared by the whole of society and when, on the other, it masks the plurality of cleavages that differentiate cultural practices, it cannot be held as pertinent to a comprehension of the forms and the materials that characterize the cultural universe of societies in the modern period.

The essays that make up this book were also born of dissatisfaction on another level. Forms of speech and behavior of traditional culture, often called folkloric, have long been set in clear opposition to the innovative impact of the written word, which gradually penetrated this long-established cultural base, first in manuscript form and then through print. This has meant that these two modes for the acquisition and transmission of culture have been studied in isolation from each other. It has also encouraged the divergence of a methodology proper to historical anthropology, which attempts to locate within the societies of the *ancien régime* forms of expression and communication proper to preliterate societies, from a more classical interpretation of cultural history that focuses on the production, circulation, and utilization of texts. Formulated in these terms, this basic opposition fails to account adequately for the culture of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, when, typically, different media and multiple practices almost always mingled in complex ways. In this book I attempt to explore these complex connections. They can perhaps be reduced to a few, fundamental configurations. The first links speech and writings, whether the spoken word was set down in written form (as was the case in the composition of the *cahiers de doléances*) or, conversely, a text was grasped by certain of its “readers” only with the aid of someone reading it aloud. Thanks to the various social situations in which reading aloud occurred, there existed in prerevolutionary societies a culture dependent on writing, even among people incapable of producing or reading a written text. Full comprehension of that culture presupposes the view that access to the written word was a process much more broadly defined than simply the silent reading of an individual in isolation, literacy in its classic sense.

INTRODUCTION

The second configuration is the relationships forged between written texts and actions. Far from constituting separate cultures, these two sets of phenomena were closely connected. To begin with, a great many texts had the precise function of disappearing as discourse and of producing, on the practical level, modes of conduct and behavior that were accepted as legitimate with respect to current social or religious norms. The guides to preparing for death and the civility books that are here studied are two examples of the sorts of texts and printed materials that aimed to impose behavior in conformity with the demands of Christianity or of *civilité*. In addition, the written word lies at the very heart of the most concrete and the most “oralized” forms of traditional cultures. This was true of rituals, which were often intensified by the physical presence of a central text, actually read aloud during the ceremony. It was also true in urban festivals, where inscriptions, banners, and signs bore a profusion of mottoes and slogans. There were, then, close and multiple connections between texts and human actions; each forces us to consider the practice of writing in all its diversity.

From the spoken word to the written text, from the written word to the act, from printed matter back to the spoken word: Such are a few of the trajectories that I shall attempt in this book to describe and to analyze, with the hope of restoring their full complexity to the various forms of expression and cultural communication. One notion has proved useful to an understanding of these phenomena: appropriation. It has enabled me to avoid identifying various cultural levels merely on the basis of a description of the objects, beliefs, or acts presumed to have been proper to each group. Even in *ancien régime* societies, many of these were shared by several different social groups, although the uses to which they were put may not have been identical. A retrospective sociology has long held that unequal distribution of material objects is the prime criterion of cultural differentiation. Here, this theory yields to an approach that concentrates on differentiated uses and plural appropriation of the same goods, the same ideas, and the same actions. A perspective of this sort does not ignore differences—even socially rooted differences—but it does shift the place in which this identification takes place. It is less interested in describing an entire body of materials in social terms (for example, designating books printed in Troyes and sold by peddlers as “popular” literature); it instead aims at a description of the practices that made for differing and strongly char-

INTRODUCTION

acteristic uses of the cultural materials that circulated within a given society.

There is thus something that seems insufficient in the statistical approach that for a time dominated cultural history in France and that was primarily intent on measuring the unequal social distribution of objects, discourses, and actions that provided data in chronological series. When this approach presumes oversimplified correspondences between social levels and cultural horizons and when it seizes thoughts and modes of conduct in their most repetitive and minimalized expressions, it falls short of the essential: the use made by the various groups or individuals of the motifs or forms they shared with others and the way in which they themselves interpreted these motifs and forms. The essays that follow are not intended to supply measurements and statistics. They merely serve to provide a preliminary indication of the extent and the range of the materials under consideration, for example the various genres of printed matter or the grievances expressed and fixed in written form on the eve of the Revolution. My primary aim is to reconstruct social and cultural practices, both as they were proposed in texts that dictated the norm to be respected (and sometimes even followed) and as they adapted to their own uses printed matter, festive and ritual formulas, and the rules imposed by the authorities.

To think of cultural practices in terms of the different ways in which they were appropriated also enables us to consider the texts, the words, and the examples that were aimed at shaping the thought and conduct of the common people: They were less than totally efficacious and radically acculturating. Such practices always created uses and representations not necessarily in accordance with the desires of those who produced the discourses and fashioned the norms. The act of reading simply cannot be divorced from the text itself, nor can the living experience of behavioral patterns be isolated from the prohibitions or precepts aimed at regulating them. Once proposed, these models and messages were accepted by adjusting them, diverting them to other purposes, and even resisting them—all of which demonstrates the singularity of each instance of appropriation. This means that several precautions need to be taken.

The first is that we must be careful not to confuse the study of texts with the study of the actions or thoughts that the texts were intended to produce. This warning may seem obvious, but the historian often forgets that he usually has available only discourses that dictate conduct

INTRODUCTION

to be imitated. This means that the history of practices must be based on their manifold representations—in literature and iconography, in statements of norms, in autobiographical accounts, and so forth. This is the perspective that must underlie the study of reading practices—solitary or collective, private or public, learned or simplistic—and that alone can help us comprehend the texts and books that publishers and printers of the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries offered their readers. In order to understand the texts, themes, and forms of the *Bibliothèque bleue*, then, we also need to investigate the ways in which reading was originally practiced among people who did not belong to the extremely restricted world of fluent readers. It is no more adequate to note the statistical imbalance in the circulation of different genres of printed works than it is to thematically describe the catalogue of literature presumed to be “popular.” We must grasp—as precisely as possible in spite of the limited documentation—the diverse ways in which readers of those now remote times encountered and manipulated the written word.

A second precaution: We must be careful not to accept without reservation the now consecrated time scheme that considers the first half of the seventeenth century to have been the period of a major rupture which pitted a golden age of vibrant, free, and profuse popular culture against an age of church and state discipline that repressed and subjected that culture. This view at one time appeared pertinent to the cultural evolution of France during the *ancien régime*. After 1600 or perhaps 1650, the combined efforts of the absolutist state to centralize and unify the nation and of the repressive church of the Catholic Reformation to acculturate the population were seen as stifling or inhibiting the inventive exuberance of the culture of an ancient people. By imposing new discipline, by inculcating a new submissiveness, and by teaching new models of comportment, church and state were alleged to have destroyed the roots and the ancient equilibrium of a traditional way of viewing and experiencing the world. The present book makes use of such a time scheme—and also of the view that the disqualification of popular culture was responsible for its disappearance—only with the greatest of prudence.

There are several reasons for prudence here. First, it is apparent that, when this schema contrasts the cultural splendor of the mass of men on one side of a watershed with misery on the other, it reiterates for the early modern period an opposition that historians have seen in

INTRODUCTION

other ages. In like fashion, in the twelfth century, a reordering of the theological, scientific, and philosophical domains that separated learned culture from folk tradition resulted in the censure of practices henceforth held to be superstitious or heterodox. This set apart the people's culture—*la culture des peuples*—as something dangerously seductive and menacing. A similar cultural watershed is supposed to have occurred in France during the half century that separated the wars of 1870 and 1914, a period devoted to freeing traditional cultures, peasant and “popular,” from their enclaves (thus uprooting them) and to promoting a unified, national, and republican culture of modern stamp. Another such transformation is assumed to have occurred before and after the advent of today's mass culture, which, in this view, has used the new media to destroy an ancient, creative, plural, and free culture. Historiographically speaking, therefore, the fate of popular culture seems forever to be stifled, inhibited, and abraded, but at the same time ever to be reborn out of its decay. This perhaps indicates that the true problem is not to identify the decisive moment of the irretrievable disappearance of a popular culture. It is rather to consider for each epoch how complex relations were established between the forms imposed (sometimes more and sometimes less forcibly) and firmly established identities (sometimes allowed to blossom and sometimes held back).

This leads to yet another reason for not organizing our entire description of the cultures of the *ancien régime* in accordance with the rupture that is generally agreed to have taken place in the mid-seventeenth century. In point of fact, no matter how forcefully cultural models may have been imposed, they might nevertheless be received with reactions that varied from mistrust to ruse or outright rebellion. A description of the norms, disciplines, texts, and teaching through which absolutist, Counter-Reformation culture may have been intended to subject the population does not prove that the people were in fact totally and universally subjected. Quite to the contrary, we should assume that a gap existed between the norm and real-life experience, between injunction and practice, and between the sense aimed at and the sense produced, a gap into which reformulations and procedures for the avoidance of the model could flow. The mass culture imposed by those in power during those centuries was no more able to destroy particular entities and deep-rooted practices that resisted it than the mass culture of our own times. What changed, obviously, was the manner in which those entities and practices were expressed and by which

INTRODUCTION

they affirmed their existence and made their own use of innovations originally designed to curtail them. But accepting this mutation as incontestable does not necessarily oblige us to acknowledge a rupture in cultural continuity throughout the three centuries of the modern period. Nor does it force us to agree that, after the mid-seventeenth century, there was no place left for practices and thoughts other than those the churchmen, the servants of the state, or the makers of books wanted to inculcate.

This is why I have chosen to set aside the thesis of an abrupt break in the cultural history of the *ancien régime* and why I have preferred to use models capable of taking both continuities and divergences into account. The first of these models contrasts discipline and invention in various cultural forms and practices. These two categories are not to be taken as totally irreducible, nor as antagonistic. Used together, they show that all procedures intended to create constraints and controls actually implement tactics that mitigate their effects or subvert them. They also show that, conversely, there is no such thing as a completely free and original cultural product which uses none of the materials imposed by tradition, authority, or the market and which is not subject to the surveillance or censure of those who hold sway over things and words. The programs for festivities or the writing up of grievances are typical examples of this tension between freedoms constrained and discipline subverted. Overly simple theories of opposition between popular spontaneity and the coercion exercised by the dominant classes are simply inadequate to explain this phenomenon.

Discipline and invention, yes; but also distinction and dissemination. This second pair of linked notions is used in the studies that follow in order to propose a way of understanding the circulation of cultural objects and cultural models that does not reduce circulation to simple diffusion, usually considered to descend from the upper to the lower echelons of society. Processes of imitation and popularization are more complex and more dynamic: They need to be thought of as competitive efforts in which any instance of dissemination—whether granted or hard-won—was met with a search for new procedures for distinction. This can be seen in the career of the notion of *civilité*, defined both as a normative concept and as the conduct it demanded. As this notion was diffused throughout society by appropriation or inculcation, it gradually lost the esteem it had enjoyed among the very people whose social personality it described. They were then led to prize other concepts and

INTRODUCTION

other codes of manners. The same process can perhaps be seen in reading practices, which became increasingly differentiated as printed matter came to be less scarce, less often confiscated, and less socially distinguishing. For a long period, ownership of an object—the book—in and of itself signified social distinction; gradually, different ways of reading became the distinguishing factor, and thus a hierarchy among plural uses of the same material was set up. We need, then, to replace simplistic and static representations of social domination or cultural diffusion with a way of accounting for them that recognizes the reproduction of gaps within the mechanisms of imitation, the competition at the heart of similarities, and the development of new distinctions arising from the very process of diffusion.

One further word on the concept of culture itself, which up to this point I have used as if its definition were obvious and universally applicable. Let me make it clear that I do not use the term here in the sense that French historiography has generally assigned to it, which is to designate as cultural a particular domain of products and practices that is presumed to be distinct from the economic or social. Culture is not over and above economic and social relations, nor can it be ranged beside them. All practices are articulated according to the representations by which individuals make sense of their existence, and this sense, this meaning, is inscribed in their words, their acts, and their rites. This is why the mechanisms that regulate the working of society and the structures that determine relationships between individuals must be understood as the result—always unstable and conflictive—of relationships between the antagonistic representations of the social world. This means that our understanding of practices which serve to organize economic activity and which create ties among individuals must not be limited to their material ends or their social effects alone. All practices are “cultural” as well as social or economic, since they translate into action the many ways in which humans give meaning to their world. All history, therefore—whether economic, social, or religious—requires the study of systems of representation and the acts the systems generate. This is what makes it cultural history.

Describing a culture should thus involve the comprehension of its entire system of relations—the totality of the practices that express how it represents the physical world, society, and the sacred. This is an impossible and illusory task, at least for such complex societies as France during the *ancien régime*. Treating such complex societies presupposes,

INTRODUCTION

in my opinion, reliance on another approach, one that focuses on specific practices, particular objects, and clearly defined uses. Practices connected with the written word—that set down or produced the spoken word, cemented forms of sociability, or prescribed behavior; that took place in the *forum internum* or on the public square; or that sought to induce belief, persuade to action, or inspire dreams—offer a good entry into a society in which proliferating printed matter endeavored to establish a *modus vivendi* with traditional forms of communication and in which new social distinctions fractured a shared base. For the sake of convenience, I may occasionally refer to these practices as “cultural.” But by no means do I hold such practices capable of being separated from the other social forms, nor do I intend them to be qualified or classified *a priori* within a specific domain designated as “cultural practices,” as distinct from other, noncultural, practices.

These reflections are, essentially, the fruit of the case studies that follow, not the result of some fully coherent, preexistent program that has guided them. Thus it is possible that, in one or another particular analysis, I may ignore my methodological precautions or return surreptitiously to the very ways of thinking about culture—popular or otherwise—that these prefatory considerations have questioned. But it seems preferable to embrace these discordant elements rather than to eliminate the hesitations and afterthoughts of a methodology that, at each step of the way, was attempting to forge new tools for comprehension out of a dissatisfaction with earlier studies.

This means that there are two ways to read the present book. One way is to accept the order in which the essays have been arranged, the first four analyzing different aspects of the possible relations among words, texts, and modes of behavior and the second four concentrating on print culture, publishing strategies, reading practices, and books produced for the greatest number of readers. The second way would be to restore the chronological order in which these eight studies were written, not, to be sure, in the interest of reconstituting a personal itinerary, but rather because the evolution that can here be traced reflects the major trends in the writing of cultural history in France during recent years: at first swept along by an ambition to reduce cultural materials to numbers and serial data, then primarily interested in understanding usages and practices. I hope that, whatever route he chooses, the reader will not regret his journey.

Ritual and Print
Discipline and Invention:
The *Fête* in France from
the Middle Ages to the
Revolution

ANY historical reflection on the *fête* must depart from the observation of its actual conditions of existence, in order to understand the veritable “festive explosion” that has marked the historiography of this last decade. Although it is not specifically historical, the emergence of the *fête* (and in particular of the traditional feast) as a preferred subject of study leads one in effect to wonder why, at a given moment, an entire scientific class (in this case, French historians) felt attracted by a theme which until then was treated only by collectors of folklore. Seemingly, three reasons, which pertain as much to the recognized function of the historical discipline as to its internal evolution, may be cited. It is clear, above all, that the increased research into the traditional feast constituted a sort of compensation, in terms of understanding, for the disappearance of a system of civilization in which the *fête* had, or rather is considered as having had, a central role. Historical analysis has therefore been charged with explaining, in its idiom and with its technique, the nostalgia exuded by a present that has eliminated the *fête* as an act of community participation. On these grounds, it then becomes possible to rediscover one of the major functions assigned—implicitly or overtly—to history today: to restore to the sphere of knowledge a vanished world, the heritage of which contemporary society feels itself a rightful but unfaithful heir. That the process of understanding is difficult to separate from the fabrication of an imaginary

Originally written for the interdisciplinary conference *La Fête en Question*, held at the University of Montreal in April 1979, this essay was published in *Diogenes* 110 (April-June 1980):51-71. Maria Antonia Uzielli's translation, for the English-language edition of *Diogenes* (*Diogenes* 110:44-65), has been edited with the assistance of Lydia G. Cochrane.

THE FÊTE IN FRANCE

past collectively desired is, in the end, insignificant, unless it is meant to underscore those things that, by being the most neglected by our present age, have become the most symptomatic of a world we have lost. The *fête*, evidently, is one of these.

On the other hand, the *fête*, at least as an object of history, has benefited from the rehabilitation of the specific event. After massive scrutiny of time's long courses and its stable flow, historians—particularly those of the *Annales* tradition—have turned their attention toward the event. In its transitoriness and its tension, it may in fact reveal, just as well as long-term evolution or social and cultural inertia, the structures that constituted a collective mentality or a society. The battle has been among the first to benefit from this reevaluation. Removed from narrative history, it can set up a suitable observation point for apprehending a social structure, a cultural system, or the creation of history or legend.¹ In the same manner, the festival has abandoned the shores of the picturesque and the anecdotal to become a major detector of the cleavages, tensions, and images that permeated a society. This is particularly evident when the *fête* engendered violence and the community was torn apart, as in Romans in 1580: “The Carnival in Romans makes me think of the Grand Canyon. It shows, preserved in cross section, the intellectual and social strata and structures which made up a *très ancien régime*.”² The geological metaphor clearly illustrates a perspective in which the festive event is indicative and the extraordinary is charged with speaking for the ordinary. Even when a *fête* does not generate excesses or revolt, it is amenable to this kind of approach. It always produces that singular albeit repeated moment when it is possible to grasp the rules of a social system, even though they are disguised or inverted.

A final reason has helped to focus historians' attention on the *fête*. It is, in effect, ideally situated at the nub of the debate that has dominated French historiography for the last ten years, the study of relations in the sphere of conflict or compromise between a culture defined as popular or folkloric and the dominant cultures. The *fête* is an exemplary illustration of this contest. To begin with, it is clearly situated at the crossroads of two cultural dynamics. On the one hand, it represents the invention and the expression of traditional culture shared by the ma-

¹ G. Duby, *Le Dimanche de Bouvines, 27 juillet 1214* (Paris, 1973), in particular 13-14.

² E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Le Carnaval de Romans. De la Chandeleur au mercredi des Cendres, 1579-1580* (Paris, 1979), 408. (Mary Feeney, trans., *Carnival: A People's Uprising at Romans, 1579-1580* [New York, 1979], 370.)

THE FÊTE IN FRANCE

jority of people, and on the other, the disciplining will and the cultural plan of the dominating class. One can then quite rightly apply to the *fête* the analytic methods that Alphonse Dupront applied to the pilgrimage, which underline the tensions between the vital impulse of collectivity and the discipline imposed by institutions.³ Furthermore, the “popular” festival was quickly looked upon by the dominant cultures as a major obstacle to the assertion of their religious, ethical, or political hegemony. Thus it was the target of a constant effort aimed at destroying it, curtailing it, disciplining it, or taking it over. The *fête* was therefore the stage for a conflict between contradictory cultural realities. Thus it offers a taste of “popular” and elite cultures at a moment of intersection—and not only through an inventory of the motifs which are supposedly their essence. The festival was one of the few scenes in which one may observe popular resistance to normative injunctions as well as the restructuring, through cultural models, of the behavior of the majority. From this the *fête* derives its importance for a history of mental attitudes that concerns the analysis of specific and localized cultural mechanisms.

Having thus acknowledged the reasons which have given the *fête* a priority in historians’ work, it is possible, considering a well-defined period (France between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries), to summarize the achievements of and problems posed by retrospective interpretation. In order to do this, a good method appears to be to consider a certain number of case studies, both original and borrowed. Finally, as a last preliminary, the great ambiguity inherent in the usage of the word *fête* must be kept in mind. Its apparently single meaning revolves, in fact, around manifold differences, often reflected through a series of oppositions: popular/official, rural/urban, religious/secular, participation/entertainment, etc. As it happens, these cleavages, far from aiding a clear typology of festive ceremonies, are themselves problematic, since nearly always the festival is a blend which aims at reconciling opposites.

On the other hand, *fête* carries in itself the definition—theoretical or spontaneous—with which each of us has invested the word. By blending memory and utopia, by affirming what the *fête* must be and what it is not, these definitions will certainly be highly personal and idiosyn-

³ A. Dupront, “Formes de la culture des masses: De la doléance politique au pèlerinage panique (xviii^e-xx^e siècle),” in *Niveaux de culture et groupes sociaux* (Paris, 1967), 149-67.

THE FÊTE IN FRANCE

cratic. Consequently, it becomes impossible to reconstruct the *fête* as a historical object with well-defined contours. In an attempt to halt this shifting, fleeting, and contradictory reality momentarily, we will accept here as *fêtes* all those manifestations which are described as such in traditional society, even though festiveness occurred outside the *fêtes* (and perhaps especially outside).⁴

THE FIRST and fundamental premise is that the traditional festival, far from being an established fact—capable of description within static limits—was, from the end of the Middle Ages until the Revolution, the object of many modifying influences which must, before anything else, be ascertained. Ecclesiastical censures were without doubt the oldest. The Church's condemnation of festivals and popular rejoicings supplied material for an uninterrupted series of texts from the twelfth to the seventeenth century. The literature of the *exempla*, which provided material for homilies, is the first example of those admonitions later relayed by the massive corpus of conciliar decrees, synodal statutes, or episcopal ordinances. From the end of the seventeenth century, the abundance of this material was such that it could serve as a basis for theological treatises responsible for transmitting Church tradition and entrusted with informing the priesthood—such as the two works by Jean-Baptiste Thiers.⁵ These ecclesiastical interdictions were all the more important inasmuch as they were often adopted by civil authorities, *parlements*, and municipal councils. A typical example of this alliance among the organs of power was the struggle against itinerant festivals in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the jurisdiction of the *parlement* of Paris.⁶ These festivals, which were held on Sundays and holy days of obligation and were often associated with a fair marked by traditional rejoicings (dances and games), were banned by a decree of the *Grands Jours d'Auvergne* in 1665. Two years later, this

⁴ M. de Certeau, "Une Culture très ordinaire," *Esprit* 10 (1978):3-26.

⁵ J.-B. Thiers, *Traité des Jeux et des Divertissements* (Paris, 1696) and *Traité des Superstitions selon l'Écriture Sainte, les Décrets des Conciles et les sentiments des Saints Pères et des Théologiens* (Paris, 1679; 2d ed. in 4 vols., Paris, 1697-1704). On the latter text, see J. Lebrun, "Le *Traité des Superstitions* de Jean-Baptiste Thiers, contribution à l'ethnographie de la France du xvii^e siècle," *Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l'Ouest* 83 (1976):443-65, and R. Chartier and J. Revel, "Le Paysan, l'ours et saint Augustin," Proceedings of the Conference *La Découverte de la France au XVII^e siècle* (Paris, 1980), 259-64.

⁶ Y. M. Berce, *Fête et révolte. Des mentalités populaires du XVI^e au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1976), 170-76.

pronouncement was extended to the entire jurisdiction of the *parlement*. Further, during the last decade of the *ancien régime*, one finds this general ban extended by some fifty particulars. Everywhere the mechanism was identical: A complaint was deposited by the parish priest with the general prosecutor of the *parlement*, who then asked the local judges to open an inquiry. Often, if not always, his information resulted in a decree of interdiction. Such an organized and predetermined attack attests simultaneously to the intractability of the rural populace toward the injunctions of established authorities and to convergences between the Christianizing will of the clergy and the magistrates' efforts to enforce control over morals.

The objective of the Church was twofold: to obtain mastery over time and over peoples' bodies. The control of festive times was thus a point of primary confrontation between folk culture and the Church. Very early, as far back as the thirteenth century, the literature of the *exempla* revealed the deep conflict which enmeshed the cycles of Easter and Pentecost.⁷ According to the folklore, that particular time of year was above all the time for those festivities that initiated youngsters into society, from the aristocratic tournaments to the dances of the *chevaux-jupons* in a popular environment. For the Church, however, this time of glorification of the Holy Spirit had to be for procession, pilgrimage, and crusade. This conflict for the possession of time occurred on a daily scale as well. The Church acted unceasingly to prevent nocturnal rejoicings and to eradicate the concepts which permitted such events. It tried to eliminate the partition between daytime, which belongs to the Church, and nighttime, the dominion of the people.

Aiming to discipline the flesh, the Church understood festive behavior according to the same categories which were conceived for the designation and description of superstitious conduct. Thus, a triple condemnation of the traditional *fête*: It was illicit, or even "popular" in the sense of Thiers's use when he suggested it as the opposite of catholic. Festive behavior, in fact, varied infinitely; it was not at all dependent upon ecclesiastical authority, but rather was rooted in specific community customs. It was therefore opposed, point by point, to the Catholic spirit which was universal, officially backed, equal for all. This theological condemnation was strengthened by a second, psychological

⁷ J. C. Schmitt, "Jeunes et danse des chevaux de bois. Le Folklore méridional dans la littérature des *exempla* (xiii^e-xiv^e siècle)," *Cahiers de Fanjeaux* 11 (Toulouse, 1976), 127-58.

one. For the Church, the popular *fête* was identified with excess and intemperance, with the irrational expenditure of body and wealth. It was situated, therefore, exactly opposite to authorized practices, which were necessary and carefully meted out. Finally, from a moral standpoint, the *fête* signified indecency and license. In it, the rules which formed the basis of Christian society were forgotten. Emotion was bestowed without control, modesty lost its standards, and the flesh let itself go without reverence for the Creator. Considered the abode of spontaneity, disorder, and dishonesty, the *fête* became, in the eyes of Christian moralists, the epitome of anticivilization. It combined, they felt, the different traits which tainted criminal practices as contrary to the true faith, to due propriety, and to Christian modesty. From all of this, it is not surprising that festivals have long been among the major targets of the Church's effort to Christianize the population.⁸

Strategies to censure the *fête* were diverse. The most radical tended to prohibit them—as, for example, in the case of the *Fête de Fous*, generally celebrated on the Feast of the Holy Innocents and characterized by the inversion of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, by the parody of religious ritual, and by manifold rejoicings (theatrical games, dances, feasts, etc.). A *fête* with strong religious connotations, unfolding essentially within the religious sphere, the *Fête des Fous* was the object of age-old condemnation, often reiterated and seemingly effective. In his *Traité des Jeux et des Divertissements*, Thiers reviews the texts that banned both the *Fête des Fous* and the Feast of the Holy Innocents. His series begins in 1198 with the decree of the Bishop of Paris and comprises three texts of the thirteenth century, seven of the fifteenth, and ten of the sixteenth.⁹ Such persistence seems to have paid off, since the *Fête des Fous* disappeared at the end of the sixteenth century and by the mid-eighteenth century was already the object of history, but a history so far removed and strange that it was almost indecipherable: “The *fêtes* of which I undertake to recount the history are so extravagant that the reader would have difficulty in giving them credence were he not instructed on the ignorance and barbarism that preceded the renaissance of belles-lettres.”¹⁰

⁸ J. Delumeau, ed., *La Mort des Pays de Cocagne. Comportements collectifs de la Renaissance à l'âge classique* (Paris, 1976), 14-29.

⁹ Thiers, *Traité des Jeux*, 440-51.

¹⁰ J.-B. du Tilliot, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la fête des fous qui se faisait autrefois dans plusieurs églises*, cited in Y. M. Berce, *Fête et révolte*, 140.

Often this strategy of eradication was not possible and had to give way for compromises in which the festive apparatus passed under religious control. As in the case of the pilgrimage, the Church aimed at imposing its order on the spontaneous, at controlling popular liberty, and at extirpating its intolerable manifestations. Thus this is how one must understand the tenacious battle fought by the churches (both Protestant and Catholic) against dance, an essential element both symbolic and jocose of the traditional *fête*, which they saw as a practice possibly present in ceremonies of very different natures. Here again, Thiers cites various authorities to condemn dance as a school of impurity and weapon of the devil: "How few are those who, dancing or seeing others dance, will not bear within themselves some dishonest thought, will not cast an immodest glance, show an indecent posture, pronounce a lewd phrase, and, finally, will not form a certain desire of the flesh, which the Holy Apostle says?"¹¹ By deforming the body, dance distorts the soul and inclines it to sin. Thus it must not contaminate the authorized festivities.

A third clerical strategy was that of selectivity. The aim of Christianization was to separate the licit core of the *fête* from the superstitious practices deposited around it. A typical example of this perspective may be found in the religious discourse concerning the fires of Saint John.¹² The *fête* and its fires, which were meant to celebrate the

¹¹ Thiers, *Traité des Jeux*, 331-41. Like the dance, carnival masks are doubly to be condemned: They disguise the body of man and consequently blaspheme against his Creator. They authorize ribaldry of the most dangerous kind both for the good order of society and for its morals. As proof, two texts. First the synodal constitutions of the Diocese of Annecy (1773 edition): "We finally exhort Their Lordships the Archpriests, Parish Priests, and their Curates, especially in the towns and Cities, to eradicate the abuse of the masquerades which are nothing but a shameful relic of Paganism. To succeed, they must rise against it in their sermons and teaching, especially from Epiphany until Lent; they must demonstrate its absurdity and danger, showing the people that such disorder is injurious to God whose image is disfigured; that it dishonors the members of J.C. by lending to them burlesque and out-of-place characters; and that it encourages licentiousness by facilitating that which impairs modesty" (cited in R. Devos and C. Joisten, *Moeurs et coutumes de la Savoie du Nord au XIX^e siècle. L'Enquête de Mgr. Rendu* [Annecy and Grenoble, 1978], 120). Second the preamble of a decree of the Magistrat of Lille in 1681: "Considering that each year sometime before Lent such disorders and inconveniences occur, detrimental to the welfare of souls and the public good, caused by the licentiousness which many people of one or the other sex employ in going through cities masked or otherwise disguised . . ." (cited in A. Lottin, *Chavatte, ouvrier lillois. Un Contemporain de Louis XIV* [Paris, 1979], 322).

¹² J. Delumeau, *Le Catholicisme entre Luther et Voltaire* (Paris, 1971), 259-61. (English

birth of the saint, were considered legitimate, but only on the condition that they would be strictly confined and controlled. The ceremony was to be brief; the bonfires had to be small to avoid any surplus or excess; the dancing and feasting which accompanied the fires were forbidden; and the superstitious practices which they engendered were prohibited. The fires of Saint John nourished, in effect, a great number of beliefs in which superstition was visible to the naked eye, since all were based on the illusive relationship that existed between a gesture (throwing grass on the fire, keeping the embers or the charcoal, going around the fire in certain turns or circles, etc.) and its supposed effects (to divine the hair color of one's future bride, to guarantee freedom from headaches or kidney pains for a whole year, etc.).¹³ Between the licit festival and its superstitious and immoral perversion the dividing line was unclear, as is clearly witnessed on the local level by the difficult relationship established between communities and their parish priests.¹⁴ Tolerance and condemnation lived side by side, as much to avoid open conflict, often litigious, as the intolerable infractions. Two cultures faced each other in the *fête*: one clerical, which aimed at organizing behavior to make of the *fête* an homage to God, the other, of the majority, which absorbed the religious ceremonial in an act of collective jubilation.

Although unquestionably the most constant and the most powerful, ecclesiastical pressure on the *fête* was not the only pressure brought to bear. Between 1400 and 1600, in fact, the urban festival (and especially the Carnival) had to face other interference as a result of growing municipal constraint. Everywhere municipal governments tried to curb the town *fête* by controlling its financing, its itinerary, and its program.¹⁵ More and more, toward the dawn of modern times, the *fête* became supported by municipal finance and not only by the head of the

translation: *Catholicism between Luther and Voltaire: A New View of the Counter-Reformation* [Philadelphia and London, 1977].)

¹³ These superstitions are reported in Thiers, *Traité des Superstitions*, 1:298 (1712 ed.) and 4:404 (1727 ed.).

¹⁴ T. Tackett, *Priest and Parish in Eighteenth-Century France. A Social and Political Study of the Curés in a Diocese of Dauphiné, 1750-1791* (Princeton, 1977), 210-15, and D. Julia, "La Réforme posttridentine en France d'après les procès-verbaux des visites pastorales: ordre et résistances," in *La Società religiosa nell'età moderna* (Naples, 1973), 311-415, in particular 384-88.

¹⁵ M. Grinberg, "Carnaval et société urbaine, xiv^e-xvi^e siècle. Le Royaume dans la ville," *Ethnologie française* 3 (1974):215-43.

confraternity that traditionally organized it. Progressively, private charity gave way to public financing. Thus the municipality gained tighter control of the ceremonial itineraries and so granted a privileged place to certain locations which were the emblem of public identity and power (for example, Town Hall or the market place, occasionally even the municipal magistrates' residences). Thus also, the municipality began a more and more determined intervention in the elaboration of the festive program, which until then had been the exclusive responsibility of the organizing confraternities, the youth "kingdoms," or the *abbayes folles*.

This municipal control had an evident objective: to express, through the idiom of the *fête*, an ideology at once urban and secular. The composition of the processions is a prime example of this scope. They assembled, symbolically and in reality, all the principal corporations and guilds which composed the town, as in Metz in 1510 and 1511.¹⁶ Assembling all hierarchically, the festival expressed the unity of the urban community. It also created an urban legend, which instilled the town's past with a prestigious history, ancient or biblical. In Metz on Torch Sunday, 1511, the eminent citizens disguised themselves to personify David, Hector, Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, Charlemagne, and Godefroy de Bouillon, all of whom legitimated the power of the city and the authority of its oligarchy. The urban festival thus became a political tool that allowed the town to assert itself against the sovereign, the aristocracy, and neighboring towns. Through expenditure and ostentation, the *fête* demonstrated the town's wealth, and thus instituted a diplomacy of competition which was not without influence on the festive calendar. In order to authorize mutual assistance to the town representatives for the carnivals, the towns of Flanders and Artois in effect rescheduled their festivities. One can observe here how a political ideology is capable of inflecting, defining, or transforming ancient rituals to subvert their meaning.

Censured by ecclesiastical authorities and diverted by municipal oligarchies, the traditional *fête* did not therefore manifest itself except through the distortions progressively imposed on it by the authorities. It would seem impossible to rediscover, beneath these deformations and mutilations, an original base, appropriately "popular" or "folkloric." The raw materials of the *fête* in the sixteenth and seventeenth

¹⁶ Ibid., 229-30.

centuries, as we understand them today, were always a cultural mix, the components of which it is not easy to separate, whether we attempt to organize them by dividing popular from official festivity or by tracing the change over time, in which dependence (on Church and municipal authorities) replaced an earlier spontaneity. That is why it has appeared legitimate to me to set down first the modifications effected on the festivals by the authorities rather than to attempt an illusory description of a festival supposedly free of doctrinal contamination. But this composite material is itself the object of a history which may perhaps be elucidated with a case study that focuses on the system of the *fêtes* in Lyons from the end of the Middle Ages to the Revolution.¹⁷

The scheme of this evolution is clear: It shows the succession from *fêtes* based in community participation to *fêtes* conceded to the populace. During the Renaissance the system of *fêtes* in Lyons was composed of two major elements: *fêtes* of all the citizenry and gregarious, spontaneous *fêtes*. The former presupposed the participation of the entire population of the town in the same rejoicing, even though this participation was hierarchical and occasionally conflictive. This was obviously the case of the religious festivals born of the Merveilles festival, which disappeared at the beginning of the fifteenth century, such as the pardons of Saint John's Day, the processions of Rogations, and the feasts of patron saints. This was also the case of the royal entries, such as the many into Lyons between the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century: 1490, 1494, 1495, 1507, 1515, 1522, 1548, 1564, 1574, 1595, 1600, 1622—exactly twelve entries in 125 years, to which should be added all those that were not royal. Each triumphal entry presented a reciprocal spectacle: The citizens became spectators of the royal procession and the king and his court spectators of the urban procession, in which participated all the city dwellers, including artisans, assembled in corporations (until 1564) and by wards thereafter. The entry was also a plural festival par excellence, in which multifold elements overlapped: processions, cavalcades, theatrical games, *tableaux vivants*, fireworks, etc. The iconographic and scenographic material thus shown offered many readings, certainly as diverse as the different social and cultural groups, but at least unified within a ceremony that assembled the town together.

¹⁷ The basic materials for such a study are collected in the catalogue *Entrées royales et fêtes populaires à Lyon du XV^e au XVIII^e siècle* (Lyons, 1970).

THE FÊTE IN FRANCE

The other essential component of the *fête* in Lyons of the sixteenth century was those *fêtes* which can be defined as “popular,” on the condition that “people” not be too narrowly defined.¹⁸ Some of these *fêtes*, taken in hand by the *confréries joyeuses*—in this case the twenty abbeys of Maugouvert—founded their activity upon close relationships within the neighborhood. The same was true of the charivari that ridiculed beaten husbands under the guise of a donkey ride. Organized by the world of artisans and merchants, these rejoicings were also spectacles that might be offered to the aristocratic visitors; such was the case with the cavalcade of 1550 and also with the one of 1566, which was to figure in the triumphal entry of the Duchess of Nemours.¹⁹ On other occasions, the leading role belonged to the *confréries joyeuses* of the guilds, particularly that of the printers. The confraternity of La Coquille (The Typographical Error), which may also have been the organizer of donkey cavalcades (as in 1578), was responsible for the parodic processions which marked Shrove Sunday. Between 1580 and 1601, a half-dozen pamphlets “printed in Lyons by the Seigneur de la Coquille” attest to the vitality, in both merrymaking and criticism, of the group of printing guildsmen.²⁰

The beginning of the seventeenth century, however, saw the breakdown of this system of festivals founded on popular participation or initiative. Two dates are symbolic historical turning points: In 1610, for the first time, the pamphlet printed on the occasion of the Shrove Sunday festival mentioned neither the *abbayes joyeuses* nor the confraternity of La Coquille; and in 1622, Louis XIII was the last to receive a triumphal entry in the old manner. The following ones, such as that of Louis XIV in 1658, were nothing more than simple receptions by the municipal authorities and did not imply the participation of the local population. The change brought about was therefore threefold. First of all, popular organizations (*abbayes*, confraternities), traditionally the organizers of the festivals, died away. Second, the *fêtes* of the urban population, the triumphal entries, and the religious ceremonies lost their force. A good index of this decline is a comparison of church ju-

¹⁸ N. Z. Davis, “The Reasons of Misrule,” in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1975), 97-123.

¹⁹ *Entrées royales et fêtes populaires*, 49-50. Two documents cited, one by Davis (“Reasons of Misrule,” n. 70), the other in the Lyons catalogue (no. 22), permit one to see into one of these *confréries joyeuses*, which met in 1517 on the Rue Mercière.

²⁰ N. Z. Davis, “Printing and the People,” in *Society and Culture*, 218.

THE FÊTE IN FRANCE

bilees in Lyons in 1564, 1666, and 1734. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the amount and the ostentatiousness of decoration in public celebrations seems to have grown in inverse relation to popular participation. Thirdly, the *fête*, conceded to the public and reduced to a display, became the norm. Thus, in the sixteenth century the artisans offered to the eminent members of society the spectacle of donkey cavalcades, but in the eighteenth century it was the authorities who offered fireworks to the populace. Over the passage of time, popular initiative vanished and the *fête* became standardized. Whatever the occasion, whoever the organizers—aldermen or lords—canon of Saint John—the ceremony was the same, reduced to a fireworks display in which the original meaning of the traditional bonfire—the *feu de joie*—was totally obliterated. The *fête* transmitted and instituted an order of separation in the city, which lost its consciousness as a unified citizenry in which each member participated at his own level.²¹

This evolution, detailed from the case of Lyons, can without doubt be generalized not only for the city, but also for the country. For example, the multiplication of rose festivals around 1770, following the Parisian discovery of the customary festivities in Salency, instituted in the village a form of *fête* provided as a spectacle, which aimed at supplanting traditional rejoicings.²² Originating outside of the community and organized by aristocrats, ecclesiastics, or notables of the *parlement*, these *fêtes*, in search of a Christian Arcadia, had nothing to do with popular tradition, even though the elites, from having dramatized it, rediscovered the image of an ideal people, chaste and vigorous, simple and frugal, industrious and Christian. The anemia and displacement of the traditional *fête* entailed, in the eighteenth century, a double reaction. Popular emotions retreated to places the people could call their own, and, in turn, the *fête* became uniform and trite in its daily repetition. Provence, in the town as well as in the country, offers a good example of this evolution, which identified the *fête* more and more with a simple evening of dancing.²³

²¹ R. Chartier, "Une Académie avant les lettres patentes. Une Approche de la sociabilité des notables lyonnais à la fin du règne de Louis XIV," *Marseille* 101 (1975):115-20.

²² On the rose festivals, W. F. Everdell, "The *Rosière* Movement, 1766-1789. A Clerical Precursor of the Revolutionary Cults," *French Historical Studies* 9, no. 1 (1975):23-36, and M. de Certeau, D. Julia, and J. Revel, "La Beauté du mort: Le Concept de 'culture populaire,'" *Politique aujourd'hui*, December 1970:3-23.

²³ M. Vovelle, *Les Métamorphoses de la fête en Provence de 1750 à 1820* (Paris, 1976), 84-90.