

LAUGHING MATTERS

*Farce and the
Making of
Absolutism
in France*

SARA BEAM

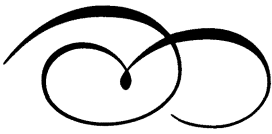


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FARCE AND THE MAKING
OF ABSOLUTISM IN FRANCE



SARA BEAM

Cornell University Press *Ithaca & London*

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First published 2007 by Cornell University Press

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beam, Sara.

Laughing matters : farce and the making of absolutism in France / Sara Beam.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8014-4560-6 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. French farces—History and criticism. 2. French drama—16th century—History and criticism. 3. French drama—17th century—History and criticism. 4. Theater—Political aspects—France—History—16th century. 5. Theater—Political aspects—France—History—17th century. I. Title.

PQ584.B43 2007

842'.409358—dc22 2006101254

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Cloth printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Acknowledgments

This work could never have been completed without the support—financial, intellectual and emotional—I have received along the way. Many thanks to the Institut Français de Washington, Victoria University at the University of Toronto, the History Department at the University of California, Berkeley, the Mellon Foundation, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada whose generous financial support made possible the research, thinking, and writing (not to mention rethinking and rewriting) that made this book what it is.

Many friends, colleagues, and teachers have contributed to this project. It was thanks to Nancy Partner at McGill University that I decided to pursue graduate studies and to focus on laughter as a historical category. In France, I owe a particular debt of gratitude to Madeleine de la Conté, chief archivist at the Archives Départementales Seine-Maritime, who led me to important documents that I would have otherwise overlooked. Robert Descimon and Roger Chartier at the École des Hautes Études very kindly allowed me to attend their seminars during the 1995–96 academic year and have encouraged me in my research since then. In North America, my colleagues at the Baltimore-Washington Old Regime Group, the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies at the University of Toronto, the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria, and the Early Modern Discussion Group at the University of Victoria provided lively intellectual communities in which to develop many of the ideas that became central to this study. David Bell, Michael Breen, Gregory Brown, Paul Cohen, Julie Crawford, Mitch Lewis-Hammond, Mack Holt, Andrea McKenzie, Jacob Melish, André Lambelet, Ed Pechter, Jeffrey Ravel, and Sydney Watts generously took the time to read parts of the manuscript and to offer their thoughts and criticisms. Megan Armstrong and Carina Johnson went further, reading and rereading the book in its entirety at moments when I needed both

critical engagement and encouragement. I would particularly like to thank John Ackerman, director of Cornell University Press, for his early enthusiasm for the manuscript as well as the anonymous readers for the Press whose comments were ever-so-helpful during the final editing process. Jim Collins and Barbara Diefendorf have been wonderful mentors, providing me with the kind of support that normally would be reserved for their own graduate students. This project was decisively shaped by my many teachers at the University of California at Berkeley, in particular Randy Starn, whose enthusiasm for my varied historical interests led me to the theater; Peter Sahlins, whose insistence that I keep the big picture in mind kept me from straying too far; and Carla Hesse, whose incisive criticism—coupled with confidence in my success—sustained me along the way. Finally, I thank Natalie Zemon Davis, whose work inspired me to become a French historian in the first place, and whose intellectual advice and personal example I always hold before me.

I owe my greatest thanks to those whose emotional support made this book possible, my family. Thanks to Irene Fairley for her endless enthusiasm for babysitting and her tactful editing; to Jordan Richards for his computer expertise and generous goodwill; to Robert Beam and Karen Takenaka for understanding completely when the book interfered with family holidays; to Matt Beam and Marjorie Garson for reading the entire manuscript with enthusiasm, love, and painstaking attention to style; to Iris and Emile Fairley-Beam for reminding me everyday of the importance of laughter; and to Peter Fairley, my life partner and best friend, who helped me in more ways than he can know.

Abbreviations

ADG	Archives Départementales de Gironde (Bordeaux)
ADHG	Archives Départementales de la Haute-Garonne (Toulouse)
ADSM	Archives Départementales Seine-Maritime (Rouen)
AMD	Archives Municipales Dijon
AN	Archives Nationales
AN MC	Archives Nationales Minutier Central
BM Bordeaux	Bibliothèque de Bordeaux
BNF	Bibliothèque Nationale de France

Until the late sixteenth century, the new calendar year began in late March or at Easter, depending on the jurisdiction. To avoid confusion, all dates have been converted to the new style, with the year presuming to have begun on 1 January.

Introduction

What we see that is ugly, deformed, improper, indecent, unfitting, and indecorous excites laughter in us, provided we are not moved to compassion.

LAURENT JOUBERT,
Treatise on Laughter (1579)

In the French farce *The Fart*, a husband and wife bicker over who has just let out a fragrant, resounding fart.¹ Unable to resolve the dispute, they turn to a passing lawyer and then to a judge to ask for legal advice. The judge's answer is simple: since, according to canon law, a married couple owns everything in common, the fart is theirs to share. The play ends happily, with the husband and wife reconciled and the judge satisfied with his fatuous ruling that all couples share a common asshole. The play works on several levels: it renders comic the awkward situation caused by the fart, the couple's inability to agree, and the inane application of canon law to a ridiculous case. It exposes the tension in human society between what our bodies do of their own accord and the social imperative to manage the body and its products in what are often ridiculous ways. By mocking both the squabbling couple and the judge, its satire does not render judgment on either—after all the ending is happy—but it does destabilize the nature of power in human relationships. It asks us to laugh at social conventions and traditional hierarchies, and to laugh at ourselves. As such, farces like *The Fart*, like much modern comedy, reveal how we see ourselves and our relationships with others. We may recognize the predicament faced by the fifteenth-century couple in *The Fart*, though the way that we would solve this problem would of course be different because our society has different structures of power and distinct systems of bodily constraints.

1. "Farce nouvelle et fort joyeuse du pect," in *Recueil de farces (1450–1550)*, ed. André Tisier (Geneva: Droz, 1996), 10:23–63.

Because it is both universal and, paradoxically, culturally specific, humor can be a useful subject for historical investigation.² In most societies, there are things you can joke about and things you cannot—at least not in public. Some jokes are forbidden by law, and many others are deemed inappropriate in mixed company. Moreover, the rules about what can be joked about change through time. Take workplace culture in professional America: it is no longer acceptable to joke about race, to demean homosexuals, or to make rape a thing of laughter. Such jokes can lead to lawsuits, monetary compensation, and dismissal.³ In a democratic society, changes in the culture of laughter sometimes advance the social and political status of groups relatively excluded from the locus of power. But this is not always the case. In authoritarian societies, changing norms about joking and laughter often limit what can be said in public and thereby inhibit political and social dialogue. Such was the case in early modern France: when common French men and women lost the freedom to joke about farts and to mock judges in public, their political freedoms were compromised as well.

Laughter is often a political act. As a result, where one can document humor's shifting context and impact over time, laughter can function as a litmus test of shifts in people's ideas about themselves and the political culture in which they live. It is a particularly useful entry into people's worldview when considering societies in which other reliable evidence is lacking, in which most people are illiterate, or in which crucial texts have been lost over time. This study examines humor, more particularly the changing fortunes of satirical theater, as a means to understand the political culture of early modern France, a society in which even the literate left relatively few records.

During the French Renaissance, young bourgeois men regularly made demeaning jokes in public. They performed short plays called farces in which

2. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1960); Christopher P. Wilson, *Jokes: Form, Content, Use and Function* (London: Academic Press, 1979); Henri Bergson, *Le rire: Essai sur la signification du comique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1969); Laurent Joubert, *Traité du ris: Contenant son essence, ses causes, et merveilleux effets* (Paris: Nicolas Chesneau, 1579); Dominique Bertrand, *Dire le rire à l'âge classique: Représenter pour mieux contrôler* (Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l'Université de Provence, 1995); William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

3. Masoud Hemmami, Lee A. Graf, and Gail S. Russ, "Gender-Related Jokes in the Workplace: Sexual Humor or Sexual Harassment?" *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 24 (1994): 1114–28; Janice D. Yoder and Patricia Aniakudo, "When Pranks Become Harassment: The Case of African American Women Firefighters," *Sex Roles* 35 (1996): 253–70; Elizabeth Walker Mechling and Jay Mechling, "Shock Talk: From Consensual to Contractual Joking Relationships in the Bureaucratic Workplace," *Human Organization* 44 (1985): 339–43; Larry Smeltzer and Terry L. Leap, "An Analysis of Individual Reactions to Potentially Offensive Jokes in Work Settings," *Human Relations* 41 (1988): 295–304; Vicki Shultz, "The Sanitized Workplace," *Yale Law Journal* 112 (2003): 2061–90.

no one was exempt from being called a whore or a fool. They mocked those on the margins of society, mostly women, whom they portrayed as licentious shrews, and peasants, whom they portrayed as fools. Yet many of their jokes skewered their social superiors—clergy and royal officials—and they regularly accused these men of misusing their positions of authority. Because France was ruled by kings who considered direct criticism of royal officials to be treasonous, the laughter of the farce allowed both actors and audience a rare opportunity to express their opinions in a public context. Performing farce was thus a political act that helped shape public opinion and let the clergy, royal officials, and even the king know that the common people expected them to behave responsibly and rule in the interest of the public good. Being able to laugh out loud about those who ruled them was experienced as a moment of freedom in an otherwise rigidly hierarchical society.⁴ Over time, however, this liberating culture of laughter was marginalized. Young bourgeois men ceased to perform satirical plays in the city streets, gradually submitting to a more closed cultural regime in which political and religious satire was pushed underground. This transformation took place in France between 1550 and 1650, and it marked the advent of a new political order—absolutism.

Farcical theater, and more particularly its regulation and later censorship, allows us to examine what role cultural change had in the establishment of absolutism, a form of governance that led to the modern European state. I argue that this transformation of farce from a ubiquitous to a marginal practice and its suppression was a two-stage process: the first stage occurred during the Wars of Religion (1562–98), when the urban elites who had until then been important patrons of farce first turned against the genre; the second began after peace was reestablished under Henry IV (1589–1610). I have found that urban officials, now eager to ingratiate themselves with a centralizing monarchy, decided that the teasing humor of the farce was too rude and crude to be performed during important civic events (especially when the king was present). Urban officials hungry for royal patronage turned instead to theatrical genres that flattered rather than mocked political power.

Seen in this light, the rise of absolutism in France—often presented as the strong arm bearing down on popular culture—becomes at least partly a *consequence* of censorship. Censorship is not simply imposed on subjects by a government but usually requires collusion at many levels of society and

4. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). For critical readings of his interpretation of laughter, see Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg, eds., *A Cultural History of Humour: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (Cambridge, Mass.: Polity Press, 1997); Aron Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*, trans. János M. Bak and Paul A. Hollingsworth (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

can itself transform political culture. The gradual demise of satirical farce was not the product of absolutism but one of its central constituents. Farce finally disappeared as an important political force at the moment when French urban officials decided they had more to gain from cooperating with the monarchy than from resisting its growing authority. This new intolerance for open religious and political debate took place between 1550 and 1650, the period *before* Louis XIV, the quintessential absolutist king, came to the throne.

My efforts to understand why farce was marginalized intersect with several strands of historical interpretation, including a well-established body of scholarship on the history of popular culture. Most historians agree that a relatively new distinction between popular and elite culture emerged in western Europe during the seventeenth century.⁵ Before 1550, nobles and educated elites happily participated in festive entertainments designed for the common city folk. The king, nobles, clergy, and urban magistrates all commissioned farce players to perform and enjoyed their bawdy humor. At a certain point, however, educated elites and nobles started to withdraw from popular festivities, holding themselves above such spectacles. In documenting the role of satirical theater in this process, this volume revises our current understanding of how this marginalization of popular culture was tied to the rise of absolutist power in France.

Since Norbert Elias's *The Civilizing Process* was assimilated into early modern historiography in the 1980s, historians have linked the growing divergence between popular and elite culture to the development of the modern European state. In France, state centralization occurred under the auspices of absolutism. Absolutism, it is generally agreed, did not mean

5. Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978); Robert Mandrou, *De la culture populaire aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles: La Bibliothèque bleue de Troyes* (Paris: Stock, 1964); Carlo Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Reasons of Misrule: Youth-Groups and Charivaris in Sixteenth-Century France," *Past and Present* 50 (1971): 41–75; Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Rites of Violence: Religious Riots in Sixteenth-Century France," *Past and Present* 59 (1973): 51–91; Robert Muchembled, *Culture populaire et culture des élites dans la France moderne, XV^e–XVIII^e siècles: Essai* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977); Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Le Carnaval de Romans: De la Chandeleur au mercredi des Cendres, 1579–1580* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979); Roger Chartier, "Discipline et invention: La fête," in *Lectures et lecteurs dans la France d'ancien régime* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), 23–43; Nicole Pellegrin, *Les bachelleries: Organisations et fêtes de la jeunesse dans le Centre-Ouest, XV^e–XVIII^e siècles* (Poitiers: Société des Antiquaires de l'Ouest, 1982); Michel Vovelle, *Les métamorphoses de la fête en Provence de 1750 à 1820* (Paris: Flammarion, 1976). See also two general collections of articles, Jacques Beauroy, Marc Bertrand, and Edward Gargan, eds., *The Wolf and the Lamb: Popular Culture in France from the Old Régime to the Twentieth Century* (Saratoga, Calif.: Anma Libri, 1977); Stephen L. Kaplan, ed., *Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century* (Berlin: Mouton, 1984).

that French monarchs truly exercised absolute power.⁶ Nevertheless, the kings of Bourbon France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries claimed to rule by divine right and in principle rejected the idea that any individual or corporate body could challenge their authority. In making these claims, French monarchs reinvented the traditional understanding of the body politic. In place of a medieval vision of the body politic, which mandated some measure of consultation between the king and his subjects, they substituted, by the seventeenth century, an absolutist body centered squarely on the king. According to Louis XIV, the king alone could act in the public good because God deemed it to be his right and duty to do so.

Norbert Elias saw a reciprocal connection between the absolutist body politic and the withdrawal of French elites from popular culture. For Elias, Louis XIV's construction of Versailles in the 1680s and his insistence that the aristocracy reside at court symbolized the changed political relationship between king and noble, in which the noble became a mere courtier under the ever-expanding authority of the monarch. Because the noble now depended on the king for a royal pension and could no longer live off his own estates, he was forced to participate in elaborate court rituals during which he debased himself before the king.⁷ At Versailles, nobles adhered to a new code of manners called *civilité*, which demanded that courtiers avoid offending (at least directly) their social superiors and encouraged them to control their bodily urges, even if that meant tempering their usual habits of spitting in public and urinating in the halls. This new standard of public comportment similarly repudiated farce as crass and scandalous. For French elites increasingly controlled by a centralizing monarchy, adopting this new set of manners distinguished them from the rabble, and allowed them to assert cultural superiority during a period when their political autonomy was shrinking. Although Elias's relentless focus on Versailles as the locus of cultural change in France has been modified by historians who identify several sites in which increasing bodily constraints and political power intersect, for most historians of early

6. William Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France: State Power and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Fanny Cosandey and Robert Descimon, *L'absolutisme en France: Histoire et historiographie* (Paris: Seuil, 2002); Louis Marin, *Le portrait du roi* (Paris: Minuit, 1981). For a fuller discussion of absolutism, see chapter 6.

7. Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Eric Dunning, Johan Goudsblom, and Stephen Mennell (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 109–28, 188–204, 365–403; Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction: Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Minuit, 1979); Jorge Ardit, *A Genealogy of Manners: Transformations of Social Relations in France and England from the Fourteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Jan A. Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg, eds., *A Cultural History of Gesture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

modern Europe the withdrawal of elites from popular culture still signals an accommodation to the absolutist, hence modernizing, state.⁸

I argue in this book that farcical performance and its marginalization need to be taken into account to explain the development of this new sense of decorum and reorientation of political relationships in France. The suppression of farce was a process that began much earlier than the developments discussed by Elias, and it proceeded not from the centralized court at Versailles but from the direction of municipal officials in cities all over the country. Until recently, the role of urban elites in seventeenth-century French political developments has been elusive. Historians have focused on the role of the French provincial nobility as active partners in the development of absolute rule under Louis XIV but have assumed rather than explored the acquiescence of urban officials.⁹ Recent studies of provincial cities, which focus on municipal politics and how urban officials interacted with the crown, have begun to correct this understanding of urban elites as passive recipients of absolutism.¹⁰ This book broadens our understanding of urban officials' motivations by demonstrating the ways in which they were responding not only to new political pressures but also to religious influences—the threat of religious violence, the religious pressures of Catholic reform—deliberately underplayed by Elias. By the seventeenth century, urban officials increasingly identified with the nobility. Repudiating farce and embracing civility were important ways for them to distinguish

8. Muchembled, *Invention*, 135–201; Roger Chartier, "Distinction et divulgation: La civilité et ses livres," in *Lectures et lecteurs*, 45–86; Jacques Revel, "The Uses of Civility," in *Passions of the Renaissance*, ed. Roger Chartier, vol. 3 of *A History of Private Life*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 167–205; Jay M. Smith, "'Our Sovereign's Gaze': Kings, Nobles, and State Formation in Seventeenth-Century France," *French Historical Studies* 18 (1993): 396–415; Orest Ranum, "Courtesy, Absolutism and the Rise of the French State, 1630–1660," *Journal of Modern History* 52 (1980): 426–51; Anna Bryson, *From Courtesy to Civility: Changing Codes of Conduct in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). Also see studies of individual French cities, Philip T. Hoffman, *Church and Community in the Diocese of Lyon, 1500–1789* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 87–97; Robert A. Schneider, *Public Life in Toulouse, 1463–1789: From Municipal Republic to Cosmopolitan City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 82–89, 255–75; Gregory Hanlon, *L'univers des gens de bien: Culture et comportements des élites urbaines en Agenais-Commois au XVII^e siècle* (Talence: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1989).

9. Beik, *Absolutism*; James B. Collins, *Fiscal Limits of Absolutism: Direct Taxation in Early Seventeenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Albert N. Hamscher, *The Conseil Privé and the Parlements in the Age of Louis XIV: A Study of French Absolutism* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1987); Sharon Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers and Clients in Seventeenth-Century France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

10. Michael P. Breen, "Legal Culture, Municipal Politics and Royal Absolutism in Seventeenth-Century France: The 'Avocats' of Dijon (1595–1715)," Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 2000; Hilary J. Bernstein, *Between Crown and Community: Politics and Civic Culture in Sixteenth-Century Poitiers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); Guy Saupin, *Nantes au XVII^e siècle: Vie politique et société urbaine* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1996); Yann Lignereux, *Lyon et le roi: De la "bonne ville" à l'absolutisme municipal (1594–1654)* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 2003).

themselves from their social inferiors and thereby constitute their identity as members of the French ruling elite.

Farce, and the theater more generally, is an effective window for viewing changes in political culture because of its predominance as a public venue. In a time before film, newspapers, and even widespread literacy, theater was a central medium for the dissemination of information and ideas. Townspeople and farmers bringing goods to market gathered to watch plays in the city square not just to be entertained but also to catch the latest news. Members of the local nobility and important city officials sat on raised platforms to watch these public shows unfold. Many of the actors were respectable members of the community, such as law clerks working at the royal courts or university students. The actors were educated enough to be in the know regarding political and religious questions, and their relatively secure social status meant that they could take some risks in mocking those who administered their town and its diocese. These amateur performers usually belonged to long-standing festive societies, associations of predominately young men who traditionally performed farces at religious festivals such as Carnival as well as other civic celebrations. During the Renaissance, festive societies were a regular and celebrated element of urban society; their performances were applauded by all social classes, even the men in positions of authority whom they sometimes mocked.

During the French Renaissance, theater was accessible to all, yet it was also controlled by the urban oligarchy that ruled the city. Generally speaking, city officials recognized that the theater was a primary medium for shaping public opinion and thus sought to regulate its performance. Groups that wanted to perform a play were limited to a specific location in the city and consulted with local authorities about the timing and content of their performance. Despite concern that actors would perform slanderous plays that might result in street fights and libel suits, city councils and nobles enjoyed farcical theater enough to help finance its performance on a regular basis. Happily for the historian, there was some disagreement about who had the authority to permit plays to be performed, leaving us a rich source of city council and royal court documentation to tell us why a particular local church might want a farce to be performed and why a particular city council might not. This evidence—sometimes of censorship, sometimes of patronage—tells us what local authorities thought to be worthy of performance. Theatrical regulation clarifies when it became unacceptable to make lewd and satirical jokes in public, and how the new ideal of civility eventually found its way onto the public stage.

Farces were inherently satirical plays, and their jokes directly challenged the authority that religious and royal officials enjoyed in Renaissance France. Their satire was informed by Christian morals: the players held everyone in society—from the peasant to the king—to the standards of modesty, charity, and submissiveness found in Christian teaching, and then laughed out

loud when it became clear that no one but saints could possibly hope to achieve them. Laughing about bodies also had direct political ramifications in Renaissance Europe. Jokes about defecation and sex were particularly resonant because political power was imagined in terms of a spiritual body. All subjects of the king, including the king himself, were thought to belong to a single body politic rendered whole by God's sanction.¹¹ Usually characterized as the head of the body politic, the king was nevertheless also expected to consult with and consider the needs of the whole. As a result, when early modern Europeans wanted to make fun of political power, they often did so by reversing the hierarchy of the body politic: at Carnival and during other traditional festivals, the anus directed the head, the belly led the clergy, and lust for violence drove the nobility to war.

We know the farce was an inherently satirical genre thanks to the actions of judges and city councilors, who often imprisoned actors when they made the authority figures they mocked a little too recognizable. During the Renaissance, bawdy humor, social satire, and political commentary mixed, if not freely, at least with a certain license. Urban magistrates and city councilors patronized farce, even though it often resulted in slander, because they believed that a measure of open political and religious discussion was legitimate in order for the king to know how best to serve the public good. Acknowledging the political engagement of the theater and its role in shaping public opinion helps us to understand why festivals like Carnival were so closely regulated throughout the early modern period.

In France, a relatively open and tolerant period of theatrical performance came to an end during the sixteenth century. The general trend between 1550 and 1650 was toward increasing constraint: fewer people were allowed to perform farces in fewer places, and those who did so had less freedom to talk explicitly about the human body or about power relations. The reasons for this contraction are both religious and political. Initially, during the Wars of Religion, religious concerns predominated. Catholic urban officials, fearful of the threat of Protestantism, sought to reform lay Catholic practice in their cities. Increasingly, they deemed satirical farce to be a profane corruption of legitimate Catholic festivals such as saints' day celebrations and, as a result, censored its performance. The explicit references to the human body and sexuality found in many farces were thought to be dangerously provocative in cities riven by rival religious communities of Catholics and Protestants who often came to blows.

Once war ended, farce returned to the public stage but in a modified form. Theater audiences still chuckled at fart jokes and limp penises, but they no

11. Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); M. S. Kempshall, *The Common Good in Late Medieval Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999); Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

longer expected biting satire and political slander from the actors who performed these comic plays, largely because the social class of the farceurs had changed. The relatively high-status bourgeois and noble actors of the Renaissance were replaced by professional actors. Such men and women—those who made their living by performing—were socially marginal; they were usually itinerants, and their trade was frowned upon by the Catholic Church. They sought to entertain the crowds but had little interest in risking a prison sentence in order to articulate political concerns about the public good. By 1600, amateur festive societies no longer performed farce publicly, and pointed political and religious satire had largely exited the stage.

Political change also influenced the performance of farce. After the Wars of Religion, during which so many French cities rebelled against the crown, Henry IV (1598–1610) and his successors sought to limit the traditional political freedoms enjoyed by urban officials. Without immediately abrogating their political privileges, Henry IV, Louis XIII, and Louis XIV put increasing pressure on municipal elites to conform to royal policies and directives during the first half of the seventeenth century. Urban officials responded to this pressure in a variety of ways, one of which was to avoid antagonizing the king with bawdy jokes made at his expense. In this context, most urban officials chose not to resuscitate the groups of amateurs who had traditionally performed farces, favoring Jesuit students who performed quiescent Christian tragedies after royal entry ceremonies and at other important civic events. The Jesuits explicitly refused to perform farce, which they considered unruly and immoral, and instead used student theater to cement their patronage relationship with the monarchy and to express their theological conservatism. Jesuit students were taught to embody the new ideal of civility. In ballets and neoclassical plays performed not only in Paris but in most provincial cities throughout the seventeenth century, the Jesuits displayed their students' physical grace, Christian piety, and political deference for the pleasure of the king and for the local urban elite. Supporting the reinvention of the French body politic advanced by the king, the Jesuits employed what I call the discourse of absolutism to enhance the status of their order and to pressure the French monarchy to pursue particular political ends.

And who were the students of this conservative Catholic religious order? They were in fact the sons of the city officials, youth who were thus naturally inclined to identify with the messages articulated in the Jesuit student theater. These officials learned from the Jesuits that the best way to get ahead politically under the Bourbon monarchy was to adopt civility, flatter the monarchy, and thereby secure themselves a position in royal service. In fact, urban elites throughout France adopted the discourse of absolutism decades before the traditionally independent French nobility, signaling their willingness to set aside a measure of local autonomy in order to profit from the extending reach of royal patronage. In the process, farce with its bawdy satire and its ability to express political discontent was sacrificed.

I have examined theater and political culture in France in part because an unusually rich set of printed and archival sources remains to tell the French story. Yet the changes I describe are not unique to France. Farce flourished all over western Europe during the Renaissance. By the eighteenth century, its prestige had waned, and in many Catholic regions from Bavaria to southern Italy, Jesuit students came to dominate the civic stage.¹² Indeed, further research may establish that a similar combination of changing religious values and political centralization contributed to the rise of civility elsewhere. Throughout western Europe, there was clearly a link between changes in elite manners and elite identification with the modernizing state. Relative elites, from the nobility to urban officials, chose to participate in the censorship of political and religious criticism in order to cement their own positions of power in the emerging state. This was not a universal or an inevitable process, but it was a defining element of becoming modern in the West. How this cultural transformation came about and at what political cost are the subjects of the chapters that follow.

12. Joël Lefebvre, *Les fols et la folie: Étude sur les genres du comique et la création littéraire en Allemagne pendant la Renaissance* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1968); Barbara I. Gusick and Edgard E. DuBruck, eds., *New Approaches to European Theater of the Middle Ages: An Ontology* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004); Jean-Marie Valentin, *L'école, la ville, la cour: Pratiques sociales, enjeux poétologiques et répertoires du théâtre dans l'Empire au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2004); Jennifer D. Selwyn, *A Paradise Inhabited by Devils: The Jesuits' Civilizing Mission in Early Modern Naples* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

I *Farce, Honor, and the Bounds of Satire*

At the break of dawn on October 29, 1447, Dijon awakens to a clear day, a good day for theater going. Just inside the city walls, at a place called Morimont's Field near the Carmelite monastery, several dozen people hurry about in the early morning light. Priests, monks, and city folk prepare for the day's performance. Pierre Montbeliard, a priest and the local organizer of the event, consults with the amateur actors, making sure each one knows where to stand during the play and when to say his or her lines.¹ Today is the Sunday before the Christian holiday of Toussaint (All Saints' Day) and to celebrate the community has decided to perform a play recounting the life of a local patron saint. In preparation, carpenters finish assembling the raised platforms that are to be the stage, which are about two meters off the ground and open to the sky. At the eastern end of these platforms hang curtains depicting heaven, complete with illustrations of the sky and angels, while the other end is darkened with images of fiery hell. These theatrical platforms stand alongside another, more sinister, platform: Dijon's public execution site. Morimont's Field is the place where the Dijon executioner burns heretics and hangs those condemned to death for murder. In other cities, theatrical performances often took place in cemeteries, where the souls of

1. James R. Farr, *Hands of Honor: Artisans and Their World in Dijon, 1550-1650* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 77, 89; Grace Frank, *The Medieval French Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1954), 161-73; Jean Richard, "Le Dijon des ducs et de la commune (XIe-XIVe siècles)," in *Histoire de Dijon*, ed. Pierre Gras (Toulouse: Privat, 1981), 44; Élie Konigson, *L'espace théâtral médiéval* (Paris: CNRS, 1975), 77-79, 93-94; Louis Petit de Julleville, *Histoire du théâtre en France: Les mystères* (Paris: Hachette, 1880; reprint, Geneva: Slatkine, 1968), 2:19, 23; Charles Mazouer, *Le théâtre français de la Renaissance* (Paris: Champion, 2002), 43-52; Michel Rousse, "Fonction du dispositif théâtral dans la genèse de la farce," in *Atti del IV Colloquio della Società Internazionale per l'Étude du Théâtre Médiéval*, ed. M. Chiabò, F. Doglio, and M. Maymone (Viterbo: Centro Studi sul Teatro Medioevale e Rinascimentale, 1984), 388.

those waiting in purgatory were thought to be lingering. This juxtaposition of death with a theatrical performance does not disturb the good citizens of Dijon. They are accustomed to the close proximity of sanctity, violence, and death. Today's performance, a mystery play depicting the life and death of Saint Eloi, will, like the executions, seek to entertain as well as to inspire the spectators with fear of God's wrath and wonder at his good works.²

Slowly, as the sky brightens, the first spectators arrive. They are probably artisans and working poor who live in the nearby urban parishes of Saint Philibert and Saint Jean. They come early to stake out a good viewing spot on the ground near the stage, and they look forward to a free and what they hope will be an amusing performance. Some artisans chat with their friends already dressed in costume and ready to take part in the ceremonial procession that will announce the beginning of the performance.³ The wealthier city dwellers—retail merchants, lawyers, city councilors, local nobility—arrive a bit later. They station themselves on some raised seating, perhaps a window or a balcony of a nearby house, or a cart mounted with benches. They are also looking forward to the show, which the city council probably helped to fund and which may feature notable and wealthy Dijon citizens in prominent roles.⁴ The field is large and can accommodate hundreds of spectators. Since the expense involved in mounting a mystery play is considerable and the planning likely a project of several months, the performance is a major civic event.⁵

But events do not unfold entirely as planned. In the middle of the mystery play three men, hoping to keep "the audience awake and amused," perform a short farce.⁶ This intermission, likely fifteen minutes to an hour long, begins with a song followed by a short play. The farce players perform on a portion of the stage, and it is possible that the actors portraying the saint and other characters in the mystery are still sitting or standing nearby, visible to the audience.⁷ The farce players are distinguished from the other actors by

2. Michel-Hilaire Clément-Janin, *Le Morimont de Dijon: Bourreaux et suppliciés* (Dijon: Darantière, 1889), 20–21; Konigson, *Espace*, 96; Dominique Viaux, *La vie paroissiale à Dijon à la fin du moyen âge* (Dijon: Éditions Universitaires de Dijon, 1988), 199–201; Jelle Koopmans, *Le théâtre des exclus au moyen âge: Hérétiques, sorcières et marginaux* (Paris: Imago, 1997), 11–40.

3. Farr, *Hands*, 83–85; Konigson, *Espace*, 69; Michel Rousse, "L'espace scénique des farces," in *Le théâtre au moyen âge*, ed. Gari R. Muller (Montreal: Aurore/Univers, 1981), 137–46.

4. Louis de Gouvenain, *Le théâtre à Dijon, 1422–1790* (Dijon: E. Joubard, 1888), 33; Konigson, *Espace*, 72, 101–3; Louis Petit de Julleville, *Histoire du théâtre en France: Répertoire du théâtre comique en France au moyen âge* (Paris: Le Cerf, 1886), 330–35.

5. Konigson, *Espace*, 74; Danielle Quérue, "Fêtes et théâtre à Reims à la fin du XVe siècle," in *Et c'est la fin pour quoi sommes ensemble: Hommage à Jean Dufournet*, ed. Jean-Claude Aubailly (Paris: Champion, 1993), 1182; Viaux, *Vie*, 166.

6. Gouvenain, *Théâtre*, 32.

7. *Ibid.*, 32–34; Barbara C. Bowen, *Les caractéristiques essentielles de la farce française et leur survivance dans les années 1550–1620* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964), 62; Konigson, *Espace*, 96; Geneviève de Chambure, "La musique dans les farces," *Cahiers de l'Association Internationale des Études Françaises* 26 (1974): 49–59.

their more down-to-earth costumes, which represent immediately recognizable social roles: the priest, the judge, the wife, the peasant. The farce players are men, probably young men, who perform both male and female roles by exaggerating stereotypes to comic effect. Unlike the mystery play, which deals with historic and divine events, the farce represents everyday life, or at least a particular version of it, in which men and women never seem to get along and authority figures always seem to make bad decisions.⁸ On this day, two of the actors dressed as commoners named Robin and Jacquin jest in rhyme about current events. Speaking in the regional dialect, they joke at length about a particular military expedition near the town of Montbéliard that certain inept people, who remain nameless, recently made. Their humor is coarse, and they rely on broad physical gestures to make sure that the audience gets all the jokes. Amid general laughter, a commotion starts up in the audience. Several of the more prominent citizens of Dijon watching the performance suddenly get up and leave Morimont's Field without even waiting for the farce to end.⁹

A few days later, after Toussaint, the city council heard a formal complaint brought against the farce players. Several "notable persons" who had attended the performance alleged that the farce players spoke foolish and outrageous words that day and should be brought to justice. These honorable citizens claimed that some jokes went so far as to mock the king, his son the dauphin, and their attendants. The chief prosecutor for the city, listening carefully to these allegations, decided that this matter challenged the very "honor and functioning of the city" and determined that the city council should investigate further.¹⁰ The judicial inquiry quickly focused on the farce and the man who played Robin, the character who spoke the offending lines.

The role of Robin had been performed by a man named Savenot, who worked in Dijon's textile industry, the backbone of the city's economy. As an artisan in another's shop, Savenot was a member of the working poor, who made up about half of Dijon's population. It is possible that he was a young man, still hoping to open a shop of his own someday when he married and settled down. We know he was literate, which suggests that he came from a family secure enough in its finances to send him to a local priest for instruction before he began to apprentice in his early teens. Savenot was thus of a decidedly lower social status than the "notable persons" who brought the complaint against him and the members of the city council who judged his case.¹¹ Once the investigation got under way,

8. André Tissier, "Le rôle du costume dans les farces médiévales," in *Le théâtre et la cité dans l'Europe médiévale*, ed. Jean-Claude Aubailly and Edelgard E. Dubruck (Stuttgart: H.-D. Heinz, 1988), 373, 377.

9. Gouvenain, *Théâtre*, 33.

10. *Ibid.*, 34.

11. Farr, *Hands*, 80, 239–40; Bernard Chevalier, *Les bonnes villes de France du XIV^e au XVI^e siècle* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1982), 83–88, 204–9.

Savenot, who took responsibility for having performed the role of Robin and for being the owner of the farcical play in question, agreed to be imprisoned in the city jail as a way of making amends for his transgression.

After a brief imprisonment of a few days, the mayor interrogated Savenot about his involvement in the farce. Savenot willingly admitted that he had referred to the dauphin's military campaigns, but he also defended his actions. Savenot claimed that he had meant no harm in performing the farce, which he had first seen performed two years earlier, in 1445, in the nearby town of Beaune. At that time, Savenot had so enjoyed the performance that he had paid to have the farce copied down so that he could take it home and perform it himself. When the residents of Dijon began to prepare for the mystery play performance, the actors together decided that Savenot's copied farce would provide an appropriate intermission. Savenot insisted that none of the actors thought the play contained "words referring to or disrespectful of the honor of anyone, and likewise the king our majesty's and the dauphin's men."¹² Nevertheless, at the urging of one performer, they all agreed to remove the word *escorcheurs* (flayers) from the text of the play, replacing it with the more neutral *estradeurs* (travelers) in a crucial scene of the play. Savenot also tried to ingratiate himself with the mayor, claiming that his own intentions had been innocent but that his judgment may have been clouded by the fact that he was "no cleric and could not read well."¹³ Despite Savenot's claims of naiveté, the farce players' decision to replace the word *escorcheurs* with *estradeurs* signals that they were aware of the satirical potential of the farce and that they understood how easy it was for stereotypical jokes to become topical and pointed.

Reconstructing the political context of mid-fifteenth-century Dijon is crucial for understanding why local authorities understood this farcical performance to be slanderous satire. At first glance, it seems surprising that the Dijon city council would have been concerned about jokes made at the expense of the king of France. Dijon, a city of 6,000 to 8,000 inhabitants in eastern France, was the capital of the duchy of Burgundy, a province that had long had a turbulent relationship with the French monarchy. Since the mid-fourteenth century when King Charles V (1364–80) gave the duchy to his youngest son Philip, the duchy had been ruled by the French king in name only. In practice, the dukes of Burgundy, who also acquired adjacent lands in Flanders through marriage, began ruling Burgundy as their own, including waging wars and conducting diplomacy as if they were independent territorial rulers. It was the duke rather than the king of France who affirmed Dijon's legal and fiscal privileges during the first half of the fifteenth century, and it was to the duke that Burgundian taxes were

12. Gouvenain, *Théâtre*, 34–35.

13. *Ibid.*, 35.

paid.¹⁴ During the devastating Hundred Years' War (1337–1453) between France and England, a war fought to determine who would control the area that is now France, the Duke of Burgundy sided with the English, a decision that inevitably weakened the French king's authority. Under these circumstances, jokes about the military weakness of the French crown might have seemed apropos, or at least inoffensive. Yet by the mid-1440s, the political balance of power was again shifting, and the Dijon city council had begun playing a delicate game of splitting its loyalties between the duke and the king. Technically, as subjects of the French monarch, all Dijon residents owed allegiance to the king. Although the duke might have laughed out loud at the farce players' barbs, the small oligarchy that controlled Dijon's city council and law courts was concerned how the king would react if he heard of the Dijon performance.

By referring to the town of Montbéliard and the *estradeurs*, the farce players raised delicate issues that the city council preferred not be aired in public. Although King Charles VII (1422–61) of France and Philip of Burgundy had settled their differences at the 1435 Peace of Arras, in actuality this treaty only marked the beginning of a prolonged cold war between the two rulers. Charles VII wanted the duchy of Burgundy back under his direct control, and, short of going to war, did his best to undermine the duke's authority in the region. With his aim in mind, Charles allowed decommissioned French troops to roam Burgundy. He also launched several military campaigns through Burgundy, including an offensive led by the dauphin on Montbéliard, the campaign mentioned in the farce. Although these military operations were directed against the Swiss and took place some 120 kilometers east of Dijon, the troops marched through Burgundy in order to reach their target. In between military campaigns, the king's troops lived off the land, requisitioning grain, harassing travelers, and looting farmhouses. Their actions threatened the public peace and the prosperity of the whole region throughout the decade between 1435 and 1445, that is to say, up to two years before Savenot performed his farce in Dijon. The French king's soldiers were known to everyone, even referred to in public documents, as the *escorcheurs*, a pejorative term that referred to their marauding and thievery.¹⁵ In the political context of 1447, the mere changing of the word *escorcheurs* to *estradeurs* (travelers) would have done little to hide the true object of the farce players' jokes. Everyone in the Dijon audience would have known that Robin was referring to the dauphin's military actions: puns, wordplay, and allusions were part of the fun of watching a farce; audiences

14. Joseph Garnier, *Chartes de communes et d'affranchissements en Bourgogne* (Dijon: J.-E. Rabutot, 1867), 1:87–111; Richard Vaughan, *Valois Burgundy* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1975), 70, 110.

15. Joseph de Fréminville, *Les écorcheurs en Bourgogne, 1435–1445: Étude sur les compagnies franches au XVe siècle* (Dijon: Darantière, 1888), 194–97; Richard Vaughan, *Philip the Good: The Apogee of Burgundy* (London: Longmans, 1970), 94–97, 114–19.

were trained to be on the lookout for hidden meanings.¹⁶ Laughing about the French king's marauding troops was probably a useful way of coping with an unstable and potentially dangerous military situation.

The Dijon city council saw the situation rather differently. The *escorcheurs* had so destabilized political authority in Burgundy that the urban elite had reacted by renewing its bonds of loyalty to Charles VII.¹⁷ By the mid-1440s, the chief law court of Burgundy was regularly sending appeal cases to the king of France rather than to the duke. The council probably worried that news of the farce might reach the king's ears and make him doubt the city's loyalty. By investigating the matter diligently, the council cleared itself of any responsibility for the offending jokes. Such was often the motivation of authorities who investigated accusations of slander against farce players.

The 1447 Dijon performance was not unusual. Farces often referred to contemporary political events, usually local ones; it was one of the elements that made these plays interesting to fifteenth- and sixteenth-century audiences.¹⁸ Sometimes such performances led to complaints and even to violence. In Dijon alone, we know of at least two more incidents of farce players getting into trouble within a decade of the *escorcheurs* incident. Six years earlier, a man named Colas Malart, pleading on his knees, apologized to the mayor of Dijon for having mocked him during a farce. A few years later, in 1452, several people, including a monk from Cîteaux, broke into the home of a Dijon schoolteacher and threatened him with violence because of a farce he had written and had had his students perform.¹⁹ Though by no means an everyday event, the disciplining of rowdy and satirical farce players was an expected element of civic life during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Obviously, only the most sensational of these incidents found their way into the archives or personal memoirs. Yet the language that local magistrates regularly used when granting permission to farce players to perform gives a clear sense of how commonplace it was for their performances to result in complaints of slander. Magistrates often warned the players to avoid "scandal" or disorder even as they helped to pay for the costumes needed for the performance.²⁰

16. *Journal d'un bourgeois de Paris sous le règne de François 1er, 1515-1536*, ed. Ludovic Lalanne (Paris: Jules Renouard, 1854), 13-14.

17. Garnier, *Chartes*, 1:103n1; Vaughan, *Valois*, 196; André Leguai, "The Relations between the Towns of Burgundy and the French Crown in the Fifteenth Century," in *The Crown and Local Communities in England and France in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. J. R. L. Highfield and Robin Jeffs (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1981), 131-36.

18. Michel Rousse, "Angers et le théâtre profane médiéval," *Revue d'Histoire du Théâtre* 43 (1991): 53-67.

19. Gouvenain, *Théâtre*, 35-36; Archives Municipales (AM) Dijon 1 B 159, fol. 27 (19 Oct. 1450).

20. Archives Nationales (AN) x1a 4906, fol. 589, 6 Aug. 1538; AN x1a 1545, fol. 336, 7 May 1540; AN x1a 1584, fol. 75, 5 Feb. 1557; Archives Départementales (AD) Haute-Garonne (HG) 2 Mi 165, fol. 421, 27-29 May 1478; ADHG B 57, fol. 793, 17 Aug. 1564; ADHG B