CHAPTER ONE

PERSONAL EXPRESSION OF A PLAYWRIGHT OR
PUBLIC DISCOURSE OF A CONFRATERNITY?
A PERFORMANCE AT THE PUY DE NOTRE-DAME IN AMIENS IN 1473

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Introduction

When considering the context of the literary production of the Puys of Normandy and the French-speaking Southern towns in the Low Countries, scholars often focus on the devotional motives of these confraternities as well as on the cultural significance of their literary practices within a given city. Indeed, the Puys were primarily local brotherhoods gathering notables that appeared first in Artois (Arras), and then developed in Hainaut (Valenciennes), Picardy and Normandy.¹ Their purpose was to encourage devotional practices and in particular to celebrate the Virgin Mary in poetic compositions; the best poems were acclaimed during contests presided over by a Prince or Master elected annually.

If scholars envisage that political considerations might have played a role in the literature produced by these societies, then these are usually seen as mere references to the general historical context in which this production took place. The reason is simple: there does not seem to be any trace of political expression in the poems nor in the rare plays produced by the Puys. Moreover, one can argue that these texts were not meant to express a public discourse on behalf of the Puy, since they were written in the specific and semi-private context of the contests and banquets of the confraternities. Indeed, the poems and plays were primarily written to be heard by the members of the Puy, and were not necessarily brought to

¹ One can observe a transfer of fame from Arras in the 13th century to Valenciennes in the 14th c., then Amiens in the 15th c., and finally Rouen in the 15th and 16th c. It is worth noting that the literary activities of the Puy of Rouen went on until the 18th century, albeit in other forms than the medieval ones.
a larger audience, either because not all the sessions of the Puys were public, or because only a limited part of their literary production was published in manuscript or print form.

However, one may find exceptions to this apparently non-political production, as I wish to demonstrate through an analysis of a play written for performance at the Puy of Notre Dame in the city of Amiens, in 1473. This play makes it possible to gauge the position of drama within the wider literary activities of this brotherhood, as well as the significance of a text that seems to contain traces of political criticism directed against the Duke of Burgundy. If confirmed, this double meaning of the play as proof of the performative activities of the Puy and as a political positioning of the author and his patron would allow us to consider the possibility that the Puy of Amiens engaged in public discourse.

In order to investigate this possibility, I will first describe the Puy of Amiens and the circumstances in which this play was performed, as well as take into account the other evidence of dramatic activity on the part of the members of the Puy. I will then present the content of the play and discuss its problematic relations to its political context. Finally, I will analyse the problems concerning public discourse raised by this example and its particular use of local characters compared to the usual ways in which a city would express its local identity in the theatrical production of the time.

**Historical and Cultural Context**

*The Political Context of Amiens Around 1470*

Picardy had long been the object of rivalry between the Kingdom of France and the Duchy of Burgundy. In 1463, Louis XI bought Amiens and other cities of the Somme from Philip the Good, but Philip’s son, Charles the Bold, forced Louis to give the cities back in 1468. The King of France then invaded the Somme region again in 1471, and despite numerous attempts by Charles to retake Amiens, the city remained French and was definitively integrated into the Kingdom of France at the time of the death of the Duke of Burgundy in 1477. The 1473 play was thus composed and performed while Charles the Bold was trying to regain the city, and, as we will see, there is some evidence in the play that the playwright was not in favour of the reintegration of Amiens into the Duchy.