French Medieval Drama and
The Praise of Folly
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DESPITE the warning prefaced to The Praise of Folly that "trifles lead to serious ideas," readers have been puzzled by the changes of tone and genre as the oration progresses from a jovial, ironic praise of folly as the sine qua non of man's life and happiness, to an invective against the negligence and vices of ecclesiastic and civic leaders, and finally to an eulogy of Christian folly. As Clarence Miller has suggested Folly herself indicates precedents for the movement from a comic to a serious tone when she begs her audience for "attention—not the kind you give to godly preachers, but rather the kind you give to pitchmen, low comedians, and jokesters..." (p. 10), referring to the actors of the sociétés joyeuses and confréries who performed in medieval and Renaissance France. The action of their dramatic productions progressed not only through a variety of events and tones but also through different genres. By forming a sequence of different plays, usually a sottie, moralité, and farce, the performances progressed from an engaging comic play to an edifying conclusion. A significant example is Pierre Gringoire's Le Jeu du Prince des Sots, performed for the Mardi Gras of 1512; it combined a cry, sottie, moralité, and farce portraying the folly of subservience to the pope.

Not only the distinct genres segmenting the action of the dramatic productions but also the variety of subjects, classical, Christian, and comic,

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3 Clarence Miller, Introduction to Moriae Encomium, pp. 16-17, 20-21.

provide significant analogies to the tripartite structure of The Praise of Folly. Through the conjunction of comic and serious elements both Erasmus and the French dramatic troupes formed a vehicle appropriate to their dual perceptions of folly, mundane and Christian.

The sottie often explores the significance of the fool who, like Erasmus' Folly, is both subject and dramatis persona. The fool represents not an individual but all men because "tout le monde est fol." Because of a medieval convention associating women with folly, a female character, Mère Sotte or Mère Folle, frequently appears as "an allegorical portrayal of [the] moral state." The allegory essential to the personified and generic characters in the sottie suggests the relation of the genre to epideixis, the vehicle of Folly's speech. Heather Arden concludes that the sottie "belongs with other forms of allegory in the area of 'epideictic rhetoric, the rhetoric of praise and ceremony, since it is most often used to praise and condemn certain lines of conduct or certain philosophical positions.'" In a traditional costume of a hood with long "Midas cars" and a marotte, a fool's scepter, the appearance of the fool provides symbols representing the laudable as well as the negative aspects of her nature.

The events in the sotties also dramatize the ambivalence of the concept of folly. The eulogy of the fool in Les Vigilles de Triboullet uses the elements of epideixis, lofty praise, testimony, and oratory, to praise a foolish and humble character. The irony generated by the incongruity of the subject and its medium only creates humor in this simple sottie, whereas the same disparity develops complex irony that informs the themes of the encomium spoken by Folly. The first section of her epideictic oration, describing her genealogy, birthplace, companions, and followers uses traditional literary allegories about folly in her claims to "subject the whole world to my dominion, lording it over the greatest lords" (p. 17). Similar boasts are heard in the sottie, La Folie des Gorriers, when Folie relates her biography, explaining that she was born

Au fons du paradis terrestre . . .
J'en ay plus de six mil vê.
Je suis celle, pour toute somme,

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