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It Will Turn Vicious: An Exploration of the Cycle of Audience Ridicule in French Drama

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IT WILL TURN VICIOUS: AN EXPLORATION OF THE CYCLE OF
AUDIENCE RIDICULE IN FRENCH DRAMA

by

STEPHANIE CARIN ELFONT

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Theatre Studies
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ABSTRACT

The intent of this thesis is to investigate the prominence of audience ridicule in the French theatre from the medieval *sottie* to Ionescan Absurdism of the mid-twentieth century. Throughout the history of French drama, playwrights have exploited this tactic with either the purpose of invoking an emotional or intellectual response or inciting a social or political call to action. This exploration takes particular interest in shaming theatrical audiences during periods of political unrest, analyzing the ways in which playwrights employed language, studies of characters, and plot-related content to highlight the prevalent and pervasive ills of society and of humanity. The majority of the literature from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries criticizes the aristocracy, the clergy, and the crown. As we approach revolutionary France, the theatre all but abandons intrigue in favor of the tears that flowed that from the ocean of English Sentimentalism. Melodrama and the well-made play adorned the early-nineteenth century, while the later part of the century brought French theatre Jarry's pataphysics and his affinity for audience shaming that set the stage for the impending onslaught of twentieth-century ridicule. The avant-garde movement flourished at the beginning of the century with the Dadas and the Surrealists responding to humanity's response to the War to End All Wars. When Ionesco arrived at the forefront of the French theatre mid-century, he employed the most effective audience ridicule tactics invented by his predecessors and created his Absurdist theatre. Ionesco writes: "take a circle, caress it, and it will turn vicious" (38). From the fifteenth century to the twentieth century, the cycle of audience ridicule was indeed vicious in a theatre that sought to effect positive change in a rapidly changing society.

DEDICATION

For my family,
for being my “one little spark”
of constant inspiration.

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Introduction

“The term French theater,” Edward Forman muses in his 2010 *Historical Dictionary of French Theater*, “evokes most immediately...the glories of the classical period and the peculiarities of the Theater of the Absurd, yet both these foci of attention are liable to be misunderstood” (Forman 1). He pursues further this argument, noting that historians begrudgingly acknowledge the work of French playwrights and theatre artists without genuinely appreciating the undeniably positive impact they have had on the growth of French culture. This, of course, is a vast understatement; the contributions of French playwrights are innumerable, for they represent more than mere entertainment.

From the medieval *sottie* and the birth of farce to the instructional and idiosyncratic neoclassical ideal, to the (not so) well-made play, to the surrealism, symbolism, and absurdism that shed light on a people plagued by war, a vast majority of French theatre works to address pervasive issues within the contemporary society. Most importantly, perhaps, these works mock and shame the blissfully unaware audiences who create these problems, and invoke a call to action that allows audience members to heal the wounds they might have inadvertently inflicted. In fact, if we examine the vein of audience ridicule that runs through the history of the French theatre, it becomes clear that although five centuries separate the *sottie* from Ionescan Absurdism, they employ astonishingly similar tactics that offer us insight into the perpetual desire to effect change in society.

The Origin of the French Satire

Sots, Fols, and the Sottie

“Medieval people,” argues Heather Arden in her book, *Fools’ Plays*, “whether learned or barely literate, not only believed the number of fools in the world to be infinite, but they greatly enjoyed repeated illustrations of this belief” (i). From this adoration of “folie” (defined loosely as foolishness), the *sottie* was born, along with humanity’s lifelong obsession with scathing satire. Generally, theatre historians agree that the *sottie* focuses primarily on physical, slapstick comedy. With this stage business, playwrights pair whimsy and a healthy helping of societal shaming, a winning combination of which contemporary art takes considerable advantage. Many theatre critics, however, argue that the *sottie* itself was quasi-farcical and nearly undefinable; French medievalist Gustave Cohen “gave up entirely the idea of dividing the plays into genres” (Arden 5). In contrast, Alan E. Knight makes a more succinct effort in *Aspects of Genre in Late Medieval French Drama*, where he refers to the *sottie* as a sub-genre of farce. While Cohen’s perspective reads as somewhat complacent and even lazy, it actually affords the *sottie* ample room to breathe. A farcical piece of theatre implies a degree of ridicule, but moreso it prepares the audience for several hours of low-brow horseplay and hijinks. In some cases, the *sottie* boasts these things, but as a genre, it dares to shame public figures mercilessly, thereby shaming mercilessly the audiences who admire these public figures.

Like many words in the English language, the word “fool” has several connotations. English speakers use this word to describe people who are unwise, people who are ignorant, and people who take unwise and ignorant action in the name of evil. The French language, in a

pleasant turn of events hugely unfamiliar to native English speakers, uses two separate words to identify the connotations of each. The term “*sot*” refers specifically to the archetype of the benign fool, while the term “*fol*” tends to refer to the personification of “the great evils of the time: the mad pursuit of money; the insane new policies of the ruling classes” (Knight 81). This distinction between the two affords writers the opportunity to play with several aspects of ridicule.

In the *sottie*, the *sots* are presented as both entertaining and enlightened, capable of gifting the audience with vital information about the plot, as well as a genuine laugh. By virtue of the fact that he is painfully aware of the sorry state of affairs, it is, therefore, the *sot*’s duty to deride, in an abundantly satirical fashion, the actions of the malicious *fols*. In this regard, the *sot* is essentially a court jester, much like the character of Touchstone in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. While the other characters and certainly the members of the audience consider Touchstone a fool (likely because he is one), he simultaneously possesses a surprising wisdom, often providing for the audience a better understanding of the action. It is entirely plausible that Touchstone’s personality and nature are indeed derivative of the personality of the playful, knowing *sot* who came nearly two centuries earlier.

Because we assume that he cannot possibly comprehend political affairs and social conventions, we inherently view the *sot* solely as a source of entertainment. This joyful simplicity, however, is precisely what allows him to understand the fundamental differences between right and wrong, for strong opinions do not cloud his sensibilities. One of humanity’s most insatiable desires is to have infinite knowledge, but this quest for knowledge is indeed what

makes humanity foolish. The *sot* observes this trait within their species and reminds his fellow human of the futility of the search for unlimited, uncensored knowledge. In this sense, the medieval *sot* quietly shames the audiences who very loudly shame him.

Barbara C. Bowen suggests most assuredly that while “the farces are about real people,” the *sottie* allegorically addresses matters of philosophy, history, politics, and religion (331). What inevitably follows this argument, however, is not only the distinction between the *sottie* and the farce, but additionally between the *sottie* and the *moralité*. Both genres employ personification and allegory to discuss sensitive topics that farces typically avoid. Moreover, both the *moralité* and the *sottie* shame their audiences into doing a certain thing or feeling a certain way, but the tactics they use to accomplish this task are what separate the two from one another. While the *moralité* forces “Everymen” to confront Discretion, Beauty, and Death and to grapple face-to-face with life’s greatest mysteries, the *sottie* exemplifies a unique manifestation of satire, one that does not attend to personal entanglements but to “broad social questions” (Arden 9).

Of the sixty-one extant *sotties*, historians date the vast majority between 1440 and 1560; only ten of the plays fall outside of this approximated span of time. Several collections of *sotties* have been published since their discovery, some of the most notable having been compiled in the early twentieth century, and it has been all but confirmed that earlier *sotties* existed than the ones of which historians have record. “Given their topical nature,” notes Vicki K. Janik in *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History*, “it is not likely that the scripts were composed with posterity in mind” (413). The texts are laden with colloquial clichés and “Ionesco-like truisms”,

launching them rapidly into obscurity (413). With this in mind, it is interesting to consider where performances of the *sottie* were held, the demographic at which they were directed, and, of course, the context of the performance itself.

Scholars accept most widely a theory which proposes that the genre arose from the literal parades of fools in celebration of holidays in mystery plays, which unquestionably explains the undertone of religious satire in many of the sixty-one *sotties*. More than half of them contain three of the same kind of character, introducing in the *sottie* a motif of literature and art quite familiar to the medieval and modern sensibilities. The number three often mirrors the holy trinity, suggesting Biblical influence or directly referencing scripture, supporting the proposition that, while they existed in conjunction with one another, the *sottie* is a direct descendant of the *moralité*. Similarly, while students of French medieval comedy do not know the definite nature of the actors and writers of the *sottie*, they theorize that, much like liturgical drama and its lack of professional actors, the majority of the people with involvement possessed little to no training. Historians generally identify two Parisian troupes of comedic performers: the *Basoche*, who were a group of law clerks, and *Les Enfants-sans-souci* (the Carefree Children), which comprised merchants, craftsmen, and students. Contemporary historians of medieval theatre consider *Les Enfants* the primary players of the *sottie*.

Historians of both past and present associate the *sottie* most prominently, perhaps, with the Feast of Fools, from which they overwhelmingly agree it originated. Celebrated on or about the first of January of each year, the raucous festival mocked sacerdotal tradition, quite literally allowing the lowly subdeacons to overtake higher ranking liturgical roles. In *Sacred Folly: A*

New History of the Feast of Fools, Max Harris asserts that the intention of the festival was to honor the fool, an homage to 1 Corinthians 1:27-30: “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.” In what Harris calls “the most frequently quoted description of the Feast of Fools,” found in a letter to the ecclesiastical dignitaries of France, the theologians at the University of Paris scathingly criticize the celebration:

Priests and clerks may be seen wearing masks and monstrous visages at the hours of office. They dance in the choir dressed as women, panders or minstrels. They sing wanton songs. [...] They run and leap through the church, without blush at their own shame. Finally they drive about town and its theatres in shabby traps and carts; and rouse the laughter of their fellows and the bystanders in infamous performances, with indecent gestures and verses scurrilous and unchaste. (qtd. in Harris 1)

It is especially important to recognize that while audience ridicule flowered under the reign of medieval comedy, it is nearly certain that shaming audiences took firm root in the dirt under the feet of the clergy. The *sottie* forced everyone – the foolish scum and the priesthood – to face the not-so-nice bits of themselves, to fester in the inevitable shame that accompanies questionable action and one too many a witness. Indeed, as E.K. Chambers tell us, “it is their humour and their mode of satire to represent the whole world, from king to clown, as wearing the cap and bells, and obeying the lordship” (381).

In the same way that contemporary artists and writers favor “roasting” celebrities who hardly deserve the attention, medieval comedians reveled in lampooning the ecclesiastics. Written by Pierre Gringoire, the most prolific and notorious writer of the *sottie*, *Le Jeu de Prince des Sotz and de Mère Sotte* (*The Play of the Prince of the Fools and Mother Fool*) outlines the conflict between Louis XII and Pope Julius II. In particular, the play remorselessly satirizes the Pope himself, an undeniably sensitive subject, even to twenty-first century sensibilities. In spite of this, Gringoire maintained good relations with Louis XII – though he wrote fools well, he certainly was not one himself.

Surprisingly, historians have access to a sufficient amount of material regarding Gringoire’s life. He was born in 1475 and died in 1538, wrote *sotties* specifically for *Les Enfants*, and even served as the guild’s “second dignitary, Mère Sotte (Mother Fool)” (Britannica.com). Most interesting, perhaps, is the fact that Gringoire did not write under a pseudonym, nor did he anonymously publish his work, a practice quite typical at the time, particularly for the *moralité*. This candid authorship suggests that he was “very concerned with his authorial status and determined to ensure that his literary productions were not pirated” (Runnalls 196). Moreover, it solidifies the validity of the purpose of his work, that is, to speak of the world’s infinite number of fools, simply because the playwright himself was unafraid to state this purpose. Otherwise, historians do not attribute the majority of the *sotties* to a specific author but to the illustrious Anonymous.

Regardless of what the playwright called him-or herself, historians do believe there exists a painfully simple explanation for this blatant disregard for discretion and unabashed mockery of

religion, politics, and the audiences who misplaced their faith in their religious and political leadership. Simply put: “*le masque de la folie permettait toutes les audaces*” – the fool’s masque permitted such audacity (Picot 108). Because it is atypical, even somewhat taboo, to give credit or credence to the opinion of a fool, the *sot* has ample freedom to express these opinions as he or she pleases, for audiences may very well disregard them entirely. Theatre habitually mimics real life – to play the fool, in many cases, allows for quiet observance, both on and off stage. Highly observant individuals often boast extraordinary insight, and through these observations gain a deeper understanding of a broad and relevant range of issues. In *Le Cry de la Bazoche*, while the sots undoubtedly “play the fool’s game,” they offer audiences an overview of the discussion that is beautifully honest and brilliantly simple:

Nous devisions du temps, des gens,

Du commun foudre, des sergentz,

De paix, des amours, de la guerre,

Qu’on veoyt preparer sur la terre.

...

Bref, de tout qu’on peult adviser

Nous pretendons en deviser.

[...] We are chatting about the times, the people, The common man, the *sergents*,
About peace, loves, the war, That we see being readied on the earth... In brief,
about everything that one would consider, We intend to talk. (qtd. in Arden 69)

The Neoclassical Ideal

Following the period of medieval comedy came an era decidedly less aggressive in its humor, and while the work of this period certainly does not lack distinction, its sophisticated form seems to diminish the effect of the content. Under the watch of esteemed poet Pierre de Ronsard, the *Pléiade*, a team of seven French writers, endeavored to develop a wholly French literary ideal. Unlike the medieval tragedy that had stormed France not a century prior, writers modeled these new plays on classical form. Reminiscent of the *sottie*, in contrast, are the comedies of the age, discussing “urban, amoral, middle-class characters motivated primarily by sex and money” (Brockett 204). Often, sixteenth-century playwrights penned both tragedy and comedy, a movement many attribute to Étienne Jodelle.

Eugène, a Jodelle comedy, appears to replicate the content of medieval comedy almost entirely, while acknowledging the dictates of classical form. The play revels in the infidelity of the title character and the moral bankruptcy of the lower-middle class. When discussing unscrupulous activity such as this, one might very well assume that the play attempts to criticize the society from which it comes. In the opening dialogue between Eugène and Jean, a chaplain, “we find the germ of social satire which became the groundwork of Molière’s comedy” (Tilley 106). Unlike the infamous Neoclassical comedian, however, no evidence truly suggests that Jodelle’s intention was to invoke a response of societal reformation.

As the sixteenth century came to a close, Pierre de Larivey spearheaded a movement away from the Jodelle-esque hybrid of medieval content and classical form. Based heavily on the *commedia erudita*, or learned comedy of Italy, Larivey’s comedies became the most popular

French works before 1630. Historians, in fact, refer to these comedies as mere translation and adaptation. Although Larivey infuses his work with the colloquial language of France and the manners of the Parisian community, the plays boast nothing unique. The characters of both the *commedia erudita* and the work of Larivey “are, as a rule, mere puppets, who move in a sordid world unrelieved by a glimmer of virtue or even passion” (Tilley 109). Larivey’s comedies indeed do not revolutionize the face of French theatre, but the merit of his greatest known works, *Les Esprits* and *Les Escoliers*, lies in his masterful use of the inherent expressiveness of the French language. Here, perhaps, Larivey unknowingly inaugurates the tradition of highly stylized language in French comedy, the perfect spouse for subtle, yet effective audience shaming. With Jean de la Taille’s 1572 *Saül le Furieux*, a biblical tragedy rooted firmly in the advocacy of the unities of time, place, and action, Neoclassicism began its complex and influential evolution.

Until de la Taille’s foray into classical form, playwrights brazenly mocked the royals and the clergy. Neoclassicism initially endeavored to entertain an aristocratic audience, and while the subject matter of the work is undoubtedly more sophisticated, it is also undeniably dull. The pioneers of the French theatre recognized this, and thus the farce maintained its eminence. This appeal lasted well into the seventeenth century, due, in large part, to the influence of the *commedia dell’arte*. The work of Alexandre Hardy, France’s true consummate professional, “paved the way for subsequent tragedy with his tragecomedies [*sic*] and for comedy with his pastorals,” even as the farce sat atop its throne (Brockett 206).

In the context of a study that focuses primarily on audience ridicule, it is easy – if not entirely prudent – to overlook the work of Pierre Corneille. He began his career writing comedies that became popular with seventeenth century audiences, but his 1636 tragicomedy, *Le Cid*, truly reveals his prowess. The play follows the relationship between Chimène, the daughter of a count, and Rodrigue, the son of a has-been general and war hero. Throughout the course of the five acts, the lovers confront their loyalties, forced to make a choice between each other and their families. While *Le Cid* was widely celebrated amongst the general public, many critics reacted adversely to its publication. Intellectual France was enamored with the Neoclassical ideal, and therefore insisted upon the observance of verisimilitude, decorum, and the Aristotelian unities. With *Le Cid*, Corneille attempts to contain two bloody duels, a Moorish attack on Spain, and a tender love story within the neoclassically allotted twenty-four hours.

Of course, it goes without saying that this might not prove entirely relevant to the history of ridiculing the audience. After all, there exists no concrete, viable evidence to suggest that Corneille sought to shame audiences. However, one might consider the fact that Neoclassicism employs the unities and the steadfast focus on decorum to access the educated and wealthy upper class. In the case of *Le Cid*, Corneille might very well have shamed this demographic simply by ignoring their theatrical preferences. Although he claims to have confined all of the action to a single day, many found this suggestion completely unbelievable and asserted, perhaps rightfully so, that Corneille severely strained verisimilitude. Still, while seventeenth-century audiences may not have suspended their disbelief, this strain was arguably more forgivable than the utter defiance of decorum. Not twenty-four hours after Rodrigue murders her father, Chimène accepts his offer of marriage. Members of high society found this prospect completely abhorrent, and in

a manner so subtle it is nearly unrecognizable, Corneille uses this conflict to emphasize his disdain for the harsh judgment of the upper class. To adhere to the dictates of Neoclassicism and acknowledge decorum at all is to limit bad behavior. Much to the dismay of proponents of the unities, bad behavior raises the stakes; the lower the stakes, the less interesting the theatre. Unlike Corneille, Molière does not so thoroughly disguise his distaste for the bourgeoisie.

Born Jean-Baptiste Poquelin to a wealthy, well-to-do family, a young Molière led a charmed existence until the age of twenty-one when he gambled with damnation and abandoned his social status – as one does – to become an actor. As he toured with a troupe of his own design throughout the late 1640s and early 50s, he not only honed his acting skills, but also developed an irreverent yet eloquent brand of comedy that would ultimately immortalize him. Despite Molière's contempt toward hypocrisy, particularly the hypocrisy running rampant in the upper class, his inventive plots and quick wit gained him the support of Louis XIV and, subsequently, the French elite. His work unquestionably adopts the tomfoolery and hijinks that made the *sottie* as popular as it was, but Molière adds a layer of complexity to his farce with the realism he embeds into his characters. His childhood experiences as a member of high-born, high-class society provided for Molière a basis of research upon which to begin his writing.

When one considers the most popular of Molière's plays, *Tartuffe* (1664) and *Le Misanthrope* (1666) come to mind. While these certainly deserve their eminence, it is Molière's final work, *Le Malade Imaginaire* (1673), that reveals both his peerless comedic writing ability and the content of his character. It premiered on 10 February 1673 at the Théâtre du Palais-Royal in Paris, ironically starring Molière, plagued with a tubercular condition, as the protagonist,

Argan, a severe hypochondriac. Seven days later, Molière collapsed on stage and died shortly thereafter. His decision to perform may not have been the most prudent, but it speaks volumes about both his genuine passion for writing and performing and his ability to parody his illness by using it to his advantage.

Le Malade Imaginaire opens with Argan analyzing an exorbitant bill from his apothecary, having recently been treated for a variety of apparent ailments including, but not limited to, constipation, insomnia, and flatulence. Before any other character appears, Molière immediately abandons discretion and ridicules two prominent flaws of the upper class. Not only does Argan spend money outrageously and unnecessarily, but he also feels entitled to unlimited medication and treatment at a price upon which he decides. “You are joking, Mr. Fleurant,” he laments after reading a bill for treatment for a buildup of bile listed at four francs, “you must learn to be reasonable with patients; [...] Tut! Put three francs, if you please” (8). Although Molière’s criticism of the upper class clearly lacks diplomacy, the aristocratic audience completely overlooked his jibe. Instead, Molière’s brilliant character development tricked them into focusing exclusively on Argan’s ridiculous character and the absurdity of his language, a skill he had perfected early in his career.

Argan’s daughter, Angelique, seeks marriage to a young man named Cléante, but it becomes obvious rather quickly that Argan does not approve of this union and instead announces Angelique’s betrothal to Thomas Diafoirus, a doctor. Right on cue, Angelique’s bumbling maid-servant, Toinette, rushes to Angelique’s rescue. “With all the wealth you possess,” she scolds Argan, “you want to marry your daughter to a doctor?” (20). Argan responds defensively and

abusively, but after some gentle coaxing, Argan admits – in the most diplomatic manner he can muster – that he wishes to have a doctor in the family “in order to secure their kind assistance in [his] illness” (20). Here, Molière reiterates the sense of entitlement he recognizes as inherent to the upper class. Although he behaves somewhat miserly, Argan himself acknowledges that money is not his primary concern. Alternatively, he feels entitled to limitless and complimentary healthcare, a luxury many would covet equally as much as excessive wealth. Argan’s use of the word “secure” suggests that he believes most assuredly that the marriage automatically reserves him the right to this care. Like the aristocracy, Argan takes advantage of a privilege he does not understand because he views it as his birthright.

As is the case with much popular comedy, *La Malade Imaginaire* features twists, turns, and disguises that generate laughter amongst an easily entertained demographic. At the top of Act II, Cléante pays Angelique a visit, but in order to slip past Argan, he poses as her substitute music instructor. Argan announces that he is expecting Mr. and Thomas Diaforus and requests that Cléante wait to conduct his music lesson until their arrival. Following a nauseatingly insincere bout of cajolery on the part of Thomas, Mr. Diafoirus makes what is perhaps the play’s most satirical commentary.

I have found that it is better for us to confine ourselves to the ordinary public.
Ordinary people are more convenient; you are accountable to nobody for your actions, and as long as you follow the common rules laid down by the faculty, there is no necessity to trouble yourself about the result. What is vexatious among

people of rank is that, when they are ill, they positively expect their doctor to cure them. (Molière 57)

What reads humorously is the obvious: of course “people of rank” expect their doctor to find a cure. Anybody in her right mind hopes her doctor will find a solution. Mr. Diafoirus’s statement indeed addresses the class disparity, but introduces Molière’s affinity for medical satire, representing a fundamental problem with seventeenth-century medicine. Throughout the play, Molière ridicules incorrect medical theory and conservative medical practitioners (like Mr. and Thomas Diafoirus) who opposed William Harvey’s discovery of the circulation of the blood in the body. In *Molière Satirist of Seventeenth-Century French Medicine: Fact and Fantasy*, H. Gaston Hall notes that “Molière’s *comédie-ballets* satirizing doctors were written for performance at Court” (Hall 426). Molière sought to underline pervasive social ills for the people to whom they applied, and knowing this, one might rightfully deduce that an audience full of Court doctors subscribed to conservatism.

Though we generally attribute Molière’s popularity to his talent for comedic writing, it is an earnest, pensive conversation between Béralde and Argan in Act III that truly solidifies Molière’s antipathy toward aristocratic medicine. “All the excellency in their art,” argues Béralde, “consists in pompous gibberish, in a specious babbling, which gives you words instead of reasons, and promises instead of results” (93). He cautions Argan zealously, reasoning that while we must respect doctors for their positive intentions and their genuine belief in their work, it is integral to remember that they kill their clientele with the same home remedies they would use on their wives and children. Often, playwrights approach comedy delicately and

diplomatically in order to make a case without inciting a riot. Here, Molière entirely jettisons both delicacy and diplomacy, mocking Court doctors and their high-class constituents, not making a single apology.

Eighteenth-century French Enlightenment

“It is almost impossible,” argues John Lough, “to determine where the seventeenth century leaves off and the eighteenth century begins” (2). For this reason, theatre historians frequently attach the first fifteen years of the eighteenth century to the end of the seventeenth century, treating the seventy-four years between 1715 and 1789 as a movement separate from Neoclassicism and the dramatic literature of the French Revolution. Although the theatre during this period of time maintained a reasonably traditional form, it criticized the bourgeoisie and inspired a genuine understanding of the contemporary conflicting sociopolitical ideals. Eighteenth-century French tragedy replaced “heroic passion with pathos and sentimentality,” while, according to Ronald Vince, comedy “became infused with an underlying seriousness that required audiences to sympathize with rather than laugh at its characters” (92).

In an era of theatre history largely distinguished by tears and feelings, Voltaire’s tragedy, such as his 1732 play, *Zaïre*, impressed the public at large. The writer and philosopher famously attacked religious intolerance and conventions of French society, advocating freedom of expression, and wildly favoring tragedy. Many consider his best and most influential comedy his 1759 novel, *Candide*, which sardonically argues against blind optimism, championing practicality and the ability to cultivate one’s own garden – that is to say, creating one’s particular variety of happiness rather than waiting for the best that is yet to come but might never arrive.

The book was initially met with controversy, due in part to Voltaire's affinity for sacrilegious blaspheming, but he went on to find much success, arguably becoming the most prolific writer of the century.

While tragedy maintained its popularity, especially in Paris, the artistic capital of the world, tragic style did not undergo a drastic transformation. Many eighteenth-century tragedians admired and attempted to emulate Racinian tragedy, "but perhaps because they substituted involved plots and complex character relationships for his emphasis on internal conflicts," their work did not stand the test of time (Brockett 275). Comedy, in contrast, underwent a more significant change, still riding the wave of Molière's influence. The early eighteenth century gifted France with more than fifty comedies written by Florent-Carion Dancourt, known for his accurate and farcical interpretation of the lower class. Though he produced them late in the seventeenth century, *Les Bourgeoises à la Mode* and *Les Bourgeoises de Qualité* set the tone for eighteenth-century comedy and were arguably the most celebrated of his plays, introducing the gigolo character and satirizing woman of the peasantry.

As the Sentimentalism of England made its way to France, playwrights replaced external intrigue with a barrage of tears and emotion, and nobody took this task more seriously than Marivaux. He emphasized identifying the particular feelings of each character, lending his writing to a particular brand of purple prose that known infamously in the artistic community as "marivaudage." His elevated language set him far above his colleagues in the history books, but because his plays feature flowery wordplay unique to the French language, he does not translate well. Of his thirty-five plays, the highest acclaimed were *Le Jeu de l'Amour et du Hasard* (1730),

Le Triomphe de l'Amour (1732), and *Le Dispute* (1744). Almost all of his plays highlighted the mysteries and nuances of falling in love, which would have allowed Marivaux to explore the absurdity of emotion. This, of course, he chose not to do, but playwrights of the nineteenth century would borrow his “marivaudage” and apply a layer of ridicule to achieve maximum effect. An author of several *parades* – improvisational street-comedies that became popular among the peasantry during the Renaissance – and champion of the Comédie Italienne, Thomas-Simon Gueullette penned some of the most offensive, crude pieces of literature of the eighteenth century. Incidentally, while the *parades* first gained notoriety with the lower class, the aristocracy participated in the fun. *Le Marchand de Merde*, for example, tells the brief story of a Harlequin who swindles an apothecary into paying seven shillings for a barrel of his excreta. Simple pieces such as this, designed specifically for the upper class, ridiculed their own demoralization, and although they recognized this, they laughed at it anyway.

Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais was the best-known playwright of the late eighteenth century. After a brief stint as a watchmaker, musical advisor to Louis XV and his family, and financier of guns for the war for independence in the United States, Beaumarchais began to show an interest in writing. Initially, he wrote *parades*, but ultimately, he found success with *Eugénie*, his first full-length play, and with his Figaro plays that featured *dell'arte*-esque scenarios: *Le Barbier de Séville*, *Le Mariage de Figaro*, and *La Mère Coupable*. Not unlike the *sotties* that earned its popularity with the aristocracy in medieval France, Louis XVI resented Beaumarchais's thinly disguised criticism of the French leadership and society and banned it. Several years later, after a bout of revision, the King lifted the ban and *Le Mariage de Figaro* premiered in 1784 to an enthusiastically supportive audience, including the aristocracy. After the

storming and subsequent fall of the Bastille in 1789, political unrest filled the theatre of revolutionary Paris. Theatrical monopolies were abolished in 1791, giving more than fifty troupes the opportunity to present popular theatre peppered with “patriotic sentiment,” thus continuing the tradition of subtle mockery of the upper class (Brockett 338).

French Theatre of the Nineteenth Century

Melodrama, Romanticism and *La Pièce Bien Faite*

Along with Napoleon's rise to power in 1799 came his longing for classical tragedy, and so began France's reluctant rejection of overzealous, patriotic drama. Napoleon's authorization of four state-subsidized theatres (including the Comédie Française) all but forced revolutionary theatre out of the country, but that did not halt the literary innovations of the boulevard theatres. Here, René Charles Guilbert de Pixérécourt pioneered the melodrama, or music-drama, which would quickly become the most popular theatrical entertainment of the nineteenth century. It was a theatre filled with heightened emotion and lush musical underscoring, and while it might not have qualified as truly sophisticated drama, it ushered in a theatrical era designed specifically for the working class that departed completely from the Neoclassical ideal. It is important to note that melodrama's function was, in no way, to satirize or ridicule the audience, but it represents an integral shift in the French theatre that allows us better to understand audience ridicule in the later part of the century.

For a play to qualify as "melodramatic," it must possess, of course, music, as the name implies. However, melodrama comprises a wide variety of characteristics that, when working harmoniously, transformed the work into the extravaganza that audiences came to see. First and foremost, melodrama focuses heavily on appealing to emotion via what might appear to us now as an outrageously over-acted performance. Interestingly enough, while the intention of this was not to shame individuals who regard their feelings as highly as their logic, what contemporary theatre-makers define as melodramatic performance often possesses this quality. Melodrama also

features comic relief and local color which, when paired with poetic justice and a happy ending, allured a wide demographic. Most importantly, melodrama was nothing short of spectacular – battles, horses, massive sets, and fancy technology adorned the stage as music swelled in the background and actresses wept. Audiences positively devoured it.

Pixérécourt, who wrote one hundred twenty plays, designed the melodramatic theatre as we understand it today. In his writing, he “did not consider subtlety a virtue, and all actions were violent, simple, direct, and frequently underscored by appropriate music” (Carlson 43). Furthermore, while the plots of Pixérécourt’s melodramas are highly derivative, he was an ingenious scenic designer, breaking significant ground by “demanding new scenery suited to each production, exact in detail and with more three-dimensional elements, fewer wings and curtains” (44). His influence cannot be overstated, as his design techniques undoubtedly paved the way for Victor Hugo’s mid-century Romantic theatre. Regardless, some of his plays, as popular as they were, appear to be nothing more than utter nonsense. Pixérécourt’s 1814 play *The Dog of Montargis* stars a live dog who solves the mystery of a boy accused of murder. Audiences, of course, did not come to the theatre to have a grand catharsis, but one cannot ignore the absolute buffoonery of the content. It was precisely this, in fact, that made Pixérécourt and the melodramatic movement as charming and as wildly successful as it was. It is important to reiterate that melodramatic playwrights (including, but not limited to Pixérécourt and his Montargois dog) never intended to ridicule their audiences. However, contemporary readings of melodramatic theatre often suggest, perhaps incorrectly, that while early nineteenth-century playwrights crafted popular entertainment, an air of social satire exists beneath the surface.

As melodrama set the stage for every deviation from traditionalism that was to come, Romanticism flourished as the century continued. In the preface to his 1827 play, *Cromwell*, Victor Hugo outlines the periods of theatre history and the conventions of performance and design that served these historical moments well. Then, he calls for the separation of Romantic literature and Classical literature and admits that he makes “the grotesque an element of art,” but argues that “whether the fact is agreeable or not matters little; it is a fact” (346). Art – good art – represents life, and in life, notes Hugo, we often find the grotesque and the sublime, a thought that Ionesco would consider at length more than a full century later. He envisions a Romantic theatre that abandons the unities of time, place, and action and boasts content relevant only to contemporary moment. While Hugo’s work did not ridicule a particular class or shame an entire society, his 1830 masterpiece *Hernani* “deliberately violated many of the rules that the advocates of Neoclassicism sought to retain” (Brockett 341). Hugo defies the limits of the Aristotelian unities, exploits onstage violence and death, and does not fear shifting between humor and emotional gravity. In this way, *Hernani* most certainly ridicules the proponents of irrelevant traditionalism, simultaneously shaming the misbehavior of the nobility and challenging Neoclassicism in as many ways as possible to invoke a truly monumental reaction.

La pièce bien faite, in stark contrast, thrived on traditional dramatic devices and had absolutely no intention of soliciting an uproar. Firm in his belief that one attends theatrical performances solely for the purpose of entertainment, Eugène Scribe designed well-made plays full of intriguing complication and twists and turns in fortune. The formula for this middle-brow brand was simple: have a late point of attack, play out a logical series of events, make the audience feel intelligent by divulging a set of secrets, and perform a high-stakes *scène à faire*.

Without a heavily saturated, life-and-death, eleven o'clock scene, Scribe argues that a well-made play could not deeply move an audience. In terms of content, money, true love, and female virtue fill the pages of *les pièces*. Alexandre Dumas fils's 1852 *La Dame aux Camélias* exemplifies these requirements, capitalizing on the "hooker with a heart of gold" stock-plot and injecting it with a healthy dose of shaming female sexuality. Despite Marguerite Gautier's professional entanglement and chronic tuberculosis, she falls in love with Armand, a young bourgeois gentleman. When a series of letters unravels their relationship, Marguerite deteriorates, becoming the embodiment of the "fallen woman." We understand – with disturbing clarity – that the play predicts a hopeful, happy future for Armand and rejects entirely the mere idea of a future for Marguerite. What is even more disturbing is that audience accepts this completely; the female spectators cry and applaud, never realizing that they help to encourage the misogyny. The advent of Naturalism in the decades to come would spurn the faux-realism of the well-made play while simultaneously addressing taboo topics, a tactic that would help spark the most prominent movement in the history of ridicule: the French avant-garde.

Naturalism, the Théâtre Libre and the Beginnings of the Avant-garde

In the wake of Charles Darwin's 1859 *On the Origin of the Species* came a new wave of theatre known controversially as Naturalism. Although many contemporary theatre artists (not unlike their 19th century counterparts) interchange Naturalism and Realism, it is more appropriate to distinguish between the two, noting that Naturalism exists as an experimental theory and realism discusses a specific stage practice. Émile Zola, to whom many refer as the official spokesperson for the Naturalist movement, argued that one could use the scientific method to both write and present plays to an audience, offering a logical analysis of certain

behavior in opposition to a performance fueled by lush character development. Although Zola's writing may not exude mastery of the craft, as Paul Briens has phrased it, "he undeniably infused French fiction with a refreshing vigor, giving it a tough, powerful edge far removed from the vaporings of high romanticism." In the preface to Zola's second edition of *Thérèse Raquin* – a play about a miserable young woman who undertakes a sordid love affair – he notes that he focuses specifically on temperaments, neglecting the more popular character study. While his approach is less than obvious, it seems as though Zola does intend to mock his audience; for decades, the French people had glorified *la pièce bien faite*, accepting and even admiring the exaggerated stage business. Zola's naturalism grabs this approach by the lapel and spits directly in its eye, unabashedly highlighting the prevalent social ills, insulting both popular stage practice and the fools whom this practice worked to entertain.

The rapidly evolving artistic world seemed to parallel eerily the evolution of the political world, particularly in juxtaposition with what became known as *l’Affaire Dreyfus* of 1894. For allegedly communicating to the German Embassy of Paris secrets of the French military, Officer Alfred Dreyfus was accused of and convicted for treason. In an anti-Semitic Europe, Dreyfus's Jewish heritage certainly did not help his cause – in fact, many believe that his conviction was part of an exclusively anti-Semitic agenda. The situation famously resulted in a genuine uproar, dividing Paris completely into two separate camps: the anti and the pro-Dreyfusards. Émile Zola became the first popular, intellectual pro-Dreyfusard and penned *J'Accuse...!*, an impassioned open letter to President Félix Faure, in addition to several other articles for numerous publications. On 1 December 1897, Zola wrote in an article in the French publication, *Le Figaro*, a plea to his fellow Frenchmen, shaming them with a distinctly "how dare you" flair:

France – just and generous France – is being forced to commit a genuine crime. France cannot possibly be France any longer if it can be duped to this extent, whipped to a frenzy against a poor unfortunate man who for the past three years, and in the most atrocious conditions, has been expiating a crime he did not commit. [...] We say to France that we are striving for the honor of the army and the greatness of the nation. A miscarriage of justice has been committed, and as long as it has not been corrected, France will be weak and sickly and will suffer as from a secret cancer gnawing at its flesh. (qtd. in Levieux 19)

Here, he asserts that his France would not dare obscure the truth through a process of obvious, systematic, and vicious discrimination. Furthermore, he declares his wish that “every decent person in France will become a member” of the syndicate which seeks justice in the face of the slanderous press. Arguably, Zola’s writing does not possess any glamour or style, but it is unmistakably passionate and almost youthful, as Zola practically resorts to name-calling in an effort to sway the opinion of a gullible public. Standing on the apron of the political stage, Zola henceforth sets the precedent of shaming audiences of all sorts into recognizing their shortcomings and invoking a hasty call to action.

As the naturalist theatre blossomed under Zola’s reign, André Antoine, a Paris Gas Company clerk and seasoned supernumerary, defied his peers and developed the Théâtre Libre (Free Theatre) in 1887. To claim exemption from censorship and freely produce the controversial work of Zola and his contemporaries, Antoine organized his theatre on a subscription basis. In order to gain access to these productions, the Théâtre Libre required a membership. This tactic

permitted Antoine both to avoid government regulation and to ensure almost entirely the unwavering support and admiration of the patrons who actively chose to subscribe. While many theatre-goers found the work deplorable, “even those critics who did not find the plays presented at the Théâtre Libre of much literary or dramatic value unanimously applauded the initiative as a much-needed breath of fresh air for the French theatre” (Charnow 71).

Although we attribute the birth of Antoine’s free theatre to his strong desire to produce the naturalistic work that was sweeping France, the theatre additionally showcased *comédies rosses*. This highly cynical movement, spearheaded by the Théâtre Libre cofounder Oscar Méténier, tarnishes the sparkling morality of religion “by showing how harsh economic facts and biological drives render those ideals hollow and inoperative” (Gerould 16) Both Antoine and Méténier took pleasure in deriding pristine virtue, for they considered it mythical and did not believe in absolute honesty. For seven years, the Théâtre Libre attacked conventional morality and shocked Parisian audiences with frank talk of taboo topics such as sex and euthanasia and the presentation of raw onstage violence. This, in its way, represented the most effective (although perhaps not the gentlest) means of audience shaming. To render them vulnerable, Antoine and his peers offended audiences through the vilification of their flimsy moral codes. Then, they outraged them with flagrant violence and sexy discussion, making for a wildly unnerving evening at the theatre. However, in an only somewhat surprising turn of events, Paris delighted in this shock, recognizing the veils that the Théâtre Libre and naturalism lifted, both reveling in and horrified by the knowledge of some of the previously “unspeakable” facts of life. Antoine’s success reverberated around the globe, inspiring theatre-makers of all backgrounds and setting the example for the German Freie Bühne and the Independent Theatre in London.

Idealism and its Opponents

Like any good theatre, naturalism faced its share of adversity and challenge, and it came initially in the form of *symbolisme*. Designed directly in opposition to naturalism, this idealist theatre sought meaning and beauty in the world, strongly resenting the idea that art could be founded upon the basis of scientific experimentation. Indeed, the symbolists created “art for art’s sake,” making them decadent to the naturalist sensibility, and focused heavily on idealism and a sincere belief that one could achieve and have access to perfection. The symbolists assert that we cannot know the real directly, only provisionally, and that we can use fantasies as symbols for the real. In this case, what is real is what is ideal, and the symbolists viewed their artistic journey as a quest for the idea. Like naturalism, *symbolisme* also boasted a spokesperson – poet Stéphane Mallarmé – who perceived drama as “an evocation of the mystery of existence through poetic and allusive language” and wished to provide for literary audiences (as did his theatre-making peers) a spiritual experience (Brockett 442). Rachilde and Maurice Maeterlinck, two of the most popular symbolist playwrights, attempted to portray the little worlds that live within us that we ordinarily cannot access.

Though naturalism and *symbolisme* disagree fundamentally on the purpose of art and a means of expression, Paul Fort and Aurélien-Marie Lugné-Poe, two symbolist directors, followed the example set by Antoine. In 1890, Fort established the Théâtre d’Art, which, unlike the Théâtre Libre, received venomous criticism probably due to the incomprehensible nature of the art. Two years later, a nineteen-year-old Fort abandoned his theatre, but his work had carved a niche filled neatly and rapidly by Lugné-Poe’s Théâtre de l’Œuvre, which would become the most important *symboliste* theatre. While Fort did uphold the tenants of idealism, critics and

symbolists alike regarded his work disdainfully. Lugné-Poe, in contrast, developed clear concepts such as color schemes, lighting design, and even scents and saw his stage pictures as living tapestries.

To induce an almost dream-like state within the theatre, he directed his actors to speak rhythmically and slowly, to ritualize their speech. He combined this chanting with low lighting and lots of blue, keeping many parts of the stage in shadow. This tactic awakened most of the senses simultaneously and evoked in audiences the feeling that they were watching a symbolist painting come to life before their eyes. With this in mind, how the theatre could provide a spiritual experience seems fairly straightforward. Simultaneously, it seems impossible that theatre practitioners used the spiritually-charged *symbolisme* to ridicule their audiences. To understand, however, the effect of the theatre that immediately follows, it is necessary to understand the ideals of Fort, Lugné-Poe, and the symbolist movement. The symbolists wanted audiences to perceive the deep mysteries of life, a lovely thought that would soon be halted in its tracks by an incensed Alfred Jarry. Although theatre historians sometimes refer to Jarry as a symbolist, nothing about his work is evocative or ethereal. Instead, it is quite possible that Jarry gave birth to the absurdist movement nearly four decades prior to its apparent arrival on the Parisian scene. His work certainly exemplifies early absurdist writing, but Pataphysics, a philosophical concept of his own design, truly represents the ideals of absurdity, and would, in fact, heavily inspire the writing of Theatre of the Absurd pioneer, Eugène Ionesco.

Described by Jarry as the “science of imaginary solutions,” Pataphysics emphasizes the idea of the epiphenomenon, a happy accident, a by-product of another thing, or, more simply,

“that which is superimposed upon a phenomenon” (Jarry qtd. in Brotchie 30). For Jarry (and later for Ionesco), life itself was an utter nonsense, and he therefore clung to epiphenomenalism’s argument that “consciousness was no more than an accidental side effect of the state of the brain” (Brotchie 31). Pataphysics favored a virtual universe supplementary to the actual universe, one in which the reality of imaginary circumstances held as much value as the reality of actual circumstances. The influence of Jarry’s philosophical discoveries cannot be overstated: “Jarry has not only inspired the absurdity of nearly every modern avant-garde but has also predicted the absurdity of nearly all modern technoscience” (Bök 9). This imaginary reality expounded upon by Pataphysics thrives especially in Jarry’s 1896 *Ubu Roi*, a play that some theatre historians refer to as the first in the canon of the Theatre of the Absurd.

“Despite the late hour,” began a famous critique of *Ubu Roi*, “I have just taken a shower” (Panero 45). Audiences found Jarry’s play so abhorrent, they felt the need quite literally to cleanse themselves of the impurities of what they had witnessed. In complete and utter opposition to the ethereal world of the symbolists, Jarry creates an environment that is equal parts grotesque and unusual. He writes of a man simply called Père Ubu who, with the “help” of his wife, Mère Ubu, seeks to usurp the Polish throne. Because *Ubu Roi* (particularly Pa Ubu himself) serves as Jarry’s scathing review of the unscrupulous and exploitative actions of the bourgeoisie, it should not surprise audiences that Ubu successfully overthrows the king and subsequently murders any person who dares challenge his leadership. To further corroborate this firm hatred of bourgeois society, Jarry mocks Shakespearean structure and motif; a king’s murder, an apparition, and a bear attack, to name only a few, sound all too familiar to readers of Shakespeare. Here, however, as graphic as it is, the onstage violence appears almost cartoonish,

and most importantly, it laughs at audiences for enjoying – even loving – the violence in Renaissance drama and in the genres for which the Bard blazed a bloody trail.

One could hardly call Jarry's mockery of his audience a coincidence. The opening stage directions of *Ubu Roi* read: "*L'action se passe en Pologne, c'est-à-dire, nulle part.*" In *God's Playground – A History of Poland*, Norman Davies argues that "for the average educated European, 'Poland' had no more substance than all the mythical realms of the past from Dipsodie to Camelot" (58). After the disappearance of independent Poland from the map in 1795, Europeans did not recognize its existence. At the time of the publication of *Ubu Roi*, a Polish national movement had begun to take root in Austria, Russia, and Prussia, but because Poland would not regain its independence until after the First World War, Europeans continued to disregard it. Subtly yet certainly, Jarry swindles his contemporary audience into facing their ignorance, to acknowledge their indifference toward Poland's autonomy. Furthermore, Jarry marries this idea of a folkloric, nonexistent Poland with larger-than-life characters in order to transform *Ubu Roi* into somewhat of an anti-fairytale, an abominable fable meant not exclusively to entertain but to teach a lesson.

There are a great many things that Jarry's contemporaries might find truly repugnant about *Ubu Roi*. His jokes extend far beyond the realm of tasteless – his wordplay is unnervingly clever and the onstage bloodshed seems superfluous even to twenty-first century audiences – but one might manage to forgive Jarry's asinine sense of humor. Late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century critics, however, found the title character's personality entirely unforgivable. Like the nobility and the aristocracy Jarry so publicly despised, Ubu possesses an allegiance to

money exclusively. He is vile, crass, cruel, and completely bankrupt of morality. The candid vulgarity of his speech and his actions evokes the mental image of a puppet show engineered by a filthy old man afraid to show his face to the world, hiding behind the sick charm of his marionettes. During his curtain speech at the show's Paris premiere on 10 December 1896, Jarry granted his audience permission "to see in Monsieur Ubu however many allusions you care to, or else a simple puppet – a schoolboy's caricature of one of his professors who personified for him all the ugliness in the world" (Jarry 1). With even the most cursory analysis, we can recognize that Jarry is inordinately similar to the nasty, elderly puppeteer we cannot help but imagine, with the exception of one pivotal difference: he was not afraid.

Ubu Roi opened and closed on the same evening at the Théâtre de l'Œuvre and incited a riot that has since become "a stock element of Jarry biographia" (Taylor iii). Much to the chagrin of Parisian theatre-makers and theatregoers, something as vapid and as simple as a riot did not deter the likes of Alfred Jarry. Although his actors indeed gave a performance, theirs was not the performance in which Jarry took primary interest. To his mind, the audience ultimately gave the most captivating performance of the evening. Jarry created a world that was purposefully anti-*symboliste*, and the mere suggestion that audiences found this offensive delighted Jarry in ways that would become familiar, if not customary, to the avant-garde artists of the twentieth century. Perhaps, the intention was to offend the audience so profoundly that they would begin to self-actualize, analyze why they felt so insulted and disgruntled. Using that knowledge, it would have been possible to create societal reform in the midst of a hot political climate that would ultimately spark the War to End All Wars.

War-Torn France and the Avant-Garde

Pre-War France

Even after the Théâtre de l'Œuvre closed its doors in 1899, Lugné-Poe championed an ambitious, yet minimally lucrative counter-realistic theatrical movement. Antoine, however, remained devoted to his marriage to naturalism and dominated the French theatre in the first decade of the twentieth century. Experimental art was limited, a loss not widely mourned by the theatrical community. Still, another wave of unorthodox, innovative theatre began to brew at the hands of practitioners with an insatiable desire to effect change and shock audiences. In his 1910 work, *Modern Theatre Art*, Jacques Rouché considered the outcome of placing emphasis on simplicity in theatrical design, allowing colors and lines to “characterize a milieu and mood without calling attention to themselves” (Brockett 457). His work at the Théâtre des Arts inspired French critic and visionary Jacques Copeau to open a theatre of his own. Of Copeau, mid-century writer Albert Camus said, “in the history of the French theater, there are two periods: before Copeau and after Copeau” (Donahue 1).

Interestingly enough, if we assess Copeau's contributions to the theatre from the perspective of his audience ridiculing tactics, they prove almost entirely irrelevant. In fact, he placed abnormally high value on his audience, offering admission to his theatre at an impossibly low price so as not to exclude any member of any social strata from the consumption of – according to Copeau – art in its purest form. Although his Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier was committed to producing classical repertory (as specifically outlined in his *An Essay of Dramatic Renovation*), Copeau's revelations did not include an effective or revolutionary tactic for

shaming audiences. Instead, he was driven by an almost charmingly optimistic outlook of the potential reform of the position of the artist himself, calling for “the encroachment of commercialism,” a renormalization of “these men and women whose vocation it is to simulate all human emotions and gestures” (Copeau 452). Regardless, his insistence upon the return to the bare stage would offer the theatrical movements of the early twentieth century a clean slate on which to proclaim their fervent anti-war messages.

The Genesis of French Anti-War Movements

Truly to internalize both the Dada and Surrealist movements as they existed in France, we must first internalize their relationships to the creative movements of their neighbors and recognize Dada and Surrealism as responses to these and to the Great War. As the inception of the war loomed in the not-so-distant future, the theatrical community saw a prominent and rapid progression of the avant-garde. Through their work, artists attempted to discover the answers to the questions they had regarding the state of humanity, and no movement saw more animosity toward the human race than Italian futurism. “Except in struggle,” insists futurist leader Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in his 1910 Futurist Manifesto, “there is no more beauty. No work without an aggressive character can be a masterpiece” (2).

Futurists admired the struggle inherent to the progression of technology but challenged the necessity of historical study and documentation, including museums, libraries, and academies. The eldest of the futurists was but thirty years old, and even at such a young age, their cynicism was tangible; these men ardently glorified war and rejected feminism and moralism, hailing these causes as artful and cunning cowardice. However, what indicates most profoundly the character

of the futurists is that they despised the audience and considered not the success of their work. In this way, perhaps, futurism both perfectly exemplifies and strongly opposes audience ridicule. Molière, for example, shamed his audiences into reconsidering the outcome of their actions because he believed in the power of humanity to change itself and to incite positive change in the community. The futurists, in contrast, ridiculed their audiences in order to invoke a negative response; whether or not the recipients of the work effected change mattered very little, if at all, to the futurist movement.

In Germany, artists desperately sought a movement toward creation that would renew their rapidly dwindling faith in humanity. Taking a rebellious, anti-authoritarian stance, Expressionists believed wholeheartedly that one could find one's ultimate truth, that is, if one were to look in the appropriate place. Foremost, Expressionism advocated for a truth that is both personal and subjective, and therefore theorized that truth lives in the individual spirit or soul. Furthermore, Expressionist theatre-makers concluded that by externalizing the inner vision of the artist, they would successfully represent truth in their work. Although Expressionism saw two distinct periods of art – the revolutionary phase prior to the First World War and the pacifistic phase that followed it – the goals of the movement remained consistent.

While both Futurism and Expressionism emerged as responses to the violent political stage, the Futurists hailed war as the primary tool for healing humanity's wounds and the Expressionists passionately opposed it. One of the hallmarks of Futurism was *bruitism*, an extreme, aggressive form of noise music that futurists like Luigi Russolo created by revving engines, simulating thunder, and filling silence with screams of horror and death. With *bruitism*,

art reached a disturbing new level of audience ridicule, for this was no longer simply ridicule but sheer torment. The Futurists instilled in already fearful audiences a sense of unshakable anguish, attempting to convince them either to surrender their stark opposition to the war or to submit to the horror and allow it to completely overtake them. Expressionism, in contrast, employed vivid war imagery and lush language to shame members of the audience who supported the violence, begging them earnestly to find their compassion. Ernst Toller's 1919 play, *Die Wandlung* (*The Transfiguration*), opens with an "Alarum," echoing the cries of mankind in the midst of turmoil. In the prologue that follows (which, Toller clarifies, one might also regard as an epilogue), Death-By-War and Death-By-Peace converse in a military graveyard adorned with iron crosses. Death-By-Peace initially admits to admiring Death-By-War, complimenting his sense of order, but quickly realizes that War had "humbugged him into admiration;" this is clearly an argument against the pro-war propaganda that had infiltrated Europe (Toller 162). To an indignant War, Peace explains himself:

Just one small paradox
To bring this little interview
To a successful close...
You are a modern Death –
A product of the times,
Comparable to the futile living of today
Where everything is rotten under tinsel.
Goodbye, you petty miserable Death,
Goodbye, you snobbish little hypocrite,

Propped up with military phrases.
Goodbye, and give my compliments
To your lords and masters,
The men of war!
Haha! Haha! Hahahaa! (Toller 163)

With the exception of the prologue/epilogue, *Die Wandlung* exists as an autobiographical drama. Friedrich shares Toller's perceived vocation to fight for peace in his homeland. With the realization that war and heroism are not synonymous, both Friedrich and Toller himself abandon the physical war and choose instead to take up arms in the form of words. "Brothers, stretch out your tortured hands, /With cries of radiant, ringing joy," implores our zealous protagonist, "Stride freely through our liberated land /With cries of Revolution, Revolution" (Toller 206). To aggregate this appeal with audience shaming would rob it of its buoyant intention, but in a way, to shame an audience by shoving its flaws in its face and to shamelessly encourage an audience to act are one and the same. Both strategies appeal to an audience's collective emotion, and whether one or the other is right or wrong, they both strike in the same place.

"Hurrah for Dada"

"DADA remains within the framework of European weaknesses," explains Dada prophet Tristan Tzara in his 1916 *Monsieur Antipyrine's Manifesto*. "It's still shit, but from now on we want to shit in different colors so as to adorn the zoo of art with all the flags of all the consulates" (Tzara, "Antipyrine" 1). For art historians, Dada leads the avant-garde pack as the most undefinable, controversial movement of the entire twentieth century. Beginning in Zürich,

Switzerland, Dada responded loudly to the outbreak of war and vehemently refused to step back when confronted with an equally loud adverse reaction. The face of Dada, though contorted, looks like a lovechild of Futurism, Expressionism, and Cubism, wearing the costume of the post-modern movement that would not appear for several decades. Dada “protested nationalism, which they blamed for the war, by championing artistic, political, and linguistic multiplicity” (Hage 64). Neither the members of the movement nor the audience that hung on its every perplexing word could trace the origins of the name, much less define it at all. Dada truly transcended language, culture, and even intellectual understanding, providing for theatre-makers and audiences a puzzling explanation – but an explanation nonetheless – for the violence that plagued the early twentieth century. Although there exists but one or two Dada plays, the Dadas hosted cabaret-inspired performances which included readings of Dada texts and showings of sculptures, paintings, and readymade anti-art that set the theatrical stage for the remainder of the century. Moreover, Dada would teach a new legion of theatre artists that the most effective way to ridicule an audience was to ridicule themselves.

In 1914, German Expressionist Hugo Ball volunteered for military service after studying under and working alongside Austrian theatre-maker, Max Reinhardt, in Berlin and Munich. Due to a medical condition, the military rejected Ball, but he insisted upon experiencing the war firsthand. Shortly after arriving at the Belgian front and experiencing a horror he could not have imagined, a traumatized Ball returned to Berlin to stage a number of anti-war protests. There, Ball and cabaret singer Emmy Hennings rekindled their friendship and Hennings, an expert forger, crafted documents which permitted the pair to relocate to Zürich. In February of 1916, Ball and Hennings opened the Cabaret Voltaire, to which Tristan Tzara became a frequent visitor.

Here, the Dada movement took root under Ball's careful watch and Tzara's poetic genius. Ball's name for his performance venue arose "out of veneration for a man who had fought all his life for the liberation of the creative forces from the tutelage of the advocates of power" (Huelsenbeck 279). Dada sought to rebel against bourgeois society and stand against the restrictive natures of culture and language, and the Cabaret Voltaire gave artists from all over the world the opportunity to freely express their seemingly mutinous musings.

After a brief stint in Zürich, Tristan Tzara hand-delivered his revolutionary, anti-establishment Dada to Paris. Long considered the artistic capital of the world, Paris's war-hating creative community immediately absorbed Dada philosophy, enamored with the idea that everything one might encounter was simultaneously art and absolute trash. While they fiercely resisted physical violence between human beings, they contributed to Dada's intellectually violent demolition of the institution of popular culture. This extreme, arguably aggressive attack on art in general caused "a division in the public sphere: they formed a Dada public (however small) and a public against Dada" (Hutchinson 124). Even the Dadas themselves – namely Tzara, Francis Picabia, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, Philippe Soupault, Louis Aragon, and André Breton – would face a division based solely on the argument of Dada's true meaning and purpose.

First staged in June of 1921 at Paris's Galerie Montaigne at the Salon Dada, Tzara's *Le Cœur à Gaz* serves as the best-known sample of dramatic Dada literature. The opening performance featured Tzara's peers, Aragon, Soupault, and Ribemont-Dessaignes as Eye, Ear, and Mouth, respectively, while Tzara himself rounded out the cast as Eyebrow. Wishing that the audience not waste even a solitary moment taking the work seriously, Tzara assures us that his

play is but a “three-act hoax,” deriding both his own piece and the sorry fools who may have toyed with the idea that it might possess any artistic merit (Tzara, *Cœur* 133). To further drive this brutal, clever shaming, the Narrator shares with us that “the actors are advised to give this production the attention due a masterpiece [...] but to treat the author – who is not a genius – with no respect and to note the levity of the script which brings no technical innovation to the theatre” (133). This introduction leads into Act I, a chaotic conversation between Ear, Neck, Eye, Mouth, Nose, and Eyebrow, featuring an occasional interjection by the narrator. Meanwhile, Gas Heart (a non-speaking character) mills about in the background. It is interesting to note that Tzara specifies the genders of only three characters: Eye, a man, and Mouth and Ear, women.

In all three acts, Tzara interweaves with this apparent maelstrom of language a touch of Ionescan repetition long before its time, beginning with a discussion between Eye and Mouth involving the banality of their interaction. Furthermore, Tzara introduces Clytemnestra, “the diplomat’s wife,” a figure that the characters repeatedly discuss (135). Here, Eye addresses her directly, calling her beautiful and calm, admitting his fear of death, or so it may appear. One might deduce, in conjunction with his surprising articulation, that Eye refers specifically to Agamemnon’s wife. Without question, Eye consistently offers us the most intellectual speech of any of the characters. One might also assume that, as Tzara suggests, Eye is, indeed, an eye, and therefore, one might also conclude that he quite literally sees in the world what his counterparts do not or cannot. It might be, incidentally, that this visual understanding of the world that surrounds him is precisely what allows Eye to share with us his most insightful (albeit disorderly) observations. In fact, Eye’s language undoubtedly recalls the vehement poetics of Expressionism, and it is here that one may truly recognize the duality of Tzara’s work as he

simultaneously mocks and admires the work of his German predecessors. Though it does not speak nearly as much, Eyebrow tends to follow Eye's silver-tongued lead, echoing Picabia circa the *Bulletin Dada* of 1920: "All I've ever been able to do is water down my water."

"Nothingness drinks nothingness," observes Eyebrow (137). "The air has arrived with its blue eyes, and that is why he goes on taking aspirin all the time."

Between Acts I and II, Tzara instructs the director to play music of any sort and for any length of time. Typically, of course, music during a performance sets the tone of the piece or foreshadows action; Tzara's haphazard directions profoundly testify to the degradation of artistic integrity. Although the dialogue in Act II proves no less unnerving than that of Act I, Tzara clearly examines what he perceives as humanity's detachment from interpersonal communication and language in general. Mouth announces, "I've made a great deal of money," to which Nose replies, "Thank you not bad" (139). For several pages, the dialogue continues in this fashion, Mouth mentioning that he wears his hairstyle *à la mode* and that he does not "understand anything about the rumblings of the next war"; Nose repeatedly responds with the same four words. With this, Tzara comments on our distinct lack of critical listening and responding, implying that whether or not we are feeling alright, we will always answer the question, "How are you?" with "Thank you not bad."

Tzara also provides for us in Act II a deeper exploration of Clytemnestra. Once again, Eye seems to speak to her directly, as if she were actually present. "Have you felt the horrors of the war?" he asks. "Don't you speak the same language?" (140). She very well might, for Clytemnestra herself faced a war, confronted the loss of her daughter at the hands of a sacrifice

motivated by the war itself, and we assume that Eye possesses this knowledge and can therefore reason accordingly. We do not see her again until the end of the act, when Eyebrow calls, “Fire! Fire! I think Clytemnestra’s ablaze” (142). Here, beautiful Clytemnestra might represent beauty itself – a work of art – facing a seemingly interminable death by war and the Dadas themselves. Once more, in Act III, Eye admires Clytemnestra’s beauty, lamenting her apparent rejection. If we consider *Le Cœur à Gaz* utter nonsense (a term both we and the makers, no doubt, apply to a vast majority of Dada literature), an analysis of Clytemnestra’s relevance is nothing short of laughable. If, however, we only halfheartedly acknowledge Tzara’s introductory warning, it seems plausible that Clytemnestra exists as nothing more than lush metaphor, and Eye simply expresses what the entirety of Paris has experienced in the wake of machine-age violence.

“Clytemnestra, race horse,” Mouth announces at the end of Act III,

3,000 francs

Going once!

Going twice!!

Going thrice!!!

Gone! (145-6)

Thus, Paris, but a disfigured mess of appendages and organs, faces the death of art, of beauty, and of peace.

While the Dadas ultimately disagreed on Dada’s function, they all employed a similar means to a vastly different end. “We will never come to any good,” admitted Breton in a 1921 improvised lecture, “but neither will you” (qtd. in Sanouillet 179). Self-deprecation paired with blatant, unforgiving ridicule was the name of the game. Without realizing it (or, perhaps,

realizing it and waving a white flag), audiences played the role of the freckled child with the broken glasses on the playground that was post-war Paris while the Dadas stepped into the bully's shoes, mercilessly teasing the beauty on which audiences had come to rely. The bully, however, would never admit his shortcomings, while the Dadas used them exclusively to catapult the movement, exempting themselves from apology by denouncing their own work as passionately as the work of others.

Surrealism and the Theatre of Cruelty

On July 6th, 1923, Tristan Tzara hosted the Bearded Heart soirée at the Théâtre Michel, featuring a film by Man Ray and a performance of *Le Cœur à Gaz*. André Breton sabotaged the evening, and so began the end of Dada and the true beginning of Surrealism. “Within the bounds in which they operate,” argues Breton in his 1924 Surrealist Manifesto, “dreams, to all appearances, are continuous and show signs of order” (8). Breton called himself more Dada than Dada itself, but Tzara, a true Dada, resented the spirituality with which Breton approached the movement and asserted that it was not the Dada to which he had subscribed. Tzara's Dada manifestos “were truly Dadaist, the ‘Surrealist Manifesto’ was not Surrealist; it set forth a literary theory, in language that was superb but conventional” (Dachy 94).

Incidentally, while Breton may very well have popularized the Surrealist movement, Guillaume Apollinaire was the first to categorize his work as Surrealist. *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* introduces us to Thérèse, whose breasts fly away like balloons when she decides to become a man to establish gender equality and obtain power. Although Apollinaire's 1917 play would hardly fall into the category of Surrealism as Breton's entourage understood it, *The*

Breasts of Tiresias certainly possesses a dream-like quality, an important facet of Breton's Surrealism. In an aggressively eloquent manner, undoubtedly appropriate for the likes of Breton, he outlines in his Manifesto four reflections: 1. It is in dreams that we find the answers to the questions we ask in daily consciousness. ("I regret having to speak according to a formula which excludes dream, in principle") (9). 2. We cannot express ourselves or make profound discoveries in our waking lives. Breton observes that "when the mind is functioning normally it does no more than respond to suggestions which come to it" during sleep (9). 3. If we exist constantly in a dream-like state, we will not fear the inevitable. "Kill, fly faster, love to your heart's content" (10). 4. When we find the resolution to existing within the realms of both dream and reality simultaneously (a sur-reality, so to speak, which Breton believes is entirely accessible), we will begin to uncover the "great Mystery" (10).

He later goes on to describe Surrealism as "pure psychic automatism," a movement "dictated by thought in the absence of any control exercised by reason, free of any aesthetic or moral concern" (19). Based on this definition, Breton lists the artists whom he believes have "performed acts of ABSOLUTE SURREALISM," and even though Apollinaire conceived the term "Surrealism," Breton does not include him. After 1924, Armand Salacrou would become the most prolific Surrealist dramatist, but it would be Antonin Artaud who would reinterpret the Surrealist ideal and transform it into his Theatre of Cruelty.

The theatre of Artaud's imagination admittedly did not boast nearly the same amount of dream imagery as Surrealist drama, but, like Surrealism, was above all else a revolutionary movement focused specifically on reviving the human experience and freeing individuals from

the confines of societal expectation. Artaud rejected the masterpieces of the past, explaining in *The Theatre and Its Double* that if “a contemporary public does not understand *Oedipus Rex*...it is the fault of *Oedipus Rex* and not of the public” (74). He believed that art for art’s sake signified nothing but decadence, and that the primary function of the theatre is to remind us that “the sky can still fall on our heads,” that life is both necessary and inevitable (79). To achieve this goal, Artaud proposes an immersive, spiritual theatrical experience, one in which vivid physical imagery plays the role of God, gripping the spectators (on whom the performance always focuses), hypnotizing their senses. Like the Surrealists, Artaud relied heavily on these images to convey meaning, and rather than pairing them with conventional speech, attached the “language of sounds, cries, lights, [and] onomatopoeia” (90). This, no doubt, inspired the oncoming onslaught of Absurdist drama, most of which rejected coherent language.

From the perspective of audience ridicule, one might have difficulty detecting and defining the tactics of both the Surrealists and Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty. In fact, one might argue that neither movement ridicules its audience in order to invoke a response, and one might make a rather convincing argument. To understand, however, the stratagems of the Theatre of the Absurd, one must recognize the ways in which the Absurdist took advantage of the theories of Breton and Artaud alike. While Surrealism does not directly shame those who do not dream in technicolor, it rejects the conscious thought and behavior that governs conventionally appropriate morality, therefore offending those to whom this consciousness applies. Absurdism famously rejects deliberate conversation, employing a quasi-stream-of-consciousness language à la Surrealism. The philosophies of Artaud and the Absurdist align surprisingly well – both recognized the inherent abnormality and ineludible natures of life and death. Artaud does not

mock his audience, but he does shock them, which likely ruffled their feathers in much the same way. The Absurdist shocked their audience with disquietingly equivocal dialogue that discreetly mocked the banality of human communication, manipulating audience members into laughing at a joke in which they embodied the punch line.

Eugène Ionesco and the Theatre of the Absurd

Between the wars, art and theatre in France remained rather stagnant. Jacques Copeau briefly revived his Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, playwright Henri Ghéon sought a revival of religious drama, Marcel Pagnol penned satire, and Marcel Archard wrote ever-popular romantic comedy. On the avant-garde front, surrealism dominated the 1930s while a new school of thought bubbled beneath the surface of a divided Europe. Though Existentialism arguably took root in the late 19th century and bloomed steadily in the early 20th century, the philosophy did not find vast popularity until Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus employed it as a response to the Second World War. As the name suggests, Existentialism argues primarily that humans simply exist and each individual human subsequently searches for her “essence” by exploring freedom of will and of choice and her personal responsibilities. Like many of its predecessors, Existentialism does not propose that humanity is basically good nor does it depend on scientific discovery to support its arguments. Most importantly, Existentialism recognizes the irrationality that humanity faces in a variety of situations, and therefore also recognizes the inherent absurdity of existence. The partnership of Existentialism and the avant-garde philosophies that pervaded the 20th century – Jarry’s Pataphysics, Dada, Surrealism, and Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty – provided for the Theatre of the Absurd a most fertile soil in which to grow.

In a conversation with literary critic Claude Bonnefoy, Eugène Ionesco admits that although he subtitled *La Cantatrice Chauve* an “anti-play,” he cannot recall the term’s precise implications. Instead, he explores the purpose of this play and the rest of this work, countering an argument made by his contemporaries and future audiences:

It was like beaming a spotlight on humanity, on the amazingness of people generally...Everywhere there's a cause for amazement: in language, in picking up a glass of something, in draining it at a single gulp, in the mere fact of existing, of being. [...] What [the characters] said didn't seem banal to me but astonishing and extraordinary to the highest degree. (Ionesco and Bonnefoy 62)

Firm in his belief that life itself is an abnormality, Ionesco (and the legion of Absurdist who shared this opinion) would highlight in his work both the terrors and the joys of living and the inherent cruelty of existence. Despite this Artaudian sentiment, and Ionesco's apparent affection toward humanity, he did not hesitate to discuss the shortcomings of his fellow man. In this way, Ionescan Absurdism marries a genuine admiration and awe of the human condition with the recognition and exposure of its most abhorrent defects, representing in and of himself, perhaps, the finest execution of audience ridicule in the history of the French theatre. Ionesco's theatrical design is "strange and nightmarish, but at the same time familiar, for it is our own little world, and the grotesque figures moving upon the stage remind us of ourselves" (Pronko 61).

Ionesco's work surely serves as an appropriate indication of his personality – brilliant, self-important, and appropriately vain – but it is particularly interesting to note that the scenario most indicative of his nature has no relationship to his writing. Before his death in 1994, theatre scholars and historians recorded Ionesco's birth-year as 1912. Eventually, they discovered that he had lied himself but three years younger, proof that everything in Ionesco's world depended on seemingly insignificant detail. Shortly after his birth in Romania in 1909, Ionesco and his family moved to Paris where he would ultimately build his career thirty-six years later. During

this period of time, Ionesco and his younger sister traveled between Romania and France, their tense family situation never allowing them to settle permanently. After pursuing a French degree at the University of Bucharest, Ionesco published several articles and essays in various Romanian literary magazines and began teaching French in Cernavoda in 1936. Once he and his wife finally settled in Paris in 1945 despite economic hardships and the disintegration of Eastern Europe, Ionesco began translating the work of Romanian absurdist Urmoz and in 1948, conceived his first play, *La Cantatrice Chauve*.

Not unlike the experiences of the forerunners of the French avant-garde, audiences initially received Ionesco's first major work less than favorably. Of course, audiences frequently deride that which they do not understand. *La Cantatrice Chauve*, is, on a fundamental level, nothing more than a deluge of proper English gibberish. Beneath the façade, however, Ionesco exposes rotten truths about the meaninglessness of language, the vapidness of human communication, and the deep emotional void in domestic life by ridiculing the petty conversation on which fools rely. Moreover, Ionesco's blatantly self-contradicting subtitle emphasizes the senselessness in playwriting, recalling certain hallmarks of the French avant-garde. Ionesco's analysis of the human condition borrows the Dada tendency to deprecate one's own work and explores Artaud's cruel necessity of being. His peers (namely Soupault and Breton) acclaimed him "as the latest and finest product of Surrealism," even though Ionesco believed that "surrealism achieved the spontaneity which is essential to great art, but it lacked the final degree of lucidity" (Coe 30-31). Perhaps most importantly, however, Ionesco molds Jarry's Pataphysics to appeal to the mid-century sensibility, exploiting the idea of a supplementary universe in which all things are but reactionary accidents.

“To understand Pataphysics,” argues Richard N. Coe, “is half the battle in trying to understand Ionesco” (32). While Ionesco vehemently denied affiliation with any one existing avant-garde movement, he did not hesitate to call himself a Pataphysician and to constantly to find inspiration in Jarry’s work. This is not to say, however, that Ionesco imitated *Ubu Roi* or any other Jarry piece; he rather wrote plays that encompassed the ideals and philosophies that pervaded the small but mighty Jarry canon. Because Jarry and Ionesco both identified as Pataphysicians, they were, in a way, impermeable and imperturbable, making them immune to the name-callers and the naysayers. “Pataphysics,” after all, “has nothing to do with humor or with the kind of tame insanity that psychoanalysis has drummed into fashion. Life is, of course, absurd, and it is ludicrous to take it seriously. Only the comic is serious” (Shattuck 12). As a Pataphysician, Ionesco remained serious – impermeable – which afforded him a sense of anonymity, and, no doubt, free reign to criticize the idiosyncrasies of the human condition.

La Cantatrice Chauve

In any theatrical circle, one could safely argue that *La Cantatrice Chauve* created, all at once, a new theatre, one completely devoid of meaning, yet somehow overflowing with implication and dissection. Audiences eventually learned to laugh at the bits at which they presumed they should, but as was the case with a great majority of avant-garde French theatre, as Allan Lewis observed, “the bitter joke is that the audience was laughing at its own vacuity” (34). Ionesco does not waste a page before he attacks the conventions of English society, or so it might appear. It is, in fact, of little importance that we understand that the home on which the scene opens is an English home, and it is most integral that we note the domesticity of the middle-class household. The stage directions read:

A middle-class English interior, with English armchairs. An English evening. Mr. Smith, an Englishman, seated in his English armchair and wearing English slippers, is smoking his English pipe and reading an English newspaper, near an English fire. He is wearing English spectacles and a small gray English mustache. Beside him, in another English armchair, Mrs. Smith, an Englishwoman, is darning some English socks. A long moment of English silence. The English clock strikes 17 English strokes. (8)

The dialogue continues between Mr. and Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Smith making careful note of her English salad and English water. Immediately, the word “English” loses its function. One might replace “English” with “French” or “American” or “Italian,” and the scene would look the same. It does not matter, even, that the clock strikes seventeen times, only that it struck at all. Seventeen is but a number, and “English” is but a word, and socks are but socks. In only one set of stage directions (and only one line, for the spectators), Ionesco, criticizes and epitomizes the absurdity and futility of assigning meaning to absolutely everything. The audience laughed away, laughed at its own trivial middle-class existences, laughed at the banality of its minimalistic vocabulary, laughed at Mr. and Mrs. Smith, with their common surname and their common home that vaguely reminded the audience of itself (“Look, darling, how droll!”).

In the conversation that follows, Mrs. Smith talks at her husband as he reads his newspaper and ignores her, paralleling a rather common trope in domestic entertainment and life. Once Mrs. Smith begins gossiping, Mr. Smith takes more interest, and as the two trash talk their neighbors and friends, including a family in which every member is named Bobby Watson, the

clock continues to strike erratically. Mary, their maid, eventually informs them that their guests, Mr. and Mrs. Martin, have arrived. After she greets them and exits, the two sit across from one another, staring awkwardly. Finally, Mr. Martin admits, “Excuse me, madam, but it seems to me, unless I’m mistaken, that I’ve met you somewhere before” (15). This launches them into a series of discoveries of the strange coincidences in their lives: they both reside in Bromfield Street in London at No. 19, they sleep in the same bed, and they both have a pretty daughter named Alice who has one white eye and one red eye. When they realize that all of this must mean they are, indeed, husband and wife, they embrace, falling asleep together in an armchair. Here, Ionesco expertly ridicules the often superficial relationships in domestic life, the distinct lack of communication between partners, and the forced intrigue of melodramatic love scenes in popular theatre. From the audience of a well-directed production of *La Cantatrice Chauve*, this scene would likely read humorously, tricking the audience into laughing at the content. Incidentally, this content could have been plucked from the lives of any of the audience members and they would have laughed just the same.

For the remainder of the play, Ionesco crafts his dialogue from a mess of contradictions and cyclical conversation. The doorbell rings several times, and nobody appears when Mrs. Smith opens the door. The doorbell rings again, and this time, Mr. Smith answers the door, revealing the Fire Chief. He observes a repetitive argument between Mr. and Mrs. Smith regarding the doorbell and the lack of response to it, and ultimately settles it with a simple assessment. “You are both partly right,” argues the Fire Chief. “When the doorbell rings, sometimes there is someone, other times there is no one. Life is very simple really” (27). One might conclude that the Fire Chief represents Ionesco himself, applying simple logic to a simple

existence otherwise clouded by disagreement and discord. The Fire Chief confesses that he has orders to extinguish all the fires in the city, to which the couples woefully report that there is no fire in the house at all. In a meticulous reading of this scene, one might argue further that Ionesco (if the Fire Chief represents him after all) wishes to extinguish meaningless communication, to reassert the absurdity of existence, and to remind playwrights of the futility of playwriting. The couples (if they represent society and popular culture after all) deny his wishes, permitting him only to sit for a moment and entertain them.

After the Fire Chief shares several stories with no apparent content, Mary reveals herself as his lover, and therefore decides to honor him with a poem entitled “The Fire,” which explains that the castle, the men, the women, the fish, the water, and the other things all caught fire. The poem concludes with “irrefutable truisms” (Lewis 36):

The ashes caught fire
The smoke caught fire
The fire caught fire
Everything caught fire
Caught fire, caught fire. (36-37)

Like the word “English,” the meaning rapidly drains from the phrase “caught fire,” and suddenly, the poem loses significance, substance, and purpose. At last, the Fire Chief bids the five farewell, Mrs. Martin thanking him for “a truly Cartesian quarter of an hour,” which likely refers to René Descartes’s mind-body duality (37). “Those with her all knew that they existed because they were thinking,” but because Ionesco ridicules their distinct lack of rational thinking, he

simultaneously ridicules their refusal to truly live and their singular desire to “pass the time as comfortably as possible” (McDermott 40).

At this moment, Ionesco reveals the most ambiguous moment of dialogue in the play: “Speaking of that – the bald soprano?” asks the Fire Chief. After a moment of “general silence, embarrassment,” Mrs. Smith replies, “She always wears her hair in the same style” (37). With that, the Fire Chief takes his leave, and the bald soprano disappears into the abyss of time and space. For an audience member, this might not appear funny. It might, in fact, be the very first moment at which the audience does not feel compelled to laugh. It is wholly enigmatic, unbelievable, and almost unsettling. We laugh not at the Fire Chief’s question nor at Mrs. Smith’s answer. We only wonder about the bald prima donna and the purpose she serves. “In its having no connection to anything spoken heretofore, in its isolation from predicating, this phrase is worse than any of the banal platitudes that have preceded it” (McDermott 40). At this moment, we abruptly realize that if the bald soprano matters not, the discussion of the English home, the discourse between the Martins, and the argument about the doorbell all matter not. Words signify nothing and language proves useless; when asked why he called the play *La Cantatrice Chauve*, Ionesco responded, “No prima donna appears in the play. This detail should suffice” (qtd. in McDermott 46).

From here, the play quite literally regresses, instantaneously transforming into nothing more than a series of clichés and colloquialisms exchanged like bullets flying through a battlefield. The mention of the bald soprano represents the unmitigated disintegration of language, and Ionesco uses his entire arsenal of platitudes to drive the function of the Prima

Donna deep into the minds of unsuspecting audience members. “Take a circle, caress it, and it will turn vicious,” Mr. Smith warns us (38). Recycle the same useless dramatic literary tactics implemented throughout the history of the French theatre, and it will turn into nothing more than a torrent of absurdity. Existence is cruel, communication is cruel, and Ionesco becomes Artaud. Art is nothing, art is everything, we can but water down our own water, and Ionesco becomes Tzara, Picabia, and Ribemont-Dessaignes. Everything we experience is nothing more than an accidental by-product of the events that have preceded this experience, imaginary reality is equally as valid as actual reality, and Ionesco becomes Jarry.

Ionesco borrows the most brilliant, effective audience shaming strategies of the 20th century, pairs them with his firm belief in the absurdity of life, and remains a serious Pataphysician as the audience laughs in its own face. To emphasize the cyclical nature of language, of theatre, of life, and of ridicule, the play ends with Mr. and Mrs. Martin playing the first scene of the show just as Mr. and Mrs. Smith had, reciting the lines exactly as the curtain falls. The Theatre of the Absurd might very well represent the culmination of the 20th century avant-garde and of the history of audience ridicule, but it undoubtedly does exactly as the *sottie* had done five centuries earlier.

Concluding Thoughts

Although it would be easy to argue that Ionesco's hypothesized outcome of caressing a circle is irrelevant, unadulterated garbage, a vicious circle may very well represent a perfect cycle of audience ridicule. Ionesco delicately borrows his favorite tactics from every pertinent moment of French theatre history; the foolishness of the *sottie*, the love of humanity embedded playfully into Molière's farce, Pixérécourt's rejection of discernment, Jarry's epiphenomenal worldview, and Dada rubbish fill the pages of Ionescan Absurdism so subtly we barely notice them at all. Ionesco's formula was so impeccable that none of the playwrights who succeeded him dared attempt to improve upon or even replicate his genius. The line of audience ridicule through the French theatre has been undeniably severed, but the damage is far from irrevocable. If theatre-makers exclusively commit to ridiculing audiences with the intention of effecting deep change within society, we might very well find that this vicious circle wishes still to be caressed.

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