

**Bruscambille's comic curtain-raisers:  
prologues and paradoxes in the early Seventeenth-Century  
Paris theatre**

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Before beginning this talk, I would like to say something about the reason for my being here – other than the immediate one, namely, the kind invitation from Pauline Smith and Dana Mayer. I understand from them that I am the first of Klaus's Bedford College students to present one of the memorial lectures: what a responsibility! We are here today to continue to recognize the work and inspiration of one of the finest mentors and scholars of his day, someone who brought the same energy and patience to the task of guiding and encouraging his students as he did to his meticulous scholarly work. He personally accompanied me on my first visit to the now greatly missed Reading Room at the British Museum, making sure I got my reader's pass speedily and knew exactly how to work with those wonderful old catalogues. Long before the days of keeping in easy touch with one's adviser by way of e-mails, his short notes and pointed comments kept us on track and raised all the right questions. And then we had the reward of those memorable evenings of elegant wining and dining at the château Mayer in north London. Dana, Klaus and Edward welcomed us with so much generosity and good humour: in fact, the reason I have always invited my subsequent university classes to our house every semester is because I have such fond memories of the Mayers' humanizing our studies, showing the links between feeding the mind and feeding the body .

After I graduated from Bedford, it was Klaus who urged me to continue on with a Ph.D., and suggested a thesis topic that

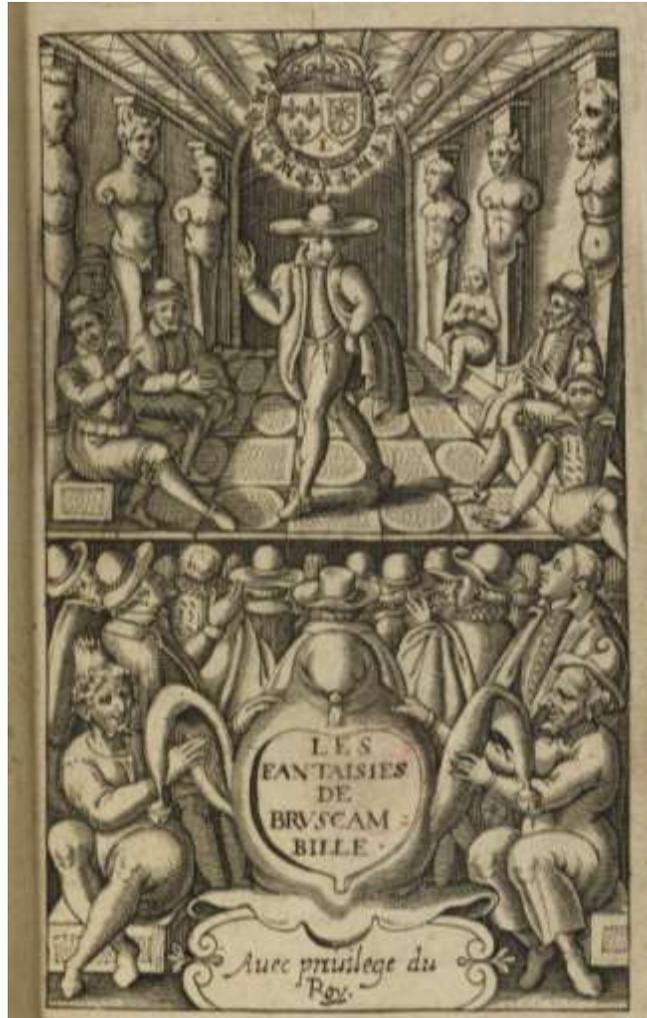
became a lifelong interest, that of the Lucianic mock encomium. And, later on, my appointments at Leeds and then London universities owed much to his advice and recommendations. Moreover, that project he originally suggested led me directly to the topic of the present article, for I first read Bruscombille's paradoxes while preparing the final chapter of my thesis. Given Klaus's love for the theatre – remember those French plays he used to direct with such skill and patience? -- I can only hope that this talented performer's work would have interested him.

Before turning to the details of the prologues, it is worth pointing out that French actors of the early seventeenth century performed in conditions very different from those found in theatres today. The Hôtel de Bourgogne, the first public theatre in Paris, was lit only by torches and candles. It was noisy, crowded, and often dangerous. Drinking, thieving, and fighting were regular occurrences as the crowd assembled for the afternoon's performance. Writers, clerks, aristocrats, soldiers, tradespeople and servants mingled with prostitutes and pickpockets. Surprisingly, as John Lough and others have demonstrated in recent years, respectable women, even court ladies attended performances, as, on occasion, did the king and court<sup>1</sup>.

The stage at the Hôtel de Bourgogne was relatively large in an era when many theatres were merely converted jeux de paume, indoor tennis courts. But the scenery and people sitting on the sides of the stage also took up space, as the frontispiece from Jean Millot's 1615 Paris edition of *Les Fantaisies de Bruscombille* (© British Library. "Les Fantaisies de Bruscombille", Paris, Jean Millot, 1615, C 97 bb 27 ) illustrates.

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<sup>1</sup> See J. Lough, *Paris Theatre Audiences in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1957, p. 25-30.



Given these constraints of a very mixed audience and a limited performance space, the problem facing the actors preparing for the main features of the day became a simple one of crowd control. Once everyone had entered, some having been reluctant to pay the modest fee<sup>2</sup>, most would have to stand throughout the

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, "Un autre un peu plus courtisan payera d'un mon amy, tu me prend sans vert, je te contenteray à la premiere veuë ", *Les Fantaisies de Bruscabille*, Paris, Jean Millot, 1612, "Autre Prologue contre l'avarice", p. 183. There is no modern edition of the complete works of Bruscabille, and the various so-called *Œuvres complètes* of the actor's speeches do not in fact contain all the 115 prologues. In collaboration with Hugh Roberts of the University of Exeter, I am preparing an édition critique of the works, to appear as part of the series *La Renaissance française* (founded by Klaus Mayer and now edited by Pauline Smith as part of Champion's *Textes littéraires de la Renaissance*). We have recently been saddened to learn of the passing of Pierre Enckell, one of the

performance: only a fortunate few would be seated. At that point, how were the actors to attract and hold the attention of their audience? The solution to this problem in the early part of the century lay in the creative and dramatic skills of an actor who belonged to the troupe. Using the stage name of Bruscombille, this performer, sometimes known as an “harangueur,” achieved considerable success with a series of comic monologues. In the modern entertainment world he would be called a stand-up comedian or “warm-up” man. Like many actors of the period, he used more than one name. It was common practice at this time for actors to employ one name for tragedy, one for comedy and farce and a third, usually their birth name, for legal documents. But for many years only one other name, that of the sieur des Lauriers, was attributed to Bruscombille. Since 1986, thanks to the research of Alan Howe, we have learned that the actor’s third name, which appeared on legal documents alongside des Lauriers, was Jean Gracieux<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, far from being some minor figure in the company, it seems that, in addition to cosigning various leases related to performances at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, Bruscombille at one time headed a troupe of his own. He performed not only in Paris, but also in the French provinces.

His monologues must have become popular quite quickly, for they were collected and published in over forty editions from

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initiators of this project, who was forced by ill health to give up his participation in it, but who continued to advise us most generously on the innumerable linguistic problems raised by the prologues.. When citing from the prologues, I shall refer to our transcriptions of the Jean Millot 1612 *Fantaisies: les nouvelles et plaisantes Imaginations de Bruscombille, en suite de ses Fantaisies*, Paris, François Huby, 1613; *Facecieuses Paradoxes de Bruscombille, & autres discours comiques*, Rouen, Thomas Maillard, 1615; and *Les plaisants Paradoxes de Bruscombille, & autres discours comiques*, Rouen, Thomas Maillard, 1617.

<sup>3</sup> See Alan Howe, « Bruscombille, qui était-il ? », *XVII<sup>e</sup> Siècle*, CLIII (1986-87), p. 390-396.

1609 onwards, both in Paris and elsewhere<sup>4</sup>. They range in length from five to ten printed pages each, and their author soon began to be mentioned by contemporaries. Indeed, the name Bruscombille seems to have become so closely associated with a comic or satiric authorial posture that some later writers adopted it as a way of signaling to readers the playful or satirical nature of the work in question<sup>5</sup>. These speeches, however, are unlike so many English theatrical prologues, in that they are rarely linked to the plays they introduce<sup>6</sup>. They stand alone, the speaker only occasionally making reference to the plays that follow his speeches. We may speculate that such free-standing pieces were easier to detach from their context for publication.

In fact, they form but one part of a widespread vogue for playful comic writing. Alain Mercier's work on "la littérature facétieuse", for example, documents many hundreds of these publications between 1610 and 1643, the reign of Louis XIII<sup>7</sup>. Many began life on stage, either at the Hôtel de Bourgogne or on one of the platforms erected in the public squares where the "charlatans" or quack doctors used comic skits and scenes to attract passers-by, hoping thereafter to sell them their ointments and

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<sup>4</sup> See Georges Mongrédien, « Bibliographie des œuvres du facétieux Bruscombille », *Bulletin du bibliophile*, n° 5, 1926, p. 373-384, 422-430, 442-444, Alain Mercier, *Le Tombeau de la mélancolie : Littérature et facétie sous Louis XIII*, 2 t., Paris, Champion, 2005, and Hugh Roberts, « La tête de Bruscombille et les métaphores mentales au début du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle », *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France*, n° 107, 2007, p. 541-557 (p. 541, n. 1).

<sup>5</sup> See for example, the *Avis donné par le sieur de Briscambille aux protestans revolté [sic] de France*, a l'enclose, par ti-pe-to-to, 1621, Bibliothèque municipale d'Avignon, 8° 11782/60.

<sup>6</sup> As will be shown below, some prologues mention in vague terms the farce or play that is to follow. "Pour Pastorales" (*Imaginations*, f<sup>os</sup> 224 r<sup>o</sup> - 228 v<sup>o</sup>) defends the genre of the pastoral. One, the "Prologue de Rien", later appeared as the prologue to a specific play, *La Melize pastorale comique. Par le Sieur du Rocher. Avec un Prologue Facecieux*, Paris, Jean Corrozet, 1639, but did not refer to the content of the play in its text. Only "Pour la Tragedie de Phalante" (*Imaginations*, f<sup>os</sup> 233 r<sup>o</sup> - 236 v<sup>o</sup>) mentions the title of a specific play. On *Phalante*, see Jean Galaut, *Phalante*, éd. A. Howe, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 1995.

<sup>7</sup> See Alain Mercier, *Tombeau, passim*.

potions. Probably the most famous of such street vendors was Tabarin, Antoine Girard, whose short dialogues with his partner and brother Philippe (who used the name Mondor) have much in common with Bruscombille's prologues. Most *facéties* were quite short, making them easy to reproduce and circulate and cheap to buy. In addition, in the absence of effective copyright laws, the pieces could readily be plagiarized. That Bruscombille's prologues held their own in such a competitive field is a sign that they worked as well in print as they did in performance. Indeed, a glance at Mercier's index shows that only Tabarin comes close to Bruscombille in the number of editions of his works to appear in this period.

Some of the competition in the realm of comic writing came from other members of Bruscombille's own troupe, the "comédiens du roy". For these years represent what has been called "the golden age of French farce", when Gaultier-Garguille, Turlupin and Gros Guillaume, three of the greatest French *farceurs*, flourished<sup>8</sup>. Like Bruscombille, the trio used other names for serious drama and for legal documents<sup>9</sup>. Their farce names, however, are those used in the various published works by or purporting to be by them. Indeed, they were so closely linked in the public perception that they were often portrayed on stage together<sup>10</sup>. However, each actor had a very distinct public image. Gros Guillaume was so fat that he wore not one but two belts, one above and one below the waist so that he resembled a wine barrel.

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<sup>8</sup> See William L. Wiley, *The Early Public Theatre in France*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1960, p. 65.

<sup>9</sup> Gros-Guillaume/Robert Guérin/La Fleur, 1554-1634; Turlupin/Henri Legrand/Belleville, 1587-1637; Gaultier-Garguille/Hugues Guéru/Fléchelles, 1572?-1633.

<sup>10</sup> The association between the *farceurs* continued even after their deaths, as in the portrait at the museum of the Comédie française, which features Turlupin, Gros-Guillaume and Gaultier-Garguille together with Molière and other actors, under the title "Farceurs français et italiens, depuis soixante ans. Peint en 1671".

His face was covered in flour (these actors were called "enfarinés") and he played the faux naïf roles to perfection. The slender Gaultier Garguille, on the other hand, was dressed in black. He specialized in playing old men, but was also famous for his fine voice and crude, clever songs, which were published in several editions<sup>11</sup>. The third *farceur*, Turlupin, usually wore a mask like that of the *commedia dell'arte* character Brighella, and was at his best playing artful valets. Curiously, we have no such clear image of Bruscombille. To be sure, some frontispieces to the various editions of the prologues, such as the 1615 Millot one mentioned above, portray a figure who is likely to be the prologuist, since they feature the large hat and, in at least one case, the spectacles that will be discussed below. It remains puzzling that we have several well-documented drawings of the three great *farceurs* but so few of Bruscombille. The reason for this relative dearth of images may be that Bruscombille's function was less that of an actor playing a coherent, recognizable role throughout a given play or farce, and more that of a comic orator. *What* he says and how entertainingly he delivers his speech are more important to his success than the specific costume he wears or the comic persona he assumes.

The prologues have been of considerable interest to critics and historians. Some scholars have concentrated on the works' many references to the contemporary theatrical world<sup>12</sup>. Others focus on the classical and contemporary sources of the prologues, from Aesop and Lucian to Berni and Rabelais<sup>13</sup>. Yet another group of

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<sup>11</sup> See Gaultier-Garguille, *Chansons de Gaultier Garguille*, éd. E. Fournier, Paris, Jannet, 1858.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, J. Lough, *Paris Theatre Audiences*, p.21-22, 75-76..

<sup>13</sup> See Eugène Rigal, « Bruscombille fabuliste », *Revue des langues romanes*, 3<sup>e</sup> série, XV, 1886, p. 305-308; Annette Tomarken, « 'Un beau petit encomion' : Bruscombille and the Satirical Eulogy on Stage », *Renaissance Reflections : Essays in memory of C. A. Mayer*, éd. P. M. Smith and T. Peach, Paris,

scholars has studied the verbal fantasy and comic skill of Bruscombille in terms of the overall development of French drama, particularly farce<sup>14</sup>. And the actor's undoubted rhetorical training and expertise have also been analysed and praised<sup>15</sup>. However, although a number of critics have applauded Bruscombille's works, some, particularly in the nineteenth century, were offended by his extremely crude humour<sup>16</sup>. Such reactions may help explain why, to date, there has been no complete critical edition of the speeches.

One problem in preparing such an edition is that speeches are sometimes given different titles in different editions, from "prologue" and "paradoxe" to "imagination", "harangue", "fantaisie", and "galimatias". Moreover, prologues may be lengthened, shortened or even, in early editions, run together<sup>17</sup>. This renaming and reordering may be due merely to the printers' wish to present as being new creations material that in fact already appeared elsewhere. Whatever the reason for these complexities, the result is that a complete collection of the prologues has to bring together and compare pieces from a large number of partial editions from the seventeenth century. Our hope is that, once this task is complete, the value of the comedian's works may be more

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Champion, 2002, p. 247-67; Joseph Vianey, « Bruscombille et les poètes bernésques », *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France*, VIII (1901), p. 569-76

<sup>14</sup> See Barbara C. Bowen, *Les Caractéristiques essentielles de la farce française et leur survivance dans les années 1550-1620*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1964; Robert Garapon, *La Fantaisie verbale et le comique dans le théâtre. Du moyen âge à la fin du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, A. Colin, 1957.

<sup>15</sup> See Patrick Dandrey, *L'Eloge paradoxal de Gorgias à Molière*, Paris, PUF, 1997, and Volker Kapp, « Eloge paradoxal et blâme burlesque dans les prologues de Bruscombille. La culture oratoire d'un farceur français au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle », *Studi di Letteratura Francese*, XXII (1997), p. 63-86.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Victor Fournel, who went so far as to say that reading the speeches gave him "des haut-le-cœur à chaque page", *Tableau du vieux Paris : Les spectacles populaires et les artistes des rues*, Paris, Dentu, 1863, p. 359. Fournel was far from alone in such views.

<sup>17</sup> In the 1609 edition of the *Discours facetieux et tres-recreatifs*, Paris, Jean Millot, for example, one part of one prologue is from the "Prologue contre les Temeraires" and the other from the "Prologue sur un autre Plaidoyé".

accurately assessed. Was he a worthy successor to or merely a pale imitator of the writings of Lucian, Rabelais and his other famous antecedents?

Such extended analysis and justification cannot of course be undertaken here. Instead, having briefly set the speeches against their background, I would like to turn to the texts themselves, presenting what might be termed a prologue to the prologues. How did Bruscombille construct and deliver his monologues in such a way as to keep those restless listeners attentive to what he said and interested in the upcoming play? Why is he deserving of continued critical study – not to mention still so enjoyable to read? Before considering specific texts, it is important to remember their origins as live performances. While we may not have many portraits of the man, what can we learn from those we do have and what can we (with due caution) infer from his own works about what Bruscombille probably looked like and about how he talked to and interacted with his listeners?

The props or attributes most often mentioned by the actor himself were his hat and his glasses, what he calls his "triples lunettes" or "lunettes à grand volume"<sup>18</sup>. The word "triples" is here used most probably as an intensifier. He also talks more than once about his ancient breeches (usually in the context of praising their virile contents), and is proud of his fine beard and large nose. The latter boast leads to predictable jokes about the relationship between the size of the nose and that of another organ rather lower down the body. Hats seem to have been favourite props of actors and charlatans in this period. Tabarin, for example, dedicated an entire *fantaisie* to his battered hat, and Bruscombille has three

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, *Imaginations*, "De la Medecine", f° 163 r°, and *Les Plaisants Paradoxes*, "Paradoxe sur la prison", p. 1.

prologues on hats<sup>19</sup>. With the exception of the breeches, the personal features mentioned by Bruscombille – the hat, the glasses, the beard and the nose - are situated at the top of the body. I would suggest that this was for the simple practical reason that in an age when most of the audience was standing and restless, features and items of clothing at the top of the body are more visible to the crowd. We know also that the acting style of the time was more florid and declamatory than that of today: we can assume, therefore, that the actor, waving his large hat, peering through his spectacles, and gesticulating energetically would have caught the eye of most spectators. The gesturing and the hat, plus a dramatic swirling coat are visible not only in the 1615 Millot frontispiece mentioned above, but also in that of the 1620 Jacques Cailloué edition from Rouen, in which, with a little "bonne volonté", we can also just make out what appear to be his glasses.

But in case his dress and gestures failed to catch the public's attention, the actor's words and mode of delivery would surely have achieved that absolutely essential goal. For Bruscombille proves to be a master at getting his audience involved. To this end, he employs several strategies. In the first place, the texts frequently mention "messieurs", but references to "mesdames" also appear, further proof that women did indeed attend performances. His attitude to his listeners changes constantly, from affectionate and respectful to blisteringly critical<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> See *Les Fantaisies plaisantes et facétieuses du chapeau à Tabarin*, Gustave Aventin, éd. *Oeuvres complètes de Tabarin*, 2 vols. ,Paris, P.Jannet, 1858, II, p. 338-339; Bruscombille, "Prologue du bonnet", *Fantaisies*, p. 198-202; "Prologue sur un chapeau", *Fantaisies*, p. 236-239; "Harangue funebre sur le bonnet de Jean Farine", *Imaginations*, f° 189 r° - 192 v°.

<sup>20</sup> "Il me suffit donc de dire que vostre favorable accueil, courtoisie & humaine douceur, renouvelée ce jourd'huy en l'honneur de vostre assistance, nous somment à ceste premiere course, de joindre tous les efforts de nostre puissance, pour vous tesmoigner le desir que nous avons de contenter vostre vertueuse curiosité", *Imaginations*, "Les visibles imaginations du seigneur Bruscombille",

In addition to involving his listeners by addressing them directly, he plays to their traditional likes and dislikes. The frequent misogynistic jokes were of course sure to raise a guffaw from an audience made up mostly of men. Other targets are lawyers and doctors, groups often satirized in French farces. Lawyers are portrayed as money-hungry, as in his regular use of the image of the lawyer's purse: "je vous voy les oreilles ouvertes comme la gibeciere d'un Advocat<sup>21</sup>"; doctors are both money-hungry *and* hypocritical about their greed: "*dicendo nolo accipiunt pecunias*<sup>22</sup>", while women are vain, lustful, silly and stubborn. Their vanity seems to arouse the comedian's particular ire: "Telle aura cinquante ans qui se fardera le museau de telle sorte, que la vieille chair ne se verra non plus à travers le fard que l'orde couleur d'une vieille muraille, qui est un peu reblanchie"<sup>23</sup>. Bruscombille is, however, careful to include himself in the circle of criticism. Thus, having listed the usual classes of people who can be viewed as fools - poets, students, women, doctors, and even readers who buy his works - he adds, following in the tradition of Erasmus' *Lady Folly*, "Je ne vous dis rien de la bizarre façon de mes habits : car puisque chacun s'habille follement, comment me dois-je habiller moy qui suis l'Empereur des fols<sup>24</sup>?"

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f° 3v° -4 r°, As for the words of criticism, the following passage gives a sense of the freedom with which the actor addresses his listeners: "Je vous dy donc que vous avez tort, mais grand tort de venir depuis vos maisons jusques icy pour y montrer l'impatience accoustumée, c'est-à-dire, pour n'estre à peine entrez, que dès la porte vous ne criez à gorge despaquetée, commencez, commencez," *Fantaisies*, "Prologue de l'Impatience", p. 88.

<sup>21</sup> *Fantaisies*, "Prologue des Fols", p. 248.

<sup>22</sup> "While saying no, they take the money", *Fantaisies*, "Prologue facecieux", p. 53. Cf. also "j'ayme le son du Ducat", a remark made in the context of explaining why the narrator plans to pursue a career as a doctor (*Imaginations*, "De la Medecine", f° 163 r°).

<sup>23</sup> *Imaginations*, "De la Folie en general", f° 85 v°-86 r°. As for their stubbornness, see, for example, the following remark: "disant que la premiere femme avoit esté créée de la coste de l'homme, & que c'estoit le subject pourquoy elle avoit la teste plus dure que tous les milles Diabes" (*Imaginations*, "De la creation des femmes", f° 28 r°).

<sup>24</sup> *Imaginations*, "De la Folie en general", f° 85 v°.

In addition to including passages of self-reflection, Bruscombille sometimes introduces an imaginary interlocutor into whose mouth he puts objections to his arguments, objections which he then demolishes. The resulting quasi-dialogue must have been particularly effective in live performance, where the actor could make use of it to toy with or perhaps even wake up inattentive members of his audience. In the criticism of impatience, he creates the following brilliant imaginary dialogue: "Vous respondrez peut-estre que le jeu ne vous plaist pas, c'est là où je vous attendois, pourquoy y venez-vous donc? [...] vous vous plaignez le plus souvent de trop aise, qu'ainsi ne soit, si on vous donne quelque excellente Pastorale, où Mome ne trouveroit que redire, cettuy-cy la trouve trop longue, son voisin trop courte: & quoy, ce dit un autre, allongeant le col comme une gruë d'antiquité, n'y devroient-ils pas mesler une intermede & des feintes<sup>25</sup>?"

These two techniques, that of direct involvement with the audience and of role-playing within the texts are further reinforced by the range of styles, themes and genres employed by the speaker. Taking first the question of style, even the most cursory reading of the prologues shows that Bruscombille habitually interweaves a formal rhetorical style full of Latin citations and academic language with explicit scatological references. The mingling of high and low language is characteristic of burlesque writing and satire in general, and the influence of Rabelais, to whom the speaker refers on a number of occasions, is very evident<sup>26</sup>. His three speeches on the value and virtues of breaking wind, for example, are presented teasingly as learned philosophical arguments making use of Aristotelian syllogisms in order to prove

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<sup>25</sup> *Fantaisies*, "Prologue de l'Impatience", p. 90.

<sup>26</sup> His admiration is apparent in the following phrase: "lire les heureux & admirables voyages de ce sublime personnage Rabelais" (*Fantaisies*, "Premiere Harangue de Midas", p. 2).

"Qu'un Pet est quelque chose de corporel", "Qu'un Pet est spirituel", and, finally, "Qu'un Pet est une chose bonne"<sup>27</sup>.

The question cannot but arise at this point as to why the speaker included so many expressions and citations that a significant part of his audience would not understand. While it is true that many *facéties* made use of Latin expressions, and that Rabelais, whom Bruscombille so admired, scattered Latin references throughout his works, there remains a significant difference between inserting Latin in a printed text, where it could be ignored by a less educated reader, and delivering it live on stage. Bruscombille therefore employs various stratagems to suggest the meaning of the Latin words. Sometimes he chooses terms that are so close to their French equivalents as to be readily understood, as when he remarks that "je penserois offenser *curiositatem vestram*"<sup>28</sup>. Elsewhere, the Latin words are so short that their meaning is self-evident – "primo", "secondo", "ergo", "valete", "nihil" for example. In addition, the meaning of many terms, whether religious, rhetorical, legal or medical, could be easily grasped from the context or from the gestures with which they could be accompanied on stage. On several occasions, the actor provides a translation, either accurate or playful, immediately after the citation. Some expressions are in fact not so much Latin as Latinate. Bruscombille, who may himself have pursued studies in the law, is a master at playing with the terminology beloved of doctors, scholastics and lawyers. In the following passage, much cited by modern critics<sup>29</sup>, actual Latin words are combined with Latin-sounding vocabulary (sometimes of the comedian's own

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<sup>27</sup> *Fantaisies*, pp. 112-126.

<sup>28</sup> *Fantaisies*, "Galimatias", p. 84.

<sup>29</sup> The words are based on legal terminology. For a recent mention of the passage, see *Farces du Grand Siècle*, éd. C. Mazouer, Paris, Librairie générale française, 1992, p. 35, n. 1).

invention) and repeated with minor variations until the meaning is quite clear:

Messieurs & Dames, je desirerois, souhaiterois, voudrois, demanderois, & requerrois desirativement souhaitativement, volontativement, demandativement & requisitativement, avec mes desideratoires, souhaitatoires, & volontatoires, demandatoires & requisitatoires, que vous fussiez enluminifiez, irredifiez & esclarifiez, pour pouvoir penetratoirement, secretatoirement, & divinatoirement, *videre, prospicere, intueri, & regardare* au travers d'un petit trou qui est en la fenestre du buffet de mes conceptions, pour voir la methode que je veux tenir aujourd'hui à vous remercier de vostre bonne assistance & audience, laquelle vous continuerez, s'il vous plaist, à une petite farce gaillarde<sup>30</sup>.

Part of the humour here lies in the contrast between the long, learned build-up requesting the audience's attention and the proposed object of this attention. We would expect the speaker to be begging the public's indulgence for one of the main plays of the day, a pastoral, a tragi-comedy or a comedy. Instead he offers them a "petite farce gaillarde", a lively little farce. It was common at this time for a farce to be the last item on the day's programme, a carrot to induce the audience to remain for the entire group of plays. But to offer merely a "farce gaillarde", and a "petite" one at that, after such a lengthy and formal introduction completes the bathetic drop that began with the ambiguousness of the words "petit trou". Language, the speaker suggests, can set up audience expectations that may later be thwarted, manipulated and undercut.

Another typical example of Bruscombille's games with Latin is "*qui patitur vincit*", meaning "qui souffre, vainc", but which the comedian explains as "c'est-à-dire qui pette, il vesse, seulement pour ceux qui n'entendent pas le latin"<sup>31</sup>. Here the game does not consist of setting up a bathetic, burlesque contrast

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<sup>30</sup> *Fantaisies*, "Prologue sur un habit", p. 161.

<sup>31</sup> *Fantaisies*, "Prologue de l'Impatience", p. 91

between expectations and outcome. Instead, the Latin expression, when read aloud, suggests to a French listener a very different meaning from the original noble one. As the text jokingly makes plain, it can be heard as two staple words of French scatological humour, "péter" and "vesser", i.e. two ways of breaking wind, noisy or silent. The same words, when spoken as if they were French, thus belong to a radically different level of discourse from that of their original language. This kind of verbal game suggests that we often cannot separate obscene words and sounds from their loftier near-homonyms. Bruscambille's particular talent is to *superimpose* one realm on the other rather than merely to substitute one for the other or drop from one to the other as we saw in the paragraph about the "farce gaillarde". In combination, the two worlds have connotations and resonances that neither carries in isolation. Bruscambille, as a performer, is sensitive to the sounds as well as the multiple senses of words.

The same flexibility is apparent in the themes chosen by the *prologueur*. His topics were often those of classic mock encomia. Thus, he composed prologues in mock praise of the cuckold, of drunkenness, and of lying, of ugliness and poverty, folly and fleas, matches and donkeys. On occasion, imitating the *pro et contra* technique used in training lawyers, he presented pairs of speeches, one in favour of a topic and one against, as when he offered speeches for and against lying and for and then against knowledge. Frequently, however, his themes move beyond those of the mock encomium. Most original – and of great interest to theatre historians – are his regular discussions of the world of the theatre. He is one of the earliest French defenders of the way of life of the professional actor: "notre profession noble ne s'allie que d'esprits de mesme metal, affinez au fourneau de la Philosophie, & la

lecture de tant de bons auteurs<sup>32</sup>". To be sure, he jokes about his chronic lack of money – acting, he says is a "vie sans soucy, & quelquesfois sans six sols<sup>33</sup>". No cares, but no cash, we might say in English. But he also praises the virtues of comedy and tragedy as valuable ways of spending leisure time, and, as we have seen, defends specific dramatic genres such as the pastoral. He enthuses about the talents of his group and mercilessly criticizes rivals who overact, "ces Comediens de la nouvelle creuë, qui d'une voix croaçante, & d'une action contrefaite & desreiglée, offensent la veuë & l'ouye des assistans<sup>34</sup>". He teases spectators about their continuing love of farce, remarking that critics of the theatre attack farces, but that for the public "le reste ne vaudroit rien sans elle [...] Dés à present nous y renonçons, & protestons de l'ensevelir en une perpetuelle oubliance, si vous le voulez, elle ne nous sert que d'un faix insupportable & preiudiciable à la renommée<sup>35</sup>".

In defending his chosen themes, he mentions dozens of classical and contemporary writers, and quotes extensively from Greek, Latin, French and Italian poets and prose writers. At times, following the custom of his age, he incorporates entire sentences from other writers into his own prologues: we have found unacknowledged borrowings from comic authors such as Noël Du Fail and Nicolas de Cholières, and extended quotations from serious authors such as Pierre Charron and Jean de Coras, to mention but a few names not previously documented by other critics. In short, few themes escape the attention of this remarkably well-read speaker. And to each new topic he brings his energy, wit, and a gift for seeing unexpected and hilarious links between the popular and the polite domains.

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<sup>32</sup> *Imaginations*, "Du Loisir" f° 68 r°.

<sup>33</sup> *Imaginations*, "Des Accidens comiques", f° 73 r°.

<sup>34</sup> *Facecieuses Paradoxes*, "En Faveur de la scene", A vi v°.

<sup>35</sup> *Imaginations*, "En Faveur de la comedie", f° 135 r°.

The third aspect of the speeches to be addressed here is the comedian's mixture of genres, another strategy for keeping his listeners' attention. In addition to the Lucianic mock encomium, Bruscombille composed Lucianic fantastical narratives, such as his account of a journey to and return from the Olympian heavens<sup>36</sup>. Several speeches are apologues, justifications either of his profession as an actor or of his colleagues and their efforts. The three linked speeches on breaking wind, the "pet" series, parody learned scholastic writing. Certain prologues are presented in the first person as quasi-autobiographical narratives, although we should not of course presume that anything they say is historically accurate. Several speeches are reminiscent of Montaigne's essays in that they select a theme, then elaborate upon it with a mixture of classical examples, reflections and reminiscences. Titles such as "De la Colere", "De l'Honneur" and "De la Medecine", for instance, echo titles found in the *Essais*. And, finally, come the prologues entitled "galimatias", in the sense of "discours confus". These are the hardest for the modern reader to understand, because they flit from one topic to another and often refer to contemporary political events, places and people after the fashion of a coq-à-l'âne. It seems likely that many of the "jeux de mots" and allusions in the galimatias might have been hard to understand even for many of the comedian's contemporary listeners and readers. As with Bruscombille's Latinate tours de force, the pleasure for the audience lies in part in the sounds of the words, the fleeting, even poetic images they conjure up<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> The "Voyage de Bruscombille" and the "Retour de Bruscombille", *Imaginations*, f<sup>o</sup> 142 r<sup>o</sup> - f<sup>o</sup> 156 v<sup>o</sup>. See also A. Tomarken, "'Un Voyage en ce pais là' : Bruscombille's Journey to the Heavens (and Back)", *Court and Humour in the French Renaissance: Essays in Honour of Professor Pauline Smith*, éd. S. A. Stacey, Berne, P. Lang, 2009, p. 199-216.

<sup>37</sup> As an example of the allusive style of the "galimatias", we may cite the following: "Ce n'est pas une chose nouvelle que le Pretejan soit noir, les Anglois blancz & les Espagnols bigarrez, sans parler des grenoiles, qui le plus

The underlying reason for the different styles, themes and genres as well as for the costume and the gestures adopted by Bruscombille remained, however, his need to grab his hearers' attention by surprising and entertaining them. To bore them would be to lose them, and, thereby, his *raison d'être* as a prologueur. To conclude, then, these speeches seem to us both original and worthy of attention precisely because the circumstances of their creation and delivery forced them to compress, combine and condense in new and striking ways elements of the story-tellers, poets and mock encomiasts of the previous century and of antiquity. We might say that the composition of Bruscombille's works mirrors that of his audience, moving from the highest to the lowest, the most learned to the most unrefined. Each realm bears traces of the other; each somehow appears in a slightly different light when juxtaposed with or superimposed upon its opposite. What the language suggests is that we will indeed be the emperor of fools if we think we can transcend the comical, base elements of our being. As the "patitur/peter" joke shows, these elements are woven into the very texture of language. This fact does not preclude consideration and mention of serious issues: it merely places them in a more complex, paradoxical light.

Bruscombille's dazzling linguistic verve and highly original use of traditional topics and rhetorical strategies must surely have worked their magic in calming and focussing the attention of his restless listeners. Only thus can we explain the number of editions of the prologues and the references to him in contemporary

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souvent sont habillées de verd, pour ce que les tructes, selon que dict Hypocrates, en un grand livre qui ne s'est jamais veu, semblent avoir assés bonne grace en dançant sur la corde au son du luth des quatre fils Aymon", (*Fantaisies*, "Prologue Galimatias", p.231).

writing<sup>38</sup>. His prologue ended and his mission accomplished, Bruscbaille could then step off the stage. My prologue to the prologues now complete, I propose to follow in his footsteps, but not before thanking you most warmly for what he would have called your "bonne assistance et audience"<sup>39</sup>.

Annette Tomarken

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<sup>38</sup> See, for example, the work of a rival of Bruscbaille named Mistanguet, one of whose surviving works is entitled *Le Duel du sieur Mistanguet contre Bruscbaille, pour un vieux chapeau*, [Paris ?], 1619.

<sup>39</sup> *Fantaisies*, "Prologue sur un Habit", p. 161.