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John Hayward Trainor

**Ubu's Moment:  
Four Resurrected Histories  
of the 1896 Premiere of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi***

John Hayward Trainor

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Reading Committee:

David Odai Johnson, Chair

Douglas P. Collins

Scott Magelssen

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**Abstract**

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John H. Trainor

Chair of Supervisory Committee:  
Professor David Odai Johnson  
School of Drama

*Ubu's Moment: Four Resurrected Histories of the 1896 Parisian Premiere of Ubu Roi*, is a new account of the début Parisian production of the nineteenth-century French writer Alfred Jarry's best known play, *Ubu Roi*. The term "resurrected" features in the title because, in this study, four previously neglected historical perspectives on this critical moment of the modernist theatrical past are brought back to life. Their first purpose is to reopen forgotten contemporary contexts concerning the production. More importantly, though, these resurrections aspire to displace and replace the charismatic myth (of a rioting and morally-outraged bourgeois audience) which continues to dominate and distort the general understanding of this noteworthy theatre historical occasion.

For many readers of theatre history the fictional idea of a rioting bourgeois audience at *Ubu Roi* has proved so emotionally satisfying that other, more trustworthy, un-fictional accounts of the historical production, having less entertainment value, are dismissed and forgotten . . . and so the myth endures. Therefore, to illuminate the more truthful workings of the historical avant-garde theatre in an effective manner, some way must be found to supplant this beloved and seemingly indestructible morality tale. Toward this end, this dissertation takes a re-historiographic approach that has not been previously applied to this event.

Each chapter of this work presents the reader with a different vision of the premiere of *Ubu Roi*. Each new telling features the viewpoint of a different significant player in the historicity of the occasion. These are, namely: Alfred Jarry (the play's author); André Antoine (a celebrity member of the audience); Rachilde (pseudonym for Marguerite Eymery Vallette, editor of an important Parisian literary journal); and Henry Bauër (an influential theatre critic). All four perspectives offered in this study are equally true and archivally supported, yet they are also contradictory to one another. When combined, they create a new narrative collage-portrait of the tumultuous event: a multi-perspective composition pieced together from little-known but provable truths about the production, providing different and unfamiliar explanations of how the performance happened, what happened during it, and its overall significance.

Ultimately, in place of re-inscribing a familiar but erroneous account of the play as a scandalizing assault on a bourgeois audience, this study proposes that the famously

tumultuous premiere should, instead, be celebrated as an unsolved (and perhaps unsolvable) mystery. The occasion's historical significance resides in the fact that several invested eyewitnesses all vied for historiographic "custody" of its premiere performance. They competed with one another for the right to declare and to define the meaning of that event for posterity — to become the predominant interpreter of the occasion — and, by becoming this, to use the impact of the performance to steer the direction and development of theatrical "progress" according to their own different agendas. This study argues that that contest — the custody battle — is what ought to be remembered about *Ubu Roi*, rather than the myth of an outraged bourgeois audience.

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## Dedication

For my wife, Jeanmarie Higgins Trainor. For my father, John W. Trainor, Jr. And for the memory of Cynthia Drzewiecki Trainor, J. William Trainor, Sr., Martha A. Trainor, Oliver Higgins Trainor, and Robin BR Wood.

## Introduction:

### The Problematic History and Historiography of *Ubu Roi*

*Ubu's Moment: Four Resurrected Histories of the 1896 Parisian Premiere of Ubu Roi*, is a new account of the début Parisian production of the nineteenth-century French writer Alfred Jarry's best known play, *Ubu Roi*. The term "resurrected" features in the title because, in these pages, four previously neglected historical perspectives on this critical moment of the modernist theatrical past are brought back to life. Their first purpose is to reopen forgotten contemporary contexts concerning the production. More importantly, though, these resurrections aspire to displace and replace the charismatic myth (of a rioting and morally-outraged bourgeois audience) which continues to dominate and distort the general understanding of this noteworthy theatre historical occasion.

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truthful workings of the historical avant-garde theatre in an effective manner, some way must be found to supplant this beloved and seemingly indestructible morality tale. Toward this end, this dissertation takes a re-historiographic approach that has not been previously applied to this event.

Each chapter of this work presents the reader with a different vision of the premiere of *Ubu Roi*. Each new telling features the viewpoint of a different significant player in the historicity of the occasion. These are, namely: Alfred Jarry (the play's author); André Antoine (a celebrity member of the audience); Rachilde (pseudonym for Marguerite Eymery Vallette, editor of an important Parisian literary journal); and Henry Bauër (an influential theatre critic). All four perspectives offered in this study are equally true and archivally supported, yet they are also contradictory to one another. When combined, they create a new narrative collage-portrait of the tumultuous event: a multi-perspective composition pieced together from little-known but provable truths about the production, providing different and unfamiliar explanations of how the performance happened, what happened during it, and its overall significance.

Ultimately, in place of re-inscribing a familiar but erroneous account of the play as a scandalizing assault on a bourgeois audience, this study proposes that the famously tumultuous premiere should, instead, be celebrated as an unsolved (and perhaps unsolvable) mystery. The occasion's historical significance resides in the fact that several invested eyewitnesses all vied for historiographic "custody" of its premiere performance. They competed with one another for the right to declare and to define the meaning of

that event for posterity — to become the predominant interpreter of the occasion — and, by becoming this, to use the impact of the performance to steer the direction and development of theatrical “progress” according to their own different agendas. This study argues that that contest — the custody battle — is what ought to be remembered about *Ubu Roi*, rather than the myth of an outraged bourgeois audience.

### **Collage-Portrait: A Modernist History for a Modernist Event**

The term “collage-portrait” is referenced in passing in the abstract above. This is a particularly useful conception for this study because the idea of a collage-portrait opens the way to the broadest of this dissertation’s re-historiographic goals. The phrase suggests connections to certain iconic landmarks of aesthetic modernism. For, beyond (1) providing clearer pictures of the 1896 Theatre de l’Oeuvre production of *Ubu Roi* and (2) replacing a beloved-but-ultimately-inimical misinterpretation, a more resonant underlying purpose of this writing is (3) to offer a history that is consciously modernist in its construction which can serve as a philosophically appropriate record for an event that is often cited as the key moment of modernism’s arrival on the Western stage.

As a concept, “collage-portrait” shares a core tenet with several works of early modernism in multiple arts and sciences. The “analytic” phase of early cubism as originated by Pablo Picasso in Paris in 1910 can serve as an illustrative example. Briefly: analytic cubism was a historical approach to painting in which the subject of the artwork was broken down into small fragmentary geometric planes. Each geometric fragment (or

“cube”) would bear an “attribute” of the subject — an eye, a chin, or a nose, perhaps, if the image was a portrait of a person — but painted as seen from a variety of different angles and distances. The fragmentary pieces were then recomposed into an overall image. The result presented the viewer of the finished work with multiple, simultaneous, equally-true but all different perspectives on the subject. This transcended the “fixed perspective” of Enlightenment thinking and yet the resulting image was arguably a more truthful depiction for having done so. The subject had been seen and comprehended more fully thanks to the artist’s rejection of a single viewpoint. So, a clear harmony-of-intent exists between early cubism and biographical-collage method of this study. More broadly, though: fragmentation of an authoritative viewpoint, restructuring of a subject from multiple perspectives, a new awareness of how an idea is constructed — these are general hallmarks of modernist technique in the arts and they are also the particular building blocks of this dissertation.

Another key turn-of-the-century modernist inspiration for the collage structure of this study is literary. The specific literary technique being referenced, however, is best-known today from a 1950 film, *Rashomon*, realized by the celebrated Japanese director Akira Kurasawa. It is important to evoke that title because the potent effect that this film made famous — which creates an engaging pathos of uncertainty around a central story which is retold differently (in contradictory ways) by different witnesses — is widely-known today as the *Rashomon* Effect. *Rashomon*’s multi-perspective narrative, however, can be understood as a late-flowering example of the same structural ideas of

fragmentation and reassembly (of the experience of reality) that had been explored by analytic cubism. The seed for the film, in fact, grew directly out of the contemporary thought of the era of Jarry, Picasso, and *Ubu*. This is easily seen in the fact that the plot and characters of the 1950 film are taken from the 1922 short story “In a Grove” by Japanese modernist writer Ryunosuke Akutagawa (1892-1927); a work which, in turn, was based on a precursor story, “The Moonlit Road,” by the American writer Ambrose Bierce (1842-1914). In Bierce’s modernist 1907 tale, three alienated characters narrate, in sequence, their contrary and incompatible accounts of a mysterious murder to which all are profoundly connected in different ways, thus creating a *Rashomon* Effect *avant la lettre*. The point, again, is the theoretical connection of the structure “collage-portrait” with the contemporary thought-innovations of the *fin de siècle*, the era in which *Ubu* made his first appearance.

A philosophical system developed by Jarry himself provides a third (and final) deeply connected example of multi-faceted modernist technique. Jarry was alive when Bierce was writing “The Moonlit Road” and he was also a friend and inspiration to Picasso in Paris during the first decade of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Being an advanced theoretical thinker, it is no surprise that a similar multiplicity of perspective (as in Bierce’s story and Picasso’s cubism) informs Jarry’s own understanding of the world. This is especially evident in Jarry’s dedicated and lifelong practice of the philosophical

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<sup>1</sup> Alastair Brotchie, *Alfred Jarry: A Pataphysical Life*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 320-321.

quasi-science that he invented and called pataphysics. According to this philosophy, the very idea of any fixed perspective is an “incomprehensible prejudice.” Exemplifying the point, Jarry asks:

Why should anyone claim that the shape of a watch is round — a manifestly false proposition — since it appears in profile as a narrow rectangular construction; elliptic on three sides; and why the devil should one only notice its shape at the moment of looking at the time?<sup>2</sup>

In Jarry’s conception, the watch becomes an ontologically different thing (circle, rectangle, ellipse) when it is seen differently: like the subject in cubism, like the murder in “The Moonlit Grove,” and like the history of his own play *Ubu Roi* as it appears and transforms in the new accounts of its debut performance presented in these pages.

These short examples are meant to emphasize both the modernist technique of this work and its delivery of a representation of *Ubu Roi* that is needed today; or, at least, its delivery of a representation of the play which is absent from the current marketplace of ideas. It is a new history of a famous occasion, written with deliberately modernist ideology, striving to recount with modernist technique what is canonically acknowledged as the foundational production of the historical modernist theatre: a synergy of content and form more appropriate to the telling of *Ubu’s* story than any single-perspective account of the occasion. So, in place of the overly-promoted *Merdre Riot*, what is offered here, in its stead, is a cubistic collage-portrait of *Ubu Roi*.

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<sup>2</sup> Alfred Jarry, *Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician: A Neo-Scientific Novel* (Boston: Exact Change, 1996), 21.

### A Few Documentaty Details

In December 1896, Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, a play inspired by puppet shows, premiered in Paris as part of the fourth season of experimental dramas presented on a shoestring budget by the tiny counter-cultural Théâtre de l'Oeuvre company. In many theatre history textbooks, the first performance of this play is regarded as having been the moment of the origination of the historical avant-garde theatre. It is generally asserted that this had something to do with the first word of the play, which happens to be "*merdre*," which is "shit" in French with an added "r" for good measure. In literal English the word is "shit-re." It is a childishly distorted profanity which is repeated in the play thirty-two times.

At the theatre, the *fin-de-siècle* Parisian audience who were attending the début performance and who heard this word would instantly have recognized "*merdre*" as a not-particularly-disguised version of the *mot de Cambronne*: the famous one-word reply given by the French culture hero, General Pierre Cambronne, at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. While commanding the last of the Napoleonic Guard and surrounded by Coalition forces, Cambronne was called upon to surrender by the English commander. Though his situation was hopeless, he returned the single word "*merde*" to his adversary. In this context: "shit to you." ("Up yours" might be a fair equivalent in contemporary American parlance). The gesture was heroic, profane, fatalistic, and defiant.<sup>3</sup> "*Merde*" had since

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<sup>3</sup> This story is apocryphal. Cambronne himself denied ever having done this, but popular legends have a life of their own. For more on Cambronne see Paul F. Boller and John George, *They Never Said It: A Book of Fake Quotes, Misquotes, and Misleading Attributions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

become “the essential word of the French language,” according to an account of *Ubu*’s premier written by the satirical poet Laurent Tailhade.<sup>4</sup> Curiously, in an interview in 1891, the Naturalist writer Émile Zola had counseled all young Symbolist writers, whose works he found infuriatingly obscure, that if they did not like the times in which they lived they should simply “say *merde* to the century,” but they should “say so plainly and clearly.”<sup>5</sup> The young writer Jarry was certainly among the target audience for this remark, though it is probably only a coincidence that, five years later, he was able to return the word to Zola, who was attending *Ubu*’s premiere, both “plainly and clearly” and yet simultaneously obscured by the addition of an extra “r.” But regardless of the word’s essential nature, it was one thing to print “*merde*” in a newspaper article, and an entirely different matter to declaim “*merd-rè*” repeatedly on stage in a gratuitous manner. To do this was undeniably a transgressive and juvenily provocative gesture on the part of Jarry and the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre.

Throughout the first public performance of the play, the audience who were present behaved in a very disruptive manner. (This is not necessarily causally related to the word “*merdre*”). The frequency and intensity of their intrusiveness ebbed and flowed throughout the evening, but there are several surviving descriptions of one particular sustained uproar that occurred during the show, and that may have lasted for up to fifteen minutes. Here is testimony from the leading actor:

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<sup>4</sup> Laurent Tailhade, *Quelques fantômes de jadis* (Paris: Éditions française illustrée, 1920), 216.

<sup>5</sup> Émile Zola, “Enquête sur l’évolution littéraire,” *Echo de Paris*, 31 Mar. 1891, 2.

At that moment the audience, undoubtedly finding that the joking had gone on long enough, began to howl and rage: shouts and insults exploded from everywhere at once, a barrage of booing, hissing, catcalls, and a thousand other noises. In brief, it was an uproar whose like I had never heard of before. It surpassed everything from my previous experience — and I had already had some personal familiarity with the reception of plays of the avant-garde. But never before did I have this sense that the audience would stop everything dead.<sup>6</sup>

And here is another description of what is clearly the same moment, written by a member of the audience:

Such pandemonium resulted that [the actor] had to remain silent for a quarter of an hour, and a quarter hour is a long time on the stage! We call this a “hole.” This was a true abyss! The literary elite laughed, but the uninitiated commoners, especially the women, never recovered. From the balconies to the boxes and back again, they hurled abuse. There was such howling that [one of my companions] deemed the performance in the audience to be more important than the one on stage. He egged it on, shouting to the throng, “let’s keep it going!” while waving his flat-brimmed hat in encouragement.<sup>7</sup>

All of the information presented thus far is accurate, factual, and can be cross-checked against many contemporary sources. However, at this point in the telling of the history of the premiere of *Ubu Roi* a significant historiographic problem arises. It is actually three problems, closely related but distinct, each of which intensifies the others.

The first problem with the historiography of *Ubu Roi* is the way in which the narrative of the début performance of this play is continued. This is ordinarily done *via* a less-than-honest reconstruction of events which creates a false idea of the relationship

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<sup>6</sup> Roger Valbelle, “M. Firmin Gémier nous dit ce que furent la répétition générale et la première d’*Ubu Roi*,” *Excelsior* 4 Nov. 1921, 4. My translation. Whenever not specified otherwise, translations from the French are my own.

<sup>7</sup> Rachilde, *Alfred Jarry, ou Le Surmâle de lettres*. (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1928), 80-81.

that exists among the pieces of data that have been presented so far. In short: historians tell a misleading story about the production. It is a charismatic and delightful story, to be sure, all about a crowd becoming outraged upon hearing such profane language uttered in public, but, delightful as this tale is, it is still false. (The real reasons for the audience's unruly behavior had little or nothing to do with offence over bad language). For future reference this will be called the problem of the "*Merdre*" Riot.

The second problem is that this false story of a *Merdre* Riot has been reiterated many times by generations of historians. The anecdote has been deployed so ubiquitously in texts about the history of theatre that it has acquired a revered and celebrated status. This (mis)construction of events is regularly showcased as the foundation, indeed the origin point, of the historical avant-garde theatre. It is commonly used to demarcate the start of a new movement in theatrical art wherein the goal of the artist is to offend the audience. Indeed, practically the only reason why the play *Ubu Roi* is studied today is because of the historiographic consequences of this misperception of its premiere performance. As this Introduction develops, this situation will come to be called the difficulty of the Narrative of Modernism. For the present, though, it suffices to understand that the second problem is that the *Merdre* Riot story is deeply entrenched in well-established and traditional narrative structures of the history of modern theatre.

The third historiographic problem flows from the second. The real stories that should be told about the 1896 production of *Ubu Roi* are not as simple, as black-and-white, as scandalously exciting, or as memorable as the idea of a *Merdre* Riot. The

premiere of this play really was an important moment in the history of the theatre, yet the real reasons for why this is the case have been unable to dislodge the erroneous mythologized narrative in the marketplace of ideas. A few attempts have been made by twenty-first century scholars to provide corrective accounts of the first performance of Jarry's play, but the *logos* of these efforts has found no traction against the established *pathos* and *ethos* of *Ubu*'s popular legend. Because of this situation, the true contemporary significance and impact — the “moment” referred to in the title of this study — of this famous production is lost to all but the most dedicated of researchers, remaining obscured behind a veil of myth and misinformation. Put simply: the third difficulty is the absence of an alternative narrative of *Ubu Roi* that can out-*pathos* and out-*ethos* the entrenched legend.

Of these three problems, the first two have already been expertly handled, respectively, by the theatre historians Frantisek Deak (in his 1993 *Symbolist Theatre*) and Thomas Postlewait (in his 2009 *Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography*). Their interventions against the *Merdre* Riot and the Narrative of Modernism are summarized later in this Introduction. However, the third problem — the need for some effective way to change the conventionally accepted account of the famous premiere — remains. Indeed, it is to this third problem that this entire dissertation is a response.

More significant, though, than this study's nominal topic (the re-historiographing of *Ubu Roi*'s premiere), is the method by which this dissertation engages its subject matter. It strives to overhaul the meaning associated with the seminal production of the

avant-garde theatre by re-telling the history of the play in four different ways; each retelling featuring the perspective of a different historical individual whose life was significantly impacted by the performance of this play and who tried in some way to manipulate the production's societal aftereffect. Through a combination of the accumulated (and sometimes contradictory) content from the study's individual chapters and the juxtapositional form of the project as a whole, this dissertation asserts that the most appropriate overall significance of the 1896 premiere of *Ubu Roi* comes from its having been a cultural crossroads where multiple competing parties all tried to control the story of its performance. In other words, they all tried to "spin" the reception of the production to suit their own personal agendas.

That historiographic structure of contrasting "plural narratives" has been inspired by theory from Thomas Postlewait, meta-historian Hayden White, semiotic anthropologist Clifford Geertz, and a modernist compositional technique known as the *Rashomon* Effect. The overlapping but disparate analyses in this study illustrate that no single narrative can contain the definitive "meaning" of a historical event; and through the formal balancing of content against counter content, any absolute interpretation of a past event is eroded. Consequently, this dissertation pilots a (re)historiographic tool that is especially relevant for today's post-truth era: one which can be deployed to challenge and revitalize any highly mythologized, overly determined, or suspiciously monolithic narrative of historical events.

### **Problem 1: The *Merdre* Riot**

A return, now, to the beginning to convey the popular but problematic story associated with the premiere of *Ubu Roi* in greater detail. That canonical narrative goes as follows: At the very first performance of Jarry's play, at the very moment when the odd expletive "merdre" was first spoken on stage, the original audience is said to have become so enraged that they immediately erupted into a fifteen-minute protest in response to this profane breach of propriety.<sup>8</sup> It is said that many among that original audience walked out of the theatre at that point without hearing more;<sup>9</sup> it is said that they were bourgeois, and were therefore culturally incapable of tolerating such filth;<sup>10</sup> that fistfights broke out in the aisles between the play's supporters and those who felt affronted.<sup>11</sup> The response is even said to have been "one of the most violent theatre riots of all time."<sup>12</sup> It is said, in a word, that the audience was scandalized.

This idea of an outraged bourgeois public quickly took root and by the 1950s a standard interpretation of this occasion had begun to appear in theatre history texts. Here, for example, is the explanation that was urged by the French literary critic Jacques-

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<sup>8</sup> Rachilde [Marguerite Eymery Vallette], *Alfred Jarry, ou Le Surréalisme de lettres* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1928), 80.

<sup>9</sup> J. L. Stylan, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981), vol. 2, 50.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques-Henry Lèvesque, *Alfred Jarry* (Paris: Seghers, Poètes d'Aujourd'hui, 1951) 39-40.

<sup>11</sup> Oscar G. Brockert and Robert R. Findlay, *Century of Innovation: A History of European and American Drama since 1870* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1973: 138).

<sup>12</sup> Michael Benedikt, *Modern French Theatre* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1964), ix.

Henry Lévesque. In 1951, Lévesque wrote one of the earliest biographies to take *Ubu*'s short-lived author, Alfred Jarry (1873–1907), as its subject. His study established a reverential awe for the word “*merdre*” that has served as a pattern for many later commentators. As he explained:

This first word of the play, without a doubt never before uttered in theatre, thrown into the audience's faces, seems to have hit them personally. Since the action began with this word and was not preceded by anything else, this word resonating with brutality, suddenly crystalized the condemnation of stupidity and cowardice with rage, the indignant rage of an individual suddenly snatched from his sense of bourgeois well-being by this loud provocation. The violent surprise caused by such a word, seemingly said completely gratuitously, with no apparent reason, gave it more power, since it became a kind of ideal entity effective by its internal power alone, it is this that constituted the intolerable provocation and inexcusable attack.<sup>13</sup>

In this assessment of the historical situation, the word “*merdre*” functions as a highly successful “provocation.” It delivers a “violent surprise” to the audience that undermines their “bourgeois well-being,” thereby triggering “indignant rage” among them. “It was fifteen minutes before the house could be silenced,” as one of Jarry's later biographers attests.<sup>14</sup> And this result — this shocking and scandalizing of a bourgeois audience — is now commonly held in theatre histories to have been an important triumph for the cause of avant-gardism. “With that incredibly simple yet explosively destructive word,” insists George Wellwarth in *The Theatre of Protest and Paradox*:

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<sup>13</sup> Lévesque, 39. The translation of this passage is by Frantisek Deak and appears in his *Symbolist Theatre* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 235.

<sup>14</sup> Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France, 1885 to World War I* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 207.

*Developments in the Avant-Garde Drama*, “Jarry changed the whole course of the future dramatic continuum. Indeed, the theatre would never be the same.”<sup>15</sup>

The idea that the first performance of *Ubu Roi* inaugurated the historical avant-garde theatre is pervasive throughout the scholarly literature on the history of modern drama. In *The First Avant-Garde*, for instance, John A. Henderson considers *Ubu Roi* to have been “a seminal play if ever there was one and in a sense the most influential avant-gardist play of all.”<sup>16</sup> Michael Kirby, in *A Formalist Theatre*, explains that the play’s premiere constituted the “origin of an avant-garde theatre that deliberately attacks conventional taste.”<sup>17</sup> Roger Shattuck, in *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France*, writes that “no event marks more clearly than this [the production of *Ubu Roi*] the close of one era and the imminence of another.”<sup>18</sup> Additional scholars could be cited to similar effect, showing that, by an overwhelming consensus among them, the production of *Ubu Roi* is understood to be the start of something momentous.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the play’s momentousness, in every case, derives from the idea of an aesthetically offended and morally outraged audience, scandalized by a word.

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<sup>15</sup> George Wellwarth, *The Theatre of Protest and Paradox* (New York: NYU Press, 1971), 14.

<sup>16</sup> Henderson, *The First Avant-Garde, 1887-1894: Sources of the Modern French Theatre* (London: George G. Harrap, 1971), 126.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Kirby, *A Formalist Theatre* (Philadelphia: Univ. of PA Press, 1987), 97.

<sup>18</sup> Shattuck, 209.

<sup>19</sup> In addition to all of the works cited already, see also: RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1988: 11-13); Annabelle Melzer, *Dada and Surrealist Performance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1994: 108); Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1997: 139); Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002: 208, 212); Günter Berghaus, *Theatre, Performance, and the Historical Avant-Garde* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005: 47).

### Frantisek Deak's Debunking of the *Merdre* Myth

In his 1993 study *Symbolist Theater*, theatre historian and critic Frantisek Deak makes it evident that the “scholars and critics who make the claim for *Ubu Roi*'s privileged position in the history of the avant-garde theater” — a company including all of the critics and historians cited heretofore — had all based their arguments “on an erroneous construction of events.” As Deak shows, these scholars all have their basic facts wrong. Consequently, they all “overly emphasize the scandal” that the onstage utterance of the play's scatological first word is purported to have caused.<sup>20</sup>

Specifically, the “overemphasized scandal” to which he objects, is the persistent reiteration of the tale of furious indignation that was supposedly experienced and acted upon by *Ubu*'s first spectators. In an attempt to control this runaway misperception, Deak demonstrates that that tale of a scandalized crowd reaction to the word “*merdre*” is entirely fiction<sup>21</sup> — albeit popular, enduring, and well-entrenched fiction. Indeed, by the time Deak came to write about the issue, the false story had already lasted through several generations of theatre historians, having been recycled and elaborated time and again, apparently for the sake of improving the charismatic anecdote-appeal of its atrociousness. In fact, scholarly advocacy for the First-Word Riot is virtually ubiquitous among pre-Deak studies of *Ubu Roi*. “What is at stake” in maintaining this false idea, as

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<sup>20</sup> Frantisek Deak, *Symbolist Theatre: The Formation of an Avant-Garde* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 228. In some cases “overemphasized” turns out merely to be a polite way to say “deliberately misrepresented.”

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 234-235.

he observes — at stake both for the individual historians and for the history of avant-garde theatre generally — “is not just an exaggeration but the creation of a[n origin] myth around the event.”<sup>22</sup>

For Deak, this myth had somehow to be countered before he could further his own book’s main argument about the continuity of ongoing contemporary developments in the aesthetics of Symbolist theatre. To aid him, then, in thwarting the pervasive misconception of the play’s premiere, he turned to the surviving (yet neglected) late-nineteenth-century documents that actually describe the production of *Ubu Roi* directly from the perspectives of its eyewitnesses and participants. Here, in the newspaper reviews and actors’ memoirs, he discovered a different account of the behavior of the audience who attended the first performance of Jarry’s play. And in recreating and expanding upon his research, one finds that the real spectators who came to this famous performance were not bourgeois at all, but were an elite crowd of bohemians and literary celebrities;<sup>23</sup> that they had known the play’s first word long in advance and were not disturbed by the idea of it;<sup>24</sup> and that the coming production had been aggressively target-marketed to them for months.<sup>25</sup> They were, in fact, quite eager

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<sup>22</sup> Deak, 235.

<sup>23</sup> The composition of the audience is discussed in detail in the next chapter. For ready reference, though, see Noël Arnaud, *Alfred Jarry: d’Ubu Roi au Docteur Faustroll* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1974), 321.

<sup>24</sup> René Druart, “Un témoignage sur la générale d’*Ubu Roi*,” *Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique* 20 (1955): 53.

<sup>25</sup> During the four months preceding the December 1896 premiere, the coming production of *Ubu Roi* had been aggressively promoted by Jarry, who ran the publicity for the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre company. He caused many of his well-placed literary friends to write about it for newspapers and avant-

for the day of the performance to arrive, and when it finally did, the opening word was “well received” by them.<sup>26</sup> This audience was not shocked by the semi-obscene first word, but rather “everybody laughed,” as Firmin Gémier, the actor who played the title role of Ubu, assures us.<sup>27</sup>

This leading actor’s account of the word’s favorable reception is corroborated by several of the newspaper reviews that were published in the immediate wake of the performance.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, there is not a single review that mentions anything about a tumultuous disruption after the play’s opening line. In other words: the reliable and cross-checkable record of primary documentation proves that there was no riot of protest after the initial “*merdre*.” It shows instead that the audience was *not* outraged, but that, in fact, they were *amused* by the naughty word. Such is the historical fact of the matter. And when one accepts this knowledge — and lets go the fiction of a charming

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garde journals, and generally left no channel unexploited to get the word out to the Parisian *cognicenti*. Many of the publicity articles included excerpts from the play, summaries of its plot, and reflections on the famous first word. For more on this publicity campaign, see P. Lie, “Comment Jarry et Lugné Poe glorifièrent UBU à l’Oeuvre,” *Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique* 3-4 (1951), 37-51.

<sup>26</sup> Roger Valbelle, “M. Firmin Gémier nous dit ce que furent la répétition générale et la première d’*Ubu Roi*,” *Excelsior* 4 Nov. 1921: 4. [Appendix C].

<sup>27</sup> Here is Gemier’s comment on the first word a bit more expansively: “You know the first word of the play? It was well received. The dinner scene amused the audience. Everybody laughed. Some by laughing were booing the play; others, by laughing were applauding it. But in any case they all laughed” (Valbelle, 4).

<sup>28</sup> See the archive/article “La Presse d’*Ubu Roi*” (*Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique* 3-4 (1951): 73-88) edited by Henri Robillot [Appendix B]. Within that, for instance, the 11 December 1896 review that had been printed by the newspaper *La Patrie* tells us that that after the initial “*merdre*” there was: “astonishment, stupor, hilarity. The play continues. Monsieur Ubu and Madame Ubu behave in the manner of puppets” (82). In other words: the audience laughed and the play went on. We are similarly assured by the critic Camille Mauclair, writing for the *Revue Encyclopédique*, that the production started off quite well, though, in his view, it went on for too long: “We laughed for the first ten minutes, yawned after half an hour, and, after an hour, we hissed” (80). Again: at the beginning, everybody laughed.

anecdote of triumphant profanity and outrageousness — one finds that the tale of the “simple yet explosively destructive word” that “changed the whole course of the future dramatic continuum” lacks a valid evidentiary basis. One is thus enlightened, in a sense. Or, at the very least, disabused.

And yet, there is a seemingly undesirable side-effect to this knowledge. A widespread awareness of the authentic truth of the real audience’s real response to the first “*merdre*” of *Ubu Roi* is detrimental to the overall theatre-historical stature of this famous play. This is because the knowledge acts as an inoculation for its initiates. It causes the mythic significance that is traditionally attributed to *Ubu*’s premiere to dissipate immediately in a vacuum of inconsequence. The established meaning of the celebrated *début* crumbles thus into dust. It leaves a void, causing one to ask: if *Ubu*’s audience was not morally outraged, then did the historical premiere of this play have any real social consequence at all? If so, what was it?

At this point, it should be affirmed that there truly was a scandal that did eventually emerge from this first production of *Ubu Roi*. No researcher who is interested in the true history of this particular play would wish to imply that its whole premiere showing was completed without any interruptions whatsoever. In historical fact, a very significant disturbance really did occur during the third act of the presentation, and this disturbance really did delay the performance for several minutes. It was fueled by rivalries among different factions of the avant-garde who had all been invited to attend the play’s *début*. As the evening progressed the tense rivalry in the audience escalated

into a sustained tempest that was both angry and joyous — a complex event in its own right, and one that is examined in detail in the second chapter of this study. Yet despite the matter's complexity, at least one point concerning it is perfectly clear already: namely, that the real commotion at *Ubu Roi* had absolutely nothing to do with a bourgeois audience whose sensibilities were offended by the use of a profane word. That idea of an outraged bourgeois audience is entirely a myth. And yet, that myth still remains at the foundation of the traditional understanding of modernist theatre.

Deak, in his study, effectively pulled the rug from beneath the feet of these canonical ideas. By toppling the long-standing *merdre* myth, he provided a notable service to the cause of *Ubu* scholarship in general. Yet it seems that he may, initially, only have wanted to consider Jarry's play in relation to established Symbolist theatrical practices of the *fin de siècle* — to show how this particular play's overall theme, structure, and scenography functioned in 1896 as the newest performative evolution from this mysterious aesthetic school. He found, though, that he could not directly approach the famous production in this narrative manner because the *merdre* myth blocked his way. The dominance of that popular tale had made it practically impossible for any scholar to examine any other aspect of the historical premiere of *Ubu Roi*. Thus, finding himself forced to discuss the *merdre* anecdote, he chose to discredit it. He therefore dismantled the phony story in order that he might move on to discuss *Ubu Roi* in a context more useful to his study. In the process of disproving the tale, Deak also happened to reveal the fact that a real brouhaha over *Ubu Roi* did actually exist . . . and that the actual

scandal of the 1896 premiere must therefore be concerned with an entirely different set of issues than those that had generally been associated with it by antecedent scholars. Deak, however, closes his investigation of the scandal prior to sorting out what these other issues may have been. To have pursued that sort of detailed analysis would have been irrelevant to the purpose of his own study. Consequently, he left many social and political questions related to the famous production largely uninvestigated. They remain so even today.

### **The Neglected Archive**

The foregoing pages have occasionally referred to erroneous reconstructions and the need to establish fresh accounts of facts that pertain to the 1896 Parisian début of *Ubu Roi*. It seems appropriate now to identify where the relevant primary data can be found. There is, in fact, a great deal of available (but largely unused) documentation that describes the production of Jarry's play directly from the viewpoints of its many participants and eyewitnesses. Consequently, it should be possible to produce a detailed and reliable history of the production.

For instance, in 1951 the *Collège de Pataphysique* — a French organization of scholars and artists who are dedicated to furthering pataphysics, a philosophical semi-science invented by Jarry — reproduced in their journal, the *Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique* [*Notebooks of the College of Paratphysics*], several turn-of-the-century newspaper

reviews of the 1896 premiere performance of *Ubu Roi*.<sup>29</sup> These eyewitness responses to the production, more than twenty-five of them in total, are accessible *via* issue number 3-4 of this journal.<sup>30</sup> Additionally a number of other critical reviews and eyewitness accounts of the performance, unknown in 1951, have been published in later issues of this same journal. Since 1978, though, the task of publishing the occasional newly-discovered *Ubu* documents (which do still turn up from time to time) has been taken over by the *Société des Amis d'Alfred Jarry* [*The Society of Friends of Alfred Jarry*], who print them in their own journal *L'Étoile Absinthe* [*The Absinthe Star*].<sup>31</sup>

In addition to the many *Ubu*-related documents found in these two journals, there are dozens of other first-hand testimonies concerning the play's premiere that can be found in the published memoirs of such *fin-de-siècle* figures as André Antoine, Firmin Gémier, André Ferdinand Herold, Aurélien Lugné-Poe, Marguerite Moreno, Rachilde, Laurent Tailhade, William Butler Yeats, and many others, all of whom were connected with the famous production in some capacity. These celebrities' accounts of events have all been catalogued and summarized in *An Evaluation of the Studies on Alfred Jarry from 1894*

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<sup>29</sup> See "La Presse d'*Ubu Roi*" ["The Press Reports Concerning *Ubu Roi*"], edited by Henri Robillot, in the *Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique* 3-4 (1951), 73-88.

<sup>30</sup> The reviews are in French, of course. I have provided an English translation of the entire archive/article in an appendix to this dissertation.

<sup>31</sup> A recent treasure, for example, is the curated archive/article "*Jarry à la lumière de la critique (1894-1897)*" ["Jarry in the Light of Contemporary Criticism (1894-1897)"], published *L'Étoile Absinthe* in 2010, issue number 123-124, introduced and presented by Julien Schuh.

to 1963, an unpublished 1966 doctoral dissertation that was undertaken at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro by Lewis Franklyn Sutton.<sup>32</sup>

This makes for an abundant primary archive. Nonetheless, today we still lack a detailed and trustworthy history of *Ubu*'s premiere. Rather, what we have is a sensational misconstruction of the performance that is based only upon a limited, cherry-picked portion of this archive — a situation which this dissertation aims to redress.

### **Problem 2: The Narrative of Modernism**

In his 2009 *Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography*, a landmark work in the philosophy of theatre history, the theatre historian and historiographic theorist Thomas Postlewait presents the next-most-significant re-examination of the legend of *Ubu Roi* to appear since Deak's (1993). In fact, Postlewait's treatment of the *Ubu* matter — a chapter titled "The Case of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*" — serves as one of the foundational instructional examples in his how-(not)-to guide for the writing of theatre history.

Postlewait's study differs from Deak's in many important ways. Most telling of these is the context in which he chooses to consider his subject. In the chapter that he spends on Jarry's play, Postlewait interrogates, not the famous premiere itself, but the convoluted (mis)historiography that has come to dominate the history of that event. The distinction here is crucial, and it is emphasized because the larger concern of Postlewait's *Introduction to Theatre Historiography*, as his title announces, really is not theatre history, but

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<sup>32</sup> Lewis Franklyn Sutton, *An Evaluation of the Studies on Alfred Jarry from 1894 to 1963* (Greensboro: University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1966), unpublished doctoral dissertation.

theatre *historiography* — the *narration* of theatre history, or, more simply, the stories that historians choose to privilege, to tell, and to re-tell about the theatrical past.

In the case of *Ubu Roi*, the story of an outraged and rioting bourgeois audience is ubiquitous. Why is it that historians, time and again, choose to tell this particular story of *Ubu*'s premiere instead of any other? It is this question, rather than the question of what actually happened at the production, that Postlewait wants to focus attention upon. The answer to any question of narrative intentionality must, of course, vary as inquiry shifts from one historical storyteller (that is: historian/scholar) to the next. Some undoubtedly repeat the tale of the *merdre* riot because they believe it to be true — yet there are also other scholars who knowingly repeat the false tale for purposes of their own.<sup>33</sup> These purposes, as Postlewait shows, most often have to do with reinforcing a “narrative of Modernism.”<sup>34</sup>

Briefly, the Narrative of Modernism is a useful and nicely linear story based on the idea that the cultural achievement of any artist (whether author, painter, sculptor, theater-maker, or otherwise) can only be validated by proof that the artist's work —

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<sup>33</sup> Here I am thinking particularly of Roger Shattuck, who is largely responsible for popularizing the myth of the *Ubu* Riot that we are familiar with today. Shattuck was clearly aware that the version of the premiere of *Ubu Roi* that he presented in *The Banquet Years* was based on a distorted account of the events of the evening. I say this with certainty, for Shattuck himself was an officer of the *Collège de Pataphysique*, the very organization that had already published (three years prior to his own study) the several reliable eyewitness accounts of the first performance of *Ubu Roi* that I have appended (in translation) to this dissertation. Those accounts clearly invalidate Shattuck's own preferred version of events. In fact, elsewhere in *The Banquet Years*, he even quotes supplemental details from these same accounts. So it really is beyond question that Shattuck was cognizant that the fifteen-minute audience outrage in response to the first word was flatly contradicted by the journalists of 1896.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Postlewait, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 64.

work that is now revered as canonical — was initially met with violent rejection by the artist's contemporary society. Thus, the establishment of a historical artist's revolutionary accomplishment is most easily achieved when the work of that artist can be shown to have been initially received with censorship, rioting, and general condemnation. The negative historical reception affirms the truly progressive and avant-garde credibility of the work. When several such incidents are linked together as beads on a string of time, they coalesce into a narrative.

Postlewait calls attention to the fact that the historiographers of Modernist art have done much more than simply *embrace* this idea (i.e., the idea that initial public censure legitimizes aesthetic innovation). Rather, he wishes for readers to recognize that these authors have, in the final analysis, actually *created* the criteria by which audiences value any given Modernist artwork. Collectively, they have achieved this by inscribing studies that systematically seek out and anthologize tales of scandalized reactions to avant-garde “art attacks,” and have then narrativized these incidents in a way that posits the history of the avant-garde as a genealogy of outrages.

After having established this point with rigor, Postlewait narrows the focus of his argument from avant-garde art in general, to avant-garde theatre in particular. As he explains:

Just as censorship and legal battles attended the reception of modernist novels (e.g., Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, and Lawrence's *Lady Chatterly's Lover*), so too did public riots testify to the outrageous nature of modernist plays.

. . . Consequently our histories and studies of the avant-garde arts feature each rebellious act, each shocked response, and each manifesto.<sup>35</sup>

Every narrative must begin somewhere, though. In the case of the narrative history of avant-garde theatre — as established earlier in this introduction, and as Postlewait also attests — it is said to begin with *Ubu Roi*. The scholar now highlights the essence of the theatrical manifestation of the modernist formula. “The modernist era,” as he explains, “was launched as an assault [i.e.: the insulting declamation of the word “*merdre*”] that engendered a riot.” This, Postlewait forces us to acknowledge, “is the story that we want to tell.” It is, in fact, the story that we insist on telling without ever actually thinking critically about it. “Historians,” he claims, have “turned the production of *Ubu Roi* into a fitting representation of what a modernist production is supposed to be.” They have “transformed [it] into the origin of what follows, as if it were the germ out of which the subsequent events developed.”<sup>36</sup>

By “subsequent events” Postlewait means, specifically, the soon-to-emerge “shock tactics of various artistic [. . .] movements, including Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and Expressionism.”<sup>37</sup> And indeed, for the purpose of serving as “the origin of what follows,” *Ubu Roi* is situated quite conveniently — both in terms of chronology (1896 nicely predates the advent of Futurism, et al.) and geography (Paris was undeniably the cultural capital of the nineteenth century). So, if the actual social disturbance caused

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 70; 80.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

by *Ubu Roi* could be transformed into (that is, misrepresented as) an attack on an unsuspecting bourgeois audience . . . then this false event should be able to provide a suitably straightforward, uncomplicated, and easily graspable starting point for the desired narrative. Suppose the Parisian philistines of the *fin de siècle* were offended by the unexpected use of filthy language on stage. Voila, this becomes an origin story: In the Beginning Was the Word.

Postlewait illustrates several other methodological details in his case study of *Ubu Roi*, but, on the whole, he foregrounds four main points about the convoluted historiography of the famous premiere. Firstly, he notes — as Deak did also — that the “*merdre* riot” story is not supported by historical fact. Secondly, he emphasizes that in order to maintain this false idea “we must repress a significant part of the historical record.”<sup>38</sup> Thirdly, he argues that the tale of the phony riot is repeated today mostly as a matter of narrative tradition, a reflexive habit of mind that needs to be questioned. And lastly, he insists that there are other possible (and much more useful and truthful and illuminating) stories that might be told about the premiere of Jarry’s play.

In emphasis of this last, Postlewait praises Deak’s 1993 treatment of *Ubu Roi*. He offers that earlier analysis as a highly positive example of the sort of historiographic intervention that he would like the readers of his *Introduction to Theatre Historiography* to emulate. For, not only does Deak’s study refuse to embrace the pre-digested idea of a *merdre* riot, but it also returns to the first-hand accounts of the event’s primary witnesses

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 74. A good portion of the material itemized in the earlier subsection “The Neglected Archive” would fall into Postlewait’s category of repressed historical records.

for its source of data, and it reframes the play's premiere in a context entirely apart from the Narrative of Modernism. As noted earlier, Deak examined the role of the production's scenic design — not as the origin or culmination of an artistic epoch — but as an important transitional moment in the ongoing development of the Symbolist aesthetic. In doing this Deak gave us a new, useful, counter-conventional, and illuminating way to present the history of *Ubu*'s premiere. Yet it is hardly the only useful, new, and illuminating examination that is possible. Postlewait is quick to point out that no single narrative can contain a historical event. “Beyond narratives about Symbolist theatre,” he writes:

the production of *Ubu Roi* could be seen as part of a long, developmental process of public controversy in the French theatre since Hugo's *Hernani* in 1830. Or it might be seen as an event in the biography of Jarry, Lugné-Poe, or Gémier.[. . .] Or if we were writing a social history of theatre criticism in Paris during the nineteenth century, the event would likely be one of many productions that might illustrate how the reviewers and their journals operated in relation to the playwrights, the performers, and the audiences of Paris. As is the case with all historical events, the production of *Ubu Roi* fits potentially into many different contexts [. . .] These quick examples illustrate a maxim of historical research and analysis: change the context, change the meaning.<sup>39</sup>

It is, in fact, this general maxim of (theatre) historical research and analysis that Postlewait most especially values and that he wishes to convey to his readers. Indeed, it is this passage from his guide to historiography that has served as the core inspiration for the methodology for this dissertation. Deak, of course, had already taught this study to scrutinize and carefully reevaluate the reliability of all the available first-hand historical

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-79.

records that pertain to the 1896 Théâtre de l’Oeuvre production of *Ubu Roi*. His example inspired the careful collection of only reliable facts upon which to base new reconstructions of the famous occasion. But it was Postlewait who held the key to what should really be done with the data. His writing showed how the meaning of this mythologized historical event could be renewed and transformed by conceiving new contexts in which to frame Ubu’s story. Building on Postlewait’s premise, this dissertation takes his advice four times over . . . with a bit of added value from a few other key theoretical ideas to bring it over one other historiographic hurdle.

### **Problem 3: Changing the Narrative (ReMoralizing *Ubu Roi*)**

The paragraphs of this new segment will theorize and describe the method used by this dissertation in its effort to overcome that remaining historiographic obstacle. The challenge is to transform the narrative of the famous 1896 Parisian premiere of Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* that will be circulated in the future. It is a difficult proposition because *Ubu*’s new story must be able to stand up to and ultimately replace the beloved Narrative of Modernism — which means that the new story will need to be equally appealing. Before explicating this study’s idea for achieving this narrative revolution, though, it is worth actively recalling that the past is not set in stone. The memory and meaning of an event that happened “back when” is perfectly capable of being changed when the concerns of society change. For continued existence, the past depends on tales that today’s historians choose to tell (or re-tell, or not tell) about it. This study strives to

promote a new memory for a particular occasion. A quick recap of the problems that its Introduction has already cleared in regard to changing *Ubu Roi*'s history and historiography will prime the pump for the new infusion of theory.

The first difficulty with *Ubu Roi*'s notoriety was the falsity of the celebrated *merdre*-riot anecdote that is commonly associated with the play's premier performance. That contrary-to-historical-fact issue was thoroughly addressed and redressed by Frantisek Deak in his 1993 monograph, *Symbolist Theatre*. This dissertation can do nothing to improve on Deak's debunking of the myth of the "*merdre*" riot.

The second problem with the historiography of *Ubu Roi* is the institutional entrenched-ness of the first problem: the perennial reinforcement of the erroneous tale via widespread and proliferating reiteration that furthers the Narrative of Modernism in multiple studies spanning generations of scholarship. That second problem has been exposed, analyzed, criticized, and contextualized by Thomas Postlewait in his 2009 *Introduction to Theatre Historiography*. Again, this dissertation cannot improve on the existing discourse around this issue.

The third problem with the historiography of *Ubu Roi* is the need to find some way to redress the second problem. That is: to find some effective way to change the conventionally accepted narrative of the play's premiere; to reinscribe the historical event with a new meaning that will be capable of displacing and replacing the spurious "significantly scandalized audience" explanation of the occasion. It is to this task that this dissertation is dedicated.

Postlewait has already provided the first theoretical ingredient needed to deal with this third problem. His premise that no single narrative can adequately represent a historical event is an excellent starting point, but, on its own, that idea of recontextualizing is not enough to overcome the challenge. Postlewait cites Deak's earlier study as a laudable example of one way in which an alternative story of *Ubu Roi* can be told. And indeed, in the years since Deak a few other corrective narratives have been published that also deal directly with the behaviors of the audience at the premiere of Jarry's play. Deak told the story of the audience's response to the play's début in relation to the developing Symbolist *mise-en-scène* aesthetic of the *fin de siècle*. In 2001 modernist theatre theorist Kimberly Jannarone reconstructed and analyzed events at *Ubu's* premiere in relation to contemporary discourses about puppetry.<sup>40</sup> In 2005 literary historian Neil Blackadder examined the audience's behavior and commentary at the first performance of the play in relation to emergent ideas about sewage, urban sanitation, and personal cleanliness.<sup>41</sup> All of these are exquisitely researched evocations of *Ubu's* first Parisian performance and all of them push back against the false notion of a first-word *merdre* riot. Each of these studies illustrates Postlewait's point that if the socio-historical context in which the event is placed is changed, then the meaning of the event also changes. Yet these corrective re-examinations of the play's famous début

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<sup>40</sup> Kimberly Jannarone, "Puppetry and Pataphysics: Populism and the Ubu Cycle," *New Theatre Quarterly* 17.3 (August 2001), 239-253.

<sup>41</sup> Neil Blackadder, "Merdre! Performing Filth in the Bourgeois Public Sphere," in *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), edited by William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson, 182-200.

performance, which have been around for decades, do not seem to have had any impact at all on the inertia of the perpetually reproduced *merdre* myth or on its role in the Narrative of Modernism. One wonders why this is the case. That is: one wonders why it is that newer and more accurate narratives have not been able to take the place of older and demonstrably erroneous ideas. Particularly since the corrective studies have now been around for long enough to have made an impact and are neither obscure nor difficult for researchers to find.

An answer may lie in the disparity between the scale and grandeur of the *merdre* myth as compared to the scale and grandeur of the corrective studies. Just as no single narrative can fully contain a historical event, no single corrective description of the first performance of *Ubu Roi* is inspiring enough on its own to overcome Ubu's *merdre* myth, for that anecdote is unsinkably buoyed by the larger Narrative of Modernism. Truthful re-narrations of the occasion are needed to change the story, to be sure, but, more importantly, a larger idea is needed. "Larger" is meant here in the moral sense evoked by Hayden White, historian and metahistorian, whose research calls attention to the fact that it is impossible for human beings to narrativize the past (or, indeed, anything at all) without moralizing it, whether consciously or unconsciously.<sup>42</sup> In the opening chapter of his 1987 *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, White explains:

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<sup>42</sup> Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 25.

The demand for closure in the historical story is a demand for moral meaning, a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a moral drama.<sup>43</sup>

The Narrative of Modernism which has claimed *Ubu Roi* is, self-evidently, a narrated historical story. And as Postlewait describes it, it holds a significant and principled lesson: innovative art is validated by an initial violent rejection by its contemporary society. That is a sizable moral proposition. It is stirring, easy to understand, easy to remember. (Moreover, it is flattering because it assures the hearer that he or she is on the intellectual side of the angels, since the hearer's non-rejection of historical innovative art is a sure sign of his or her cultural sophistication).

That trope of modernist art is able to continue to dominate the story of *Ubu Roi* because its moral message is more charismatic — and consequently more powerful — than the meanings contained in the existing, more truth-filled, alternative illustrations of the real historical roles played by Jarry's play. Although the corrective ideas (from Deak, Jannarone, and Blackadder) have greater factual accuracy than the *merdre* myth, they are less morally efficacious — they are less capable of being distilled to an easily relatable and rousing sound bite. Consequently, the alternative histories seem smaller, less inspiring. They are unable to knock the more charismatic traditional notion off its pedestal in the marketplace of ideas because they are not functioning in the same moral weight class.

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

The task of this study, then, must be to improve the moral/narrative weight class of the alternative idea of *Ubu*'s premiere which is on offer. Consequently, the relevant question to ask is how such moral weight-training might be accomplished. The two ideas on the philosophy of history that are already in play, Postlewait's "no one narrative can contain a historical event" and White's "it is impossible to narrativize without moralizing," are both helpful for challenging the established myth — for "stretching out" as it were. But a third insight, amounting, essentially, to the statement that "all history is a type of fiction," borrowed and adapted from the ethnographic theory of semiotic anthropologist Clifford Geertz, is particularly salutary for this dissertation's re-historiographic regimen.

In his seminal 1973 collection of essays on *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Geertz likens the task of an anthropologist to that of a literary critic. Both professionals operate by absorbing stories, sorting out what details in them are most important, then assembling these into an overall statement of coherent significance. Both are professions of Interpretation. In the case of the literary critic the stories to be interpreted come from the printed page. For the ethnographic anthropologist, though, the stories are verbal anecdotes that arrive already infused with (moralized) meanings (i.e., "spin") given to them by their narrators, who are the subjects of the ethnographer's larger study. Geertz carefully underscores that the psychological human factor inherent in this engagement with ethnographic source material — the intention, purpose, and personal agenda of the informant; the informant's motivation behind the telling of the story — needs always to

be kept in mind and considered as part of the ethnographer's analysis. Reflecting on this, he notes that:

What we [ethnographers] call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to.<sup>44</sup>

The ethnographer's role is thus to re-explicate, on a different cultural level, already explicated explications.<sup>45</sup> The similarity in this to the task of the historian is noteworthy. The historian must interpret and re-explicate data which consists of stories about contemporary events that were written down "back in the day," which arrive already embedded with a moral "spin" that was provided by the original author.<sup>46</sup> Like the literary critic and the anthropologist, the historian must then sort out the significant details in the data and re-constellate them into an explanatory story that will provide the sort of "closure," or moral lesson, that Hayden White has already invoked.

Geertz's observation that is of greatest practical value to this study, though, is his acknowledgement of the subjective, interpretive, and, "fictional," nature of the anthropologist's finished work. As he explains:

Anthropological writings are themselves interpretations, and second and third order ones to boot. [. . .] They are, thus, fictions; in the sense that they are

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<sup>44</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 9.

<sup>45</sup> Geertz also points out the potential for deliberate misinformation from informants, unintentional misinterpretation by the ethnographer, and other errors due to imperfect familiarity with the host culture that find their way into the finished anthropological writing. Ultimately it seems that a great deal of cultural interpretation is actually cultural misinterpretation.

<sup>46</sup> See previous note. The exact same set of conditions of misinformation and misinterpretation are equally true of historical interpretation.

‘something made,’ ‘something fashioned’ — the original meaning of *fictiō*. Not that they are false or unfactual.<sup>47</sup>

Fictions. Stories. Second and third order interpretations (i.e., new inventions or reinterpretations built on previously existing interpretations). Purposefully constructed constellations of data points selected by the critic/ethnographer/historian in order to support some thesis. In exactly the same way that anthropological writings are fiction, the written interpretation of history — historiography — is also a type of fiction.

Understanding this point is extremely enabling for this dissertation because it shifts the primary focus away from the collection of objective data (historical facts) and toward the subjective authorial agency of the interpreter (anthropologist, historian) who curates the data into the written “fiction” which proclaims the cultural significance of the event. In the particular case of the re-historiography of the premiere of *Ubu Roi*, this means that the historian’s job is to write a new fiction to describe the event. (As opposed to correcting the facts of the old fiction).<sup>48</sup> It has already been established that the new story will need a potent new moral if it is to displace the traditional Narrative of Modernism. And so one asks: is there any technique that exists in the construction of frankly fictional — meaning “imaginary,” in this case, rather than “something made” —

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<sup>47</sup> Geertz, 15.

<sup>48</sup> It goes without saying that it is most ideal and most ethical when the data on which a new interpretation is built is factually accurate. In this regard, this dissertation — like the accounts published by Deak, Jannarone, and Blackadder — will be an improvement on the more ubiquitous (but problematically mythologized) histories of the famous 1896 debut performance of Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*.

narratives that can help to boost the moral oomph of the corrective history that this study aspires to establish?

Indeed: yes. It seems that a very effective elevation of the moral of the re-historiography of *Ubu Roi* can easily be achieved by making a structural change in the narrative form in which the story of the famous 1896 production is told. To show how this innovation will function, though, it is first necessary to explicate one final narrative idea that will serve as an immediate model for this dissertation. This narrative technique is also borrowed from another field: modernist literature. Specifically, from Ambrose Bierce's 1907 short story "The Moonlit Grove." Bierce's technique, however, is more generally familiar today thanks to its powerful later use in 1950 by the innovative Japanese director Akira Kurosawa in his film *Rashomon*, which tells a story about the telling of a story.

Set in medieval Japan, the action of *Rashomon* consists mainly of the contradictory legal testimony of three witnesses to the murder of a young samurai in the woods and the rape of the samurai's wife.<sup>49</sup> The witnesses are a recently-captured bandit, the wife, and the ghost of the murdered samurai (who testifies through a spiritual medium).<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *Rashomon*, Directed by Akira Kurasawa (1950; New York: Criterion Collection, 2012), DVD.

<sup>50</sup> The plot and characters of the film *Rashomon* are based on the 1922 short story "In a Grove" by Japanese modernist writer Ryunosuke Akutagawa (1892-1927). In both Kurasawa's film and Akutagawa's short story, the details of the testimonies of the bandit, the wife, and the samurai remain the same. Akutagawa's tale was inspired by a precursor short story, "The Moonlit Road," written in 1907 by the American poet and Civil War veteran Ambrose Bierce (1842-1914). The situations depicted in "The Moonlit Road" and "In a Grove" are not exactly analogous, but Bierce's structure of three unreliable narrators all delivering different eyewitness interpretations of a mysterious murder is acknowledged by Akutagawa as the spark for his own story. It is also worth noting that the title of Kurasawa's *Rashomon* film as well as its overall framing device — medieval Japanese commoners sheltering from the rain beneath the

Each witness gives an equally plausible, but entirely incompatible, explanation of the samurai's death. The bandit brags that he killed the man in a sword fight, presenting his spirited confession in a way that shows himself as a daring and charming scoundrel, as a swashbuckler and seducer rather than a rapist. But in the wife's account of events the bandit ambushes her husband, ties him up, rapes her, then runs away, leaving the samurai bound to a tree. She uses a dagger to free her husband from bondage and he then spurns her, putting blame for the crime entirely on her. She tells the court that she then fainted while holding the knife — and when she came back to consciousness, the blade was stuck in the samurai and he was dead. Her story portrays her in a sympathetic light. The ghost of the samurai then testifies that he died by suicide. After he was captured, he claims, his wife promised to marry the bandit if only he would kill her husband. The bandit, disgusted by this bargaining, abandons the woman, frees the samurai, and goes on his way. The samurai then plunges a dagger into his own heart because he has been dishonored. His telling of the story highlights his own moral perfection. All three accounts give a plausible explanation for the physical evidence that was present, while showing the speaker in the most positive light possible. There is no way to choose which story, if any, is true. Indeed, the objective truth of the samurai's death is forever lost; replaced by a rich and multi-layered discourse of possibilities and varied meanings . . . which is the main point of the film.

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city of Kyoto's large but decrepit Rashomon gate — come from another of Akutagawa's short stories, the somewhat earlier 1915 tale "Rashomon," which shares with "In a Grove" its larger setting of the countryside around twelfth-century Kyoto.

Writ largely, this technique of storytelling — where an event is redescribed several times in contradictory but equally credible ways by multiple witnesses — has come to be known as a “*Rashomon* effect.” (Since the technique is so widely known by that name, it is Kurasawa’s film — rather than Bierce’s story — that is being described here as a structural model for this study). Indeed, “*Rashomon* Effects” are regularly cited in academic discourses and critical analyses in such non-cinematic/non-literary fields as sociology, psychology, and legal studies.<sup>51</sup> The effect has become a regular theoretical tool in those disciplines because it opens a way of thinking that is helpful for understanding complex or ambiguous situations. It does this by emphasizing that the objective facticity of an event is secondary in importance to a witness’s personal and subjective perception of it.

To grasp a *Rashomon* effect fully, however, also requires active recognition that any narration of a matter is likely being steered by the storyteller’s personal agenda (the same as Hayden White’s observation). The ultimate lesson here is that when multiple plausible-but-incompatible narratives of the same event are brought together, what emerges from their confluence is not “truth,” which is a reduction of events to a singular meaning, but a more complex whole, which calls attention to the personal stake in the matter for each narrator. In this situation the ability of one party to control a narrative, matters far more than the objective reality of the story that is being told. In fact, control

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<sup>51</sup> The applications of the “Rashomon Effect” in history, sociology, psychology, legal studies, and other fields is, for instance, explored in the multi-author edited collection *Rashomon Effects: Kurosawa, Rashomon and their Legacies* (Abingdon, England: Routledge, 2015), edited by Blair Davis, Robert Anderson and Jan Walls.

of the narrative replaces, and even retroactively creates, the reality, the “truth,” of the tale. (Such is the case with the Narrative of Modernism). Consequently, the essence of a *Rashomon* effect is that struggle to win control: the suspended ambiguity of the narrative at hand is much more important than its closure into a final meaning. In this, one sees a neat combination of Hayden White’s principle that it is impossible to narrate without moralizing, Geertz’s observation that all history is fiction, and a variation on Postlewait’s notion that no single narrative can contain a historical event.

Returning, then, to the history and historiography of *Ubu Roi*. The goal of the study is to offer a compelling reinterpretation of the play’s famous 1896 Parisian premiere that may be able to dislodge and supplant the traditional presentation of that occasion as the starting point for theatre’s Narrative of Modernism. To counter that well-established positivist idea, a viable competing idea needs a certain moral size, a discursive “it factor,” that will weigh similarly to the Narrative of Modernism. Intentional use of the *Rashomon* effect as a compositional device is a way to address the challenge. In fact, this technique of presenting multiple, contradictory, and moralizing re-examinations of a single event seems, as a historiographic model, to resonate well with epistemological concerns of the current post-truth era: for, in a *Rashomon* effect situation, all the narratives inhabit a shared reality, yet they advocate different truths about it. Consequently, the result of this manner of storytelling is the evocation of a complex and deliberately unresolved (and possibly unresolvable) narrative whole. It is a markedly different discursive effect from the singular resolved truth of the Narrative of

Modernism, but the divergent ideas seem to function in the same moral “weight class,” making the compositional tool of the “*Rashomon* effect” a useful potential foil for the Narrative of Modernism.

So, by embracing and adapting this narrative technique, this study presents four contrasting biographically-oriented “resurrected” histories of the premiere performance of *Ubu Roi*, each focusing on the experience of a different individual, to create a narrative “knot” around that historical event. Each chapter of the study highlights a different significance of the audience’s reception of Jarry’s play, with their differences being determined by the four different personal agendas of each narrative’s key individual. The term “resurrected history” is used here to describe the various narratives of the study because the different interpretations they contain have all been either forgotten, overlooked, lost, neglected, or repressed during the past century. The most likely reason for this neglect is because these interpretations cannot easily be incorporated into the conventionally preferred Narrative of Modernism. In essence, the histories included here are “resurrected” because this study brings these forgotten stories “back to life.”

Ultimately, the dissertation asserts that the most appropriate overall significance of the 1896 premiere of *Ubu Roi* comes from its having been a cultural crossroads where multiple competing parties all tried to control the story of its performance. Retelling the play’s history in this multilayered way reveals some of the complex specifics of how aesthetic evolution can take place in the highly social medium of theatrical performance. Even more importantly, the “contested crossroads” idea is presented here as an

alternative to the traditional notion that *Ubu Roi* is significant mainly because of its (problematic) relation to the Narrative of Modernism. And, going forward, this new alternative may prove viable as a competitor, succeeding where its predecessors have not, because it possesses a similar moral size, a similar ideational “weight class,” to the idea it seeks to displace.

One way to simplify the foregoing is with the idea of a custody battle. In *Rashomon*, the witnesses all exert themselves to obtain ownership over — and control of — the story of the crime. In an analogous manner, several influential historical individuals vied to control the story of the tempestuous premiere of *Ubu Roi*, each promoting a different interpretation of the meaning of the crowd’s behavior at the play. They were all, in different fashions, trying to use the extraordinary occasion as a means to steer the development of aesthetic history — at least insofar as it pertained to *fin-de-siècle* Parisian theatre. In this study, the actions and agendas of four of the interested parties are illuminated. The ultimate victor of their custody battle does not particularly matter, though, because all the perspectives are ultimately distorting and reductive. To reiterate Postlewait: “no single narrative can contain a historical event.” Rather, it is the fact of the contest itself that should be remembered; the more complex whole of the Custody Battle of *Ubu Roi*. The tale of that battle’s end result, its use in the narrative of theatrical modernism, is both less interesting and less true.

## Chapter Descriptions

This dissertation is presented in four chapters and a conclusion, according to the following synopsis. In addition to the divisions described below, there are also four appendixes following the study's conclusion. These appendixes present my annotated English language translations of several primary documents essential to this investigation but which are only available in French.

Chapter 1 of this study of *Ubu's Moment* traces the pre-1896 development of the play *Ubu Roi* as seen from Alfred Jarry's point of view. The narrative recounts how this unusual work came to exist and gives a step-by-step chronicle showing how the young author shepherded the work through many evolutions before managing to get it produced on stage by the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre. Examination of these details not only sets the stage for the later chapters of the dissertation, but also fills a notable absence in the existing scholarship. Nowhere, either in English or in French, has a thorough and accurate account of Ubu's eight year pre-Théâtre-de-l'Oeuvre evolution been published. This chapter furnishes that missing story. Naturally, it discusses the play's (reasonably well-known) origins in a schoolboy satire of a particularly ludicrous teacher . . . but it also itemizes the (much less well-known) intermediate growth of the central character, showcasing Ubu's many appearances in Symbolist literary publications prior to 1896, his well-established pre-1896 countercultural celebrity, and his ever more frequent (pre-1896) depiction in other (non-literary) media. All these developments resulted directly from the efforts of Alfred Jarry. Overall, the chapter argues that the Théâtre de

l'Oeuvre's December 1896 production of the play *Ubu Roi* came to pass mainly because Jarry's charismatic, tenacious, and carefully political promotion of Ubu — combined with Jarry's own personal likeability, courtesy, and overall good management — created a significant audience-demand for the play to be performed. This proposition offers to replace the widely held (but mistaken) belief that Jarry was an antisocial maniac who was in total rebellion against the norms of society, and that the production of his play was an anarchistic art-attack intended to insult and enrage its audience. Ultimately, this chapter views the play's production as the crowning achievement of diligence and careful management.

Chapter 2 of this study examines the sentiments of the audience who attended *Ubu Roi* by reconstructing their actual behavior at the famous first performance of the play. The deportment of this group of elite theatergoers is considered within the context of the customary behavioral practices of Parisian audiences who regularly attended the *théâtres à côté* [fringe theatres] of the 1890s. When the chapter's focus is narrowed, though, the customary behavior — and customary agenda — of one celebrity audience member is featured in particular. I argue that the significant disturbance that really did take place during the third act of Jarry's play was a normal and expected feature of an audience's experience at an avant-garde theatre production of this era. In the case of *Ubu Roi*, though, the energetic discourse performed by the highly factional audience had been carefully set up in advance. As for the famously intensive fifteen-minute uproar during the play's third act: I propose that this was touched off by an action of André Antoine

— the founder of the (recently defunct) *Théâtre Libre*, inventor of the institution of avant-garde theatre in Paris, passionate advocate of a rival aesthetic of theatre performance, one-time mentor to both Lugné-Poe (director of the *Théâtre de l'Oeuvre*) and Firmin Gémier (the actor who played the role of Ubu) . . . and also the point-of-view personality for this chapter. As everyone present would have known, Antoine had very recently been dismissed from his post as director of the *Odéon*, a large state-supported theatre that was known also as “the second *Comédie-Française*.” The specific behavior of this particular celebrity may well have ignited the “riot”; a disruption that had little or nothing to do with Jarry’s use of the word “*merdre*,” but whose enactment was an important aspect of participatory theatergoing for Parisian audiences of the *fin de siècle*.

Chapter 3 of this study addresses an un-obvious aspect of the *merdre* myth (the myth of the supposedly outraged supposedly bourgeois audience who supposedly attended the premiere of *Ubu Roi*) that has never been adequately explored. Namely: the political origins of the phony story itself. Here I contextualize the publication of the one and only source for this celebrated fiction — a 1928 biography of Jarry that was written by his close friend, the Decadent pornographic novelist Rachilde [pseudonym of Margeuritte Eymery Vallette], who gives this chapter its point of view. As I argue, Rachilde’s invention of the first-word riot (after a thirty-two year delay) is best understood as a byproduct of an intellectual custody battle that was raging internally among the Parisian avant-garde of the 1920s. Rachilde was making a deliberate effort to wrest cultural control of the *idea* of Jarry away from his Surrealist inheritors of this

period, who were led by the thirty-two-year-old André Breton. In Rachilde's view, their entire generation willfully misunderstood the real Jarry and his proper significance.

Therefore, with a biased, anecdotal, and first-person biography of Jarry, she endeavored to set the memorial record straight concerning her deceased friend. Ultimately, though, her book contains many distortions that exist solely for reasons of personal propaganda. One of these is her account of the *merdre* riot of *Ubu Roi* — a fantasia that has proved so enticing to later researchers that it has become a canonical truth of theatre history.

Chapter 4 of this study explores what the theatre historian Claude Schumacher referred to as the “real battle” of *Ubu Roi* — the journalistic *mêlée* that was waged in the contemporary press in the immediate wake of the production. In this fight, the most spectacular combatants were two important theatre critics. Leading one side: the anarchistic former Communarde officer, and former political exile, Henry Bauër, who wrote for the *Écho de Paris*. Leading the opposing camp was the utterly conventional former Official Censor of the French Press, one-time Prefect, and recent retiree from the Chamber of Deputies, Henri Fouquier, who wrote for *Le Figaro*.<sup>52</sup> The theatrical adventure of *Ubu Roi* provided these two critics with an ideal opportunity to take the field against one another over a matter of aesthetic politics. Ultimately, it was the right to wield the political power of art that was at stake in the real contest between these two

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<sup>52</sup> In France a Prefect is a government executive who administers a geographic Department, roughly equivalent to the status of the Governor of an American state. The Chamber of Deputies is the lower house of the French legislature, something like the American House of Representatives. It should be noted, though, that French and American political systems are not similar and any comparisons between them are, at best, only rough approximations.

men: each fought the other for contemporary critical ascendancy, for the right to define the direction of aesthetic progress in the French capital. At the time of *Ubu Roi* this privilege was Bauër's to lose. As I argue, the utter defeat that this politically radical critic experienced on this occasion halted the advance — in terms of both aesthetic experimentation and of leftward political drift — of the French theatrical avant-garde for (at least) the next ten years.

Lastly, the Conclusion of this study addresses a big-picture idea that accumulates from chapter to chapter all throughout the dissertation thanks to its *Rashomon*-inspired structure of overlapping but juxtaposed narratives. The common element (or the shared point of contention, depending on perspective) in each narrative is the political power that historical individuals derive from their custodianship of the avant-garde theatre. “Custodian,” in this case, indicates an individual who, through popular accord, holds the right to define the immediate focus of the avant-garde vision — a fleeting privilege which also brings a certain degree of political agency to effect social transformations. In all four case studies, I show a protagonist who, each in his or her own way, strives to use the cultural energy created by the premiere performance of *Ubu Roi*, as a tool to assert control over the direction of the contemporary Parisian avant-garde. In other words: through their mutually antagonistic uses for the figure of Ubu, the four featured custodians fight one another to win ascendancy. They engage in a “custody battle” comparable to the competition among the witnesses in *Rashomon* to win control of the narrative in their court case. Jarry launches his idea from the stage of the Théâtre de

l'Oeuvre; Antoine, in the audience, deploys his considerable celebrity to resist Jarry “with all his might”; Bauër, in turn, exerts himself in the *Écho de Paris* to steer the monster; and Rachilde, in her memoir, does the same. All are competing with one another to harness the energy of *Ubu* for their own individual, and mutually incompatible, political agendas. Collectively, the four case studies create a collage-portrait of a complex and multifaceted political contest. This composite rendering of the events of *Ubu Roi* from multiple simultaneous perspectives may be as close as it is possible to come to a record of what “really” happened on the occasion of this production.

Arriving at what “really happened” is not true goal of this study, though. Rather, the goal is to create at a new moral “take away” for the story of the play’s premiere . . . and that take-away is the Custody Battle. The art of *Ubu Roi* was not rejected by contemporary society, as the Narrative of Modernism requires. On the contrary: *Ubu Roi* is a notable cultural landmark because many different aspiring custodians sought to control the production’s energy and use its dynamism for their own purposes. In the end, the “*merdre* riot” anecdote was victorious in the marketplace of ideas, but the historical occasion of *Ubu Roi* itself is important specifically because of the scrambling competition it inspired.

## Chapter 1:

### **Alfred Jarry, Shepherd of Ubu's Progress from the Théâtre des Phynaces to the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre**

To launch this dissertation's first resurrected history, it will be useful to iterate a few facts about the real début production of the play *Ubu Roi* that are not especially famous on their own. First: the actual premiere performance of this play occurred in 1888, eight years prior to the highly mythologized Théâtre de l'Oeuvre début production of 1896, whose historiography has already been discussed somewhat in this dissertation's Introduction. Second: this actual premiere production of 1888 was mounted by an amateur company that called itself the Théâtre des Phynances. Third: the production took place in the small provincial city of Rennes — which is the capital of Brittany, a cultural and administrative region in northwestern France — and not in the much more culturally central national capital of Paris. Fourth: the play was not even written by Alfred Jarry, as is generally supposed, but by two of his schoolfellows, two brothers named Charles and Henry Morin. There is more that will be added later to this list of revelations, but this much begins to set the stage for the tale at hand. Put concisely: this

chapter presents the untold story of how the play *Ubu Roi* evolved, grew, and moved from the tiny amateur provincial production of 1888, to its much more famous 1896 representation on the most important experimental stage in France at the time. Even more pointedly: this first portion of my study explains where that play came from, how it ever came to be produced in Paris in the first place, and what Alfred Jarry had to do with any of it.

To understand this overall evolution in its proper context, one should start with a clear picture of what the Théâtre des Phynances was. Even to say that this company was a group of amateur players gives an overly grand idea. In truth it was three boys in high-school (*lycéens*) — the Morin brothers and their new-in-town friend Alfred Jarry — who got together in the attic of the spacious home in which the Morin family lived, to put on a live-action performance of a satire that Charles and Henry had written as a lampoon of their despotic and pompous high school physics teacher. All three of the boys involved in this production were between fourteen and sixteen years old at the time. At one of their afternoon rehearsals they came up with the name “Théâtre des Phynances” for their live-action-performance enterprise. The denomination was in (dis)honor of the teacher’s — or, more precisely, of his caricature’s — abiding lust for worldly riches (that is: “phynances,” of which more will be said later). Moreover, the moniker also served to satisfy their own adolescent delight in mock-archaic spellings.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Later in the present chapter the basis for this information on the Théâtre des Phynances will be discussed in detail. For the moment, it suffices it to note that the specifics come mainly from two sources. One is the biographical commentary written about the life of Alfred Jarry by his elder sister, Charlotte, after her brother’s death. These “biographical notes” are included in the third volume of the *Oeuvres*

In December 1888, just before the Christmas holidays at the *Lycée de Rennes* (the proper name the school attended by the boys), the Théâtre des Phynances presented its one (and only) performance of the first ever production of the earliest version of the play that eventually came to be called *Ubu Roi*. At that time, though, the piece was called *Les Polonais* [*The Poles*], so named because it depicted deeds supposedly perpetrated by the physics professor in the country of Poland.<sup>54</sup> In this early version of the work, the teacher murders the king of Poland in order to become king in his place. He does this only after first fortifying himself by devouring an enormous meal consisting of feces and sausages, which is the fare he best likes to eat. Following the regicide, the teacher proceeds to slaughter all of the Polish nobility in order to take their wealth (called “phynance” in the play) for himself. He then makes several pompous speeches that include puerile profanities (such as “*merdre*”); farts a lot; shits his pants (literally) when he fears retribution for his crimes; and, in the end, is driven out of the country by a mob of angry peasants.

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*complètes* of Alfred Jarry (Paris: Gallimard, 1972-1988), pages 699-703. The other source is an early twentieth-century study written by a Parisian academic, Charles Chassé, titled *Sous le masque de Jarry: Les sources d'Ubu-Roi* (Paris: Floury, 1921). It compiles and quotes extensively from several first-hand accounts describing the schoolboy culture at the *lycée* attended by Jarry and the Morins.

<sup>54</sup> The play *Ubu Roi* continued to bear the subtitle “*Les Polonais*” until just before the publication of (what we now regard as) the “official” first edition of the text. As this chapter demonstrates, though, the play’s nominal first edition was not really the first (or even the second or even the third) time the piece had been published. The disappearance of the subtitle is clearly evidenced in the slightly different versions of the text published in the spring and summer of 1896. When the work was printed in serialized form — starting in May 1896 — in the literary journal *Le Livre d'Art*, it was still called *Ubu Roi, ou les Polonais*. But by the following month, when printed as a single volume by the book-publishing arm of the Mercure de France, the title had become *Ubu Roi, Drame en cinq Actes en prose*, with no mention of “*les Polonais*” to be found. Both these publications, and the circumstances surrounding them, are discussed in detail later in this chapter.

The boys themselves were the principal performers in the show. Charles acted the central role, while Henry and Alfred embodied the other key parts. The play also included minor thespian participation from a few schoolmates. In addition to acting in the show, Jarry also took on the main responsibility for creating the scenery and props, and seems to have functioned as a director for the project. Jarry's elder sister, Charlotte, assisted with costuming the various characters. When the day for the performance finally arrived, its single audience was comprised mostly of other boys from the *lycée*.<sup>55</sup> Considering the size of the venue, it is clear that no more than twenty-five spectators could possibly have been present for this "real premiere." Thus: it was an exceptionally small event. Nonetheless, it was also a hugely important one in the context of this study, for it is this tentative occasion that is posited as the starting point for "Ubu's progress" in the title of this chapter: "Alfred Jarry, Shepherd of Ubu's Progress from the Théâtre des Phynances to the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre."

### **The Argument of this Chapter**

In this chapter I ask what the specific steps were that led from this attic production by schoolboys, to the later presentation of the play by a highly celebrated Parisian theatre company. My multi-part response to that question constitutes the travelogue of Ubu's evolution that is offered in the following pages. Some of the key items of his itinerary that will be discussed include: the specific vector that brought the

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<sup>55</sup> The sources for these specifics are named in note 1, and will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Ubu character to his first Parisian appearance in 1891; his evolution into (and recognition as) a highly significant, darkly comic, and archetypal literary figure; his many appearances in Symbolist publications between 1893 and 1896; his growing countercultural celebrity; and his ever more frequent depiction in other (non-literary) media.<sup>56</sup> All these developments took place prior to the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre's December 1896 production of the play *Ubu Roi*, and all of them were necessary rungs in Ubu's overall climb toward that production. For his part, Jarry was there every inch of the way, working diligently to open doors and to create each new path of opportunity for the character. He crafted new episodes for Ubu; he reframed and expanded old ones; and he continually translated the figure from one representational genre to the next. Given the extensive and easily documentable pre-1897 career of the Ubu character, it is surprising that a detailed and accurate account of his eight-year literary odyssey ("from the Théâtre des Phynances to the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre") has never been published, either in English or in French. In the existing literature where aspects of the progression are recorded, the tale is always either out of focus, left in the background, or (most often) it is distorted and highly inaccurate.

I argue that our general misperception of this journey owes mainly to the fact that the story's first narrator in English, Roger Shattuck, had a special interest in

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<sup>56</sup> In addition to rendering Ubu in multiple literary styles, Jarry also presented the character in drawings, in woodcuts, as a sculptural object, in songs, and in mimetic performances. This last took several forms: recitations by Jarry, enactment of episodes of his adventures given by puppets, and eventually a full production of *Ubu Roi* by live actors. All will be discussed in their proper contexts during the course of this chapter.

presenting *Ubu Roi*'s (nominal) author, Alfred Jarry, as a manic iconoclast who existed in a state of “permanent psychosis.”<sup>57</sup> Shattuck’s idea of Jarry — Jarry as outrageous social misfit — served the overall logic of his important 1955 study *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France, 1885 to World War I*. But his determination to construct a picture of “crazy Jarry” led him to distort and downplay Jarry’s intelligent, politically astute, polite, carefully social, and tenacious management of his (and Ubu’s) early literary career. It should be noted that *The Banquet Years* is a profoundly influential book. Its arguments concerning Jarry will be discussed in detail presently — but for the moment it will suffice to note that this book could not portray Jarry as rational, charming, canny, and goal-oriented, for such portrayal would have been contrary to its main thesis. Shattuck therefore avoids any emphasis on these qualities of Jarry’s personality and instead exaggerates a fantastical element of the young man’s behavior that was not especially dominant in his life prior to the 1896 production of *Ubu Roi*. One collateral effect of this (mis)representation of Jarry has been the significant distortion of the history of the young writer’s careful step-by-step guidance of *Ubu Roi* from the printed page to Parisian stage. Certainly a version of that tale does emerge from Shattuck’s treatise, but it is not a trustworthy account: it is full of gaps and misleading

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<sup>57</sup> Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France, 1885 to World War I* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 198. Throughout this study, whenever I quote from Shattuck’s book, the quotations will be drawn from the revised edition of 1968. This is because the revised version of the text of *The Banquet Years* is much more common than the original 1955 version. The differences between the original and the revised editions consist only of a few added paragraphs here and there throughout the work, but the overall effect is that the (more common) revised edition follows a different pagination from the 1955 original.

information; it lacks many necessary citations; and several of the most telling details are either omitted or taken out of sequence and/or out of context in order to make them seem outrageous.

In this study's Introduction I discussed Thomas Postlewait's analyses of the (mis)historiography that clings to *Ubu Roi*. With specific reference to *The Banquet Years*, Postlewait has shown that many scholars who came after Shattuck simply accepted his account of events uncritically, without considering the writer's agenda.<sup>58</sup> Time and again Shattuck's narrative has been used as though it were primary data — and in this way a variety of inaccuracies that were introduced by him have been spread throughout much of the Jarry/*Ubu* scholarship of the past sixty years.<sup>59</sup> The resulting condition of compounded (and thus legitimized) misinformation concerning the life of *Ubu*'s nominal author is a significant difficulty that must be reckoned with now. This is because the present chapter's main task of explaining the gradual eight-year progress of *Ubu* toward the stage of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre is inextricably linked with the task of correcting the established (but distorted) narrative that describes this same period in the life of *Ubu*'s “author” — or, as he is being presented in this chapter, as *Ubu*'s “shepherd.”

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<sup>58</sup> Thomas Postlewait, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 68-69, 76-77.

<sup>59</sup> In his illustration of this point, Postlewait also notes that the repetitions and proliferations of Shattuck's ideas on Jarry and *Ubu* are not limited only to English-language scholarship. The text of *The Banquet Years* has been translated into many languages. The French version — *Les Primitifs de l'avant-garde* — was even translated into that language by the author himself and is as standard a reference work for Francophone scholars as the original is for Anglophone scholars. Still, even if Shattuck's study were not readily available in multiple languages, “the dominance of the English language in the international scholarly communities,” as Postlewait explains, causes historians writing in other languages to “depend upon publications in English” for their information (280 n.29; see also 69-70).

There are several reasons why I characterize Jarry as “shepherd,” rather than as “author,” in relation to Ubu. First, as is already noted above, Jarry was not the original creator of the schoolboy satire that sits at the core of the play *Ubu Roi*. He was an inventive writer, to be sure, but he did not invent the Ubu character.<sup>60</sup> It is more accurate to say that he adopted, developed, and promoted the fellow, in a literary sense. It is true that Jarry did genuinely come up with several additional (i.e., non *Ubu Roi*) episodes of Ubu’s adventuring. In reading these, though, one gets the sense that Jarry’s most significant role was to steer this archetypal (but not yet widely recognized) and collectively-fashioned figure from one landmark appearance to the next.<sup>61</sup> The young writer always seems to be drawing on a larger pre-existing “folklore” associated with the figure.<sup>62</sup> His “authorship,” then, is somewhat akin to the authorship exerted by the Brothers Grimm over the German *Childrens’ and Household Tales* that they collected, revised, edited, and published in 1812.<sup>63</sup> Notwithstanding, in the judgment of posterity,

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<sup>60</sup> The Ubu character was also not invented by the Morin brothers. For a decade before these boys ever attended the *Lycée de Rennes*, the students at that school had already been writing burlesques and drawing satirical cartoons based on the physics teacher. Altogether this amounted to an underground folkloric saga for schoolboys. There were many chapters to the character’s notorious adventuring, all devised by different adolescent authors. The Morin’s contribution of *Les Polonais* was merely the latest innovation in the tradition. For examples of the pre-Morin-brothers satires see Chassé, 28-32.

<sup>61</sup> It seems worthwhile to note that, even if Jarry is taken out of the picture, the Ubu character would still exist. A version of this figure was written by other people before Jarry ever encountered him. It is undeniable that Jarry provided an important link in Ubu’s chain of continuity. But still, he was just that: a link in a chain. The character also continued to be written by others after Jarry’s death. Indeed, even during the height of Jarry’s popularity some of his own contemporaries also created small episodes featuring Ubu.

<sup>62</sup> See note 8, above.

<sup>63</sup> By this I mean that the Grimms did not actually *create* the stories inasmuch as they *curated* them.

Jarry's dedication to continually revising (refining, elevating, recording, publishing, popularizing, performing, perfecting) and generally overseeing the many literary evolutions undergone by Ubu . . . has won for him the right to be called the creator of Ubu, even though the true authorship of the earliest "original" version of the play *Ubu Roi* is a complex undeterminable matter.<sup>64</sup>

But even beyond this, there is another reason why it is preferable to think of Jarry in the role of "shepherd for" rather than "creator of" Ubu. It is because the Ubu character — who, by 1896, had grown from a lampoon of one specific individual into a much more potent comedic archetype of despotic narcissism coupled with violent marauding idiocy coupled with fundamental cowardice — appears to have an autonomous life of his own. He seems to go where he will, independent of the intentions of his author(s).<sup>65</sup> "Pere Ubu exists!" wrote one critic after the famous 1896 Théâtre de l'Oeuvre performance of Ubu's play.<sup>66</sup> The critic was referring to the profound truth he saw in the satirical character, who, in his opinion, seemed to be everywhere in the world, thoughtlessly and greedily wrecking every wholesome thing around him, and in the most stupid ways imaginable, merely to bring some insignificant short-term benefit to himself.

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<sup>64</sup> Also in relation to the authorship issue, it is worth noting that, as adults, the Morins actively wished not to have their names associated with Ubu in any way. After high school they "had better things to do than concern themselves with such stupidities," as the elder of the brothers, Charles, communicated to Chassé (Chassé, 26).

<sup>65</sup> Regarding the plural "author(s)" see notes 8 and 9, above.

<sup>66</sup> Catulle Mendès, Review of *Ubu Roi* at the Theatre de l'Oeuvre, Paris, *Le Journal* 11 Dec. 1896. The majority of this review is reprinted in Rachilde, *Alfred Jarry ou Le Surmâle de lettres* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1928), 82-86.

Jarry, too, seems to refer to the character's autonomous volition when, in his own after-the-fact commentary on the premiere, he spoke of the need to “unleash” [*lâcher*] the character on a stage.<sup>67</sup> It seems somehow right, then, to consider Ubu as a comically amusing but extremely destructive sheep — a chicken-hearted and notoriously dimwitted creature — whom Jarry drives from one field to the next, moving him among several literary genres and representational media.<sup>68</sup> But even while this happens, the beast also exercises idiotic desires of its own. Positioning Jarry as his “shepherd” manages to embrace this idea, while simultaneously acknowledging the complexities of the authorship issue.

In relation to the overall structure of this dissertation, this chapter delivers the first of the four unknown histories promised by the introduction. Specifically, it gives an appropriately contextualized account of how the play *Ubu Roi* ever came to be produced in Paris in 1896 by the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre. It does this while arguing that this event came to pass mainly because Jarry's charismatic, tenacious, and carefully political promotion of Ubu as an entirely “new” character type — combined with Jarry's own personal likeability, courtesy, and overall good management — created a significant audience-demand for the play to be performed by the one French theatre company then in existence that could bring about a suitably innovative staging of the work. This proposition opposes the widely held belief that Jarry was an antisocial maniac who was

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<sup>67</sup> Alfred Jarry, “Questions de théâtre” in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), vol. I, page 415. Hereafter this edition of Jarry's complete works will be cited as *OCG*. Unless otherwise specified any translations from the French are my own.

<sup>68</sup> See note 4, above.

in total rebellion against the norms of society, and that the production of his play was some sort of anarchistic art-attack intended to insult and enrage its audience.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, this chapter also redresses the many (Shattuck-inspired) discussions of the play's origin that fail to represent Ubu's true progress from his ignoble beginnings as a satire by schoolboys, through his elaboration and refinement in the rarefied and ultra-cerebral realm of Symbolist literature, and then into a phase of growing popularity among an ever-widening counterculture of highly literate and sophisticated admirers.

To establish that narrative is the primary goal of this chapter. At the same time, though, the chapter also serves three supplemental purposes. One of these is to introduce certain individuals who were profoundly influential in the development of the avant-garde arts in Paris during the 1890s and who will serve as focal figures in later chapters in this study. Another is to open this dissertation's first window on the social and material contexts that enveloped and pervaded the production of Jarry's play, thereby offering a realpolitik view of how Paris's artistically experimental subculture operated at this particular time. And finally, this initial chapter is also intended to acquaint the reader with the textual content of the play *Ubu Roi*, the published work of *literature* that preceded and inspired the December 1896 theatrical production that is at

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<sup>69</sup> The idea that the 1896 Parisian production of *Ubu Roi* was a type of aesthetic "anarchist attack" that was created specifically to insult and enrage the play's audience is a very common historiographical (mis)interpretation of the occasion. It has served as the basis for numerous articles and book chapters, and in some cases even for entire books, as can be seen in the title of a 1984 monograph by Gérard Damerval, *Ubu Roi: La Bombe Comique de 1896* (Paris: A.G. Nizet, 1984). The notion of the play as "attack" derives mainly from the false idea of the *merdre* riot, but it brings an additional dimension of contemporary politics into the mix. The real — by which I mean the *appropriately contextualized* — political positions that should be associated with the famous 1896 production are discussed thoroughly in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

the epicenter of this entire study. All these topics are developed during the following presentation of the intermingled — and pre-Théâtre-de-l'Oeuvre — lives of Jarry and Ubu.

### **The Ubiquitous Influence of Shattuck**

Roger Shattuck's 1955 study *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France* has already been mentioned above. Because the ideas in this book have been repeated so pervasively in later Jarry/Ubu historiography, it is important to take a moment here to consider this work's overall argument. Taken as a whole, Shattuck's book examines artistic developments in Paris between the years 1885 and 1914. It does this through the presentation of petit biographies for four key avant-garde artists, considering their lives, works, and innovations in relation to the official artistic culture of France at the time. Included in the study are: the painter Henri Rousseau, the composer Erik Satie, the author Alfred Jarry, and the poet Guillaume Apollinaire. Seventy of the book's 350 pages are devoted to Jarry, whose section commences with a chapter called "Suicide by Hallucination." In the sequence of the overall study, the discussion of Jarry comes third, following the chapters on Rousseau and Satie, but preceding the consideration of Apollinaire. This placement is because, for Shattuck, Jarry exemplifies "the third trait of the arts of the period: the eruption of dream into waking experience."<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Shattuck, 34.

According to *The Banquet years*, it was Jarry's abuse of alcohol, absinthe, and ether that created the main conduit for this "third trait." It is proposed that these substances allowed Jarry to keep himself in a perpetual "semiexalted state," wherein his unconscious fantasy world was always being tapped and channeled directly into ordinary daily behaviors.<sup>71</sup> This is one of the two main pillars of Shattuck's argument. The other is the idea that the personality of the writer, Jarry, came to be devoured and replaced by the personality of that writer's own monstrous literary creation, Père Ubu (a character who we will come to know quite well).<sup>72</sup> These notions have proved to be (and still are) powerfully attractive. Especially the latter Jekyll-into-Hyde idea. Especially since, when combined, they make good sense of the grotesque final years of Jarry's short life — from approximately 1901 through 1907 (the year of Jarry's death at the age of 34), when the writer's addictions really did have solid control of him.

Yet there is at least one major difficulty with Shattuck's packaging of Jarry, for it treats his biography as a preordained destiny, and it shows him more as an illustration of a theory than as a person. It is true that the critic has shined a light, quite brilliantly, on the condition of Jarry's final years. But for Shattuck this illumination casts its shadow all the way back across Jarry's early childhood. One sees this in several unjustifiable claims that he makes — such as: "all his life Jarry was haunted by the insistent reality of

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 201.

<sup>72</sup> Shattuck presents variations on this point in a number of different ways throughout his book. For instance: "Jarry adopted in 'real' life the fictional role of Ubu, his most horrendous creation" (39). And later: "through drink and hallucination [he] converted himself into a new person physically and mentally" (203). Many more examples could be given, but these are the most concise.

dreaming consciousness,” or, “Jarrry’s incredible life takes place in the atmosphere of a self-inflicted nightmare.”<sup>73</sup> These ideas simply do not apply to “all” (or even to half, or even to a third) of Jarrry’s life. But since it would be extremely helpful to Shattuck’s case if they did, he makes them apply. Thus, when moving beyond his introduction and into a chronological narrative of his subject’s life, Shattuck jiggers the story to create moments in Jarrry’s youth that might be said to prefigure his later transformation of personality. These manipulations have given a false picture of Jarrry’s pre-alcoholic years, making the actual story of Jarrry’s activities between 1888 and 1896 that much more difficult to recover.

For instance, Shattuck writes that Jarrry, as a small child, “had a scrunched-up little face which was further twisted by a wracking cough, as if violent excess had very early undermined his health.”<sup>74</sup> It is true that Jarrry was not a robustly healthy child, but the “wracking cough” the “violent excess” and the “twisted face” are only colorful imaginings on Shattuck’s part, meant to prefigure a metamorphosis that would come some decades in the future. He then cites a (not-particularly-trustworthy) memorial recollection by one of Jarrry’s former schoolmates, which reported Jarrry’s role in what could easily be characterized as an ordinary act of teenaged recalcitrance. The critic, however, does not present the tale in this way. Rather, he leans on the interpretive scale

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<sup>73</sup> Shattuck, 35.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 189. There is no evidence for these claims: no photos of Jarrry as a small child, nor any description of a scrunched-up/twisted face or a wracking cough. The biographical notes written by Jarrry’s sister Charlotte (discussed and cited below) do, however, confirm that he was not an especially healthy child.

by declaring that the “effrontery” of Jarry’s youthful behavior “revealed a terrible wrenching of personality.”<sup>75</sup> Such pronouncements as these ask the reader to think of Jarry as an extreme nonconformist, an “unregenerate misfit,” in Shattuck’s words, whose social conduct can only be attributed to a state of “permanent psychosis.”<sup>76</sup> In this same vein, the critic also insists that “between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five”— which is the specific period scrutinized in this chapter — Jarry “refused ever to come to terms with the world.”<sup>77</sup> This last claim is simply unfounded. Shattuck is only able to make it by deliberately neglecting a plethora of contrary evidence that shows Jarry to have been charming, disciplined, likeable, politic, and very perceptive with regard to the working of authority. He was mischievous, to be sure, but this eccentricity was also contained within conventional behavioral parameters of his era. This, as I argue, remained true at least until he passed the age of twenty-five, and will be demonstrated in the following pages.

### **Survey of Biographical Studies of Alfred Jarry**

The biographical account of Jarry that was written by Roger Shattuck is not the only Jarry biography available. In English there are seven others (all subsequent to Shattuck’s), and in French there are more than a dozen.<sup>78</sup> I have consulted all of them. I

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>78</sup> It should be noted that the French-language biographies that were published before 1955 served as sources for Shattuck’s own study.

have also consulted their sources, wherever this was possible. Before moving on to the presentation of my own corrective account of Jarry's pre-1897 life with Ubu, I acknowledge and characterize several of these studies — each of which has informed my own narrative in some way — to highlight the ways in which they all diverge from one another. My own version of Jarry's story differs (in its focus) from all of them. That difference is explained at the conclusion of this survey section.

The first full-length work to be written about the life of Jarry was published in 1928. This was *Alfred Jarry, ou Le Surmâle de lettres* [*Alfred Jarry, or the Supermale of Letters*].<sup>79</sup> It is an anecdotal personal memoir of the short-lived writer, authored by his close friend, the *fin-de-siècle* French novelist known by the name of Rachilde. (Her real name was Marguerite Eymery Vallette). The book gives a wonderfully vivid impression of Jarry's personality. Unfortunately, as later Jarry scholars have shown, a great deal of the biographical information that it contains is exaggerated and unworthy of the reader's trust.<sup>80</sup> Any particulars or reminiscences that derive only from this book need to be treated with skepticism. Yet despite its unreliability, the work remains an essential source for any study of Jarry, for it is a fact that no one else who ever wrote about this odd character knew him as intimately as Rachilde did.

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<sup>79</sup> Rachilde [Marguerite Eymery Vallette], *Alfred Jarry ou Le Surmâle de lettres* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1928).

<sup>80</sup> It is, in fact, this book that first introduced the false tale of the fifteen-minute first-word riot at the 1896 production of *Ubu Roi*. Rachilde's reasons for exaggerating and myth-ifying her friend's life — and for inventing this story of the “*merdre*” riot in particular — are examined in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

A few years later, in 1932, Rachilde's associate Paul Chauveau produced what is now regarded as the first real biography of Jarry. His book was called *Alfred Jarry, ou La Naissance, la Vie et la Mort du Père Ubu* [*Alfred Jarry, or the Birth, the Life and the Death of Père Ubu*].<sup>81</sup> In contrast to Rachilde, who recorded a series of stream-of-consciousness anecdotes about her own experiences with her friend, Chauveau made a more methodical effort. He researched Jarry's life, investigated his childhood in Brittany, comments on a number of Jarry's writings, and quotes from many turn-of-the-century periodicals. The book also contains several unique details of Jarry's life that were apparently conveyed orally to Chauveau (Rachilde is believed to be the source of many). Overall, this work presents Jarry's life as a melodrama: the cautionary tale of a man who was devoured by his creation (as the book's title implies). Chauveau views the (alleged) loss-of-identity on Jarry's part as the ultimate revenge of the Rennes physics teacher on whom Ubu was modeled.<sup>82</sup> But as with Rachilde's earlier book, there is again reason to suspect that this biographer's desire to fashion a good morality tale allowed a significant measure of complicated reality to be glossed over. Ultimately, while the book establishes a useful basic outline of Jarry's life, it also leaves many gaps, and its most interesting details and assertions must be taken warily.

The next landmarks in the study of Jarry's biography came in the 1950s. In 1951 the *Collège de Pataphysique* (which was discussed already in this dissertation's Introduction)

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<sup>81</sup> Paul Chauveau, *Alfred Jarry ou la naissance, la vie et la mort du Père Ubu* (Paris: Le Mercure de France, 1932).

<sup>82</sup> See especially Chauveau, 96-101.

began publishing its journal in which one finds (reproductions of) dozens of previously unknown documents which illuminate Jarry's life, and which help to place him in the context of the years in which he lived. Four years later, in 1955, Shattuck's *The Banquet Years* appeared — first in English, and, soon after, in French. This work has just been discussed at length in the previous section. I would add here, though, that rather than draw on the newly available and de-mythologizing material from the *Collège de Pataphysique* — which Shattuck, as a member of that organization, was undeniably familiar with — he chose instead to perpetuate a chimerical version of Jarry's life for which Rachilde and Chauveau provided the main basis.<sup>83</sup>

The first biographical study of Jarry to make good use of the material from the *Collège de Pataphysique* was by Noël Arnaud. It was planned as a multi-volume work, but only a single (450-page) volume ever appeared. This was *Alfred Jarry: d'Ubu Roi au Docteur Faustroll* (*Alfred Jarry: From Ubu Roi to Doctor Faustroll*), published in 1974.<sup>84</sup> Rather than viewing Jarry as an outrageous avant-garde iconoclast, as previous biographers had done, this study shows him to have been shy, ambitious, fiercely intelligent, and highly attentive to his familial and social responsibilities. And rather than relying primarily on

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<sup>83</sup> In 1955 Shattuck was not only a member of the *Collège de Pataphysique*, he was an officer of the organization. By then, he had even published some of his own essays in its journal. In the account of Jarry's life that he gives in *The Banquet Years*, he quotes some of his supporting details from documents published by the *collège*. These details, however, are often deployed in a misleading fashion, being interpreted in an incomplete and inappropriate context. In my view, it is entirely beyond question that Shattuck knew perfectly well that many aspects of the account of Jarry's life that he fashioned for his book were contradicted by historical fact. I've already discussed some examples, and we will see later that this is especially true of his account of the 1896 performance of *Ubu Roi*. He clearly knew better, yet he chose to perpetuate a myth.

<sup>84</sup> Noël Arnaud, *Alfred Jarry: d'Ubu Roi au Docteur Faustroll* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1974).

unverifiable anecdotes, this work draws extensively on previously unknown documentary evidence (school records, military service records, payment contracts, correspondence, *etc.*).<sup>85</sup> Unfortunately, the study covers only the years from 1891 until 1898 (from when Jarry was 18 until he was 26). Also unfortunate is the book's overall organization. Each of its eight chapters focuses upon a single year, but within each year the narrative is unchronological, lacks any clear organizing principle, and is not subdivided in any way. Despite its many invaluable de-mythologizing insights, the book makes itself difficult to use because of its odd organization, its limited time span, and its lack of an index.

While Arnaud's insights are quite important, his biography of Jarry is incomplete. It is also out of date. In the decades following its publication an abundance of even-more-newly-discovered documents pertaining to Jarry's life came to light.<sup>86</sup> In 2005, the preeminence of the 1974 study was supplanted by a new 700-page French language biography by Patrick Besnier titled simply *Alfred Jarry*.<sup>87</sup> This carefully organized, fully-sourced, annotated, indexed, and complete cradle-to-grave account of Jarry's life builds on Arnaud's project of de-mythification. Its declared purpose is "to look beneath the

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<sup>85</sup> A significant share of Arnaud's supporting material had been published by the *Collège de Pataphysique* in their journal. Just as much, however, came from Arnaud's own personal collection of Jarry-related documents (especially personal letters to and from Jarry). Arnaud died in 2003. Today his files and papers can be consulted at the *bibliothèque de l'Arsenal* in Paris. This archive is of immense benefit to the latest generation of Jarry scholars.

<sup>86</sup> Some of these appeared in the post-1974 publications of the *Collège de Pataphysique*. Since 1978, though, the majority of new Jarry-related documents have been presented by the *Société des Amis d'Alfred Jarry* [*The Society of Friends of Alfred Jarry*], who began publishing their own journal, *L'Étoile Absinthe* [*The Absinthe Star*], in that year. For more on this topic see the section titled "The Repressed Archive" in this dissertation's Introduction.

<sup>87</sup> Patrick Besnier, *Alfred Jarry* (Paris: Éditions Feyard, 2005).

mask of Ubu” in order to reveal the true face of Alfred Jarry.<sup>88</sup> The result is the most complete, authoritative, and humanizing biography of this controversial figure that is presently available.

Thus much will suffice for a quick survey of the major French-language biographies of Jarry, but there are two important post-Arnaud works written in English that should also be acknowledged here. The first is Keith Beaumont’s *Alfred Jarry: A Critical and Biographical Study*, which appeared in 1984.<sup>89</sup> After Shattuck’s *The Banquet Years*, Beaumont’s book is the first substantial English-language biography of Jarry. It is predominantly a “literary biography,” though. Taking all of Jarry’s published works in chronological order, Beaumont comments on the writings, particularly highlighting any autobiographical content within them. The study expands our knowledge of Jarry’s quotidian world by calling attention to many reasonably likely details of his life — details arrived at *via* careful critical examination of his texts. As an alternative strategy for sifting information about Jarry, the study’s method is extremely fruitful. Yet while its “biographical” literary analyses achieve wonderful depth, its purely biographical segments of non-literary-commentary are shallow by comparison.

Well aware that the main strength of Beaumont’s 1984 book lay in its literary commentary, Alastair Brotchie, author of the 2011 English-language biography *Alfred Jarry: A Pataphysical Life*, deliberately focuses his own study more on the day-to-day lived

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<sup>88</sup> Besnier, 11.

<sup>89</sup> Keith Beaumont, *Alfred Jarry: A Critical and Biographical Study* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, Inc., 1984).

experience of his subject.<sup>90</sup> His book's stated aim is to make Jarry "a believable person."<sup>91</sup> The work is scientific in its comprehensiveness, offering numerous minute analyses of Jarry's life-choices, and placing each in the context of Jarry's current geographical, financial, and familial circumstances. The book is illustrated with over 150 photographs; it is based on extensive (and extensively cross-checked) documentary evidence; it debunks and clarifies several Jarry anecdotes; every source is scrupulously footnoted; and its organization is clear, effective, and easy to search. Overall, this study shows Jarry as being far more complex and dimensional than he appears in any other Anglophone biography. It is a worthy English-language counterpart to Besnier's 2005 French study.

In addition to the seven works characterized above, there are at least a dozen other books on Jarry, either in English or in French, which are primarily biographical in nature. Those that are not represented in my survey have been excluded for one of three possible reasons. Some are of less overall consequence, being intended for a fairly general readership and adding little to our understanding of Jarry that is not already conveyed by the landmark studies noted above.<sup>92</sup> Some others are extremely inaccurate,

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<sup>90</sup> Alastair Brotchie, *Alfred Jarry: A Pataphysical Life* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011).

<sup>91</sup> Brotchie, x.

<sup>92</sup> Some works that fall into this category: Ferdinand Lot, *Alfred Jarry, son oeuvre* (Paris: Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue Critique, 1934); Claude Schumacher, *Alfred Jarry and Guillaume Apollinaire* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1985); François Pédrón, *Alfred Jarry, Le Cycliste de Montmartre* (Paris: Éditions de la Belle Gabrielle, 2007). The books in this grouping also tend to reinforce the myth of Jarry perpetuated by the early anecdotal biographers.

and hardly worth mentioning at all.<sup>93</sup> Still others are excellent and carry significant academic weight, but are primarily focused on aspects of Jarry's life that are not relevant to the narrative of this particular dissertation chapter.<sup>94</sup> There are also a few very informative studies that are formal textual analyses of the play *Ubu Roi* — but these deal mainly with the internal workings of the play itself (structure, humor, neologisms, etc.) and offer little that illuminates the play's road to production in 1896.<sup>95</sup>

A specific focus on that “road to production” is what sets the present writing chapter apart from all other biographical treatments of Jarry. To underscore the need for me to create this particular narrative, I should clarify that Ubu — meaning, in this case, not only *Ubu Roi* but all of Jarry's works which feature the Ubu character — constitutes only a very small portion of Jarry's total creative output. Other biographers must

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<sup>93</sup> One example in this category would be Nigey Lennon's *Alfred Jarry: The Man With the Axe* (San Francisco: Last Gasp Publishing, 1990), though more titles can easily be added. The tendency here is to make Jarry a hero of nihilistic destruction and to attribute more outrages to him than even his most enthusiastic anecdotalizers with very little regard for actual historical events.

<sup>94</sup> In this category: Linda Klieger Stillman's *Alfred Jarry* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983) is a literary biography for the Twayne World Author Series and is primarily concerned with surveying Jarry's oeuvre as a whole. Henri Bordillon's *Gestes et opinions d'Alfred Jarry, écrivain*, (Laval, France: Éditions Siloe, 1986) was commissioned to accompany a major exposition of Jarry memorabilia in the author's hometown of Laval. It makes excellent use of that town's official government records and is especially useful for studies of Jarry's final years. Jill Fell's *Alfred Jarry: An Imagination in Revolt* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005) was developed from her doctoral dissertation. It showcases Jarry's contributions to visual culture, book design, puppetry, and art and dance criticism — very much a path less traveled in Jarry studies. Fell is also the author of *Alfred Jarry* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), which is a fairly short critical biography which offers some interesting perspectives on Jarry, but which also leaves many gaps and lacks the investigative depth of her earlier study.

<sup>95</sup> In English, see: Judith Cooper, *Ubu Roi: An Analytical Study* (New Orleans, LA: Tulane University Studies in Romance Languages and Literatures, 1974), and also Keith Beaumont, *Jarry: Ubu Roi* (London: Grant & Cutler, Ltd., 1987). In French, see: Henri Béhar, *Jarry Dramaturge* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1980). This last was revised in 2003 as *La Dramaturgie d'Alfred Jarry* (Paris: Éditions Champion, 2003).

somehow fit his twelve novels, his dozens of articles, essays, and newspaper columns, his contributions to visual culture, book design, and art criticism, as well as a wide variety of life-circumstances, all into a limited number of pages. Naturally, the 1896 Théâtre de l'Oeuvre production of *Ubu Roi* figures prominently in every biography, for this occasion was a major milestone in Jarry's life. But his many biographer's vague and various accounts of the eight-year preparation for that production are usually quite sparse, often inaccurate, and always incomplete.<sup>96</sup> In a context where the "big-picture" of Jarry's life and work as a whole must be evoked, it is understandable that this seemingly-minor subtopic might need to be condensed or elided by a biographer. But in the context of a corrective history of the 1896 production of *Ubu Roi* itself, the missing details take on far greater importance. This biographical chapter on Jarry's relationship to Ubu brings these into the spotlight.

All the named sources in the foregoing literature review have been consulted in the construction of this chapter's step-by-step narrative. The relevant details have been collated; the particulars that are certainly true have been sorted from those that are clearly false; and also those particulars that are probable have been sorted from those that are dubious. These are supplemented with many previously un-represented specifics culled directly from primary evidentiary documents. Occasionally an interpretation offered by one or another of Jarry's biographers has been included. In general, though,

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<sup>96</sup> Even in Besnier and Brotchie.

the surveyed biographies have been employed to help locate (and to help evaluate the veracity of) those primary sources which are the true basis of this chapter's narrative.

With that being said, the remainder of this chapter focuses on presenting Jarry's biographical journey: his early life, his first encounters with the Ubu character, and his careful shepherding of the character all the way to the famous Parisian production of 1896.

### **Before Ubu: Jarry's Childhood in Brittany (1873-1888)**

Alfred-Henri Jarry was born on 8 September 1873 in the town of Laval, situated on the river Mayenne in the northwest of France. Although this town is not quite in Brittany, Jarry always considered himself to be Breton. He had one sister, Charlotte, who was eight years older than he. It is thanks to the several pages of biographical notes that she composed after his death that we know anything at all about her brother's early childhood.<sup>97</sup>

Alfred's parents were Anselme and Caroline Jarry. At the time of his son's birth, Anselme, together with a partner, owned a business in Laval that involved purchasing, warehousing, selling, and redistributing textiles. The family was thoroughly bourgeois. For the first six years of Alfred's life, Anselme's business was profitable and the family prospered. In 1879, though, the business failed. This was apparently due to some shady dealings of the partner. Anselme was bankrupted. He was forced to sell his house and to

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<sup>97</sup> Charlotte Jarry, "Notes de Charlotte Jarry sur Alfred Jarry" [1932], reproduced in *OCG3*, 699-703.

take a job as a traveling sales representative for another textile company. He would spend much of the next decade on the road.<sup>98</sup>

When this circumstance arose, Anselme's wife, Caroline, took her six-year-old son and teenaged daughter and moved back to the home of her father. This was located in the even smaller — but truly Breton — town of Saint-Brieuc, near the northern coast of Brittany. Here Caroline's father, Charles Quernest, was a distinguished local magistrate. In 1879 Quernest's wife/Caroline's mother was suffering from mental illness and had gone into a sanitarium where she would remain until her death in 1883.<sup>99</sup> Thus when Quernest's daughter and grandchildren arrived at his door, he was living alone. Caroline Jarry then assumed the role of manager of his household.

It was in this pastoral Breton setting of Saint-Brieuc, that young Alfred spent the next nine years of his childhood.<sup>100</sup> His parents, though, would never live together again. Despite their informal separation, Anselme Jarry always gave financial support to his wife and children. His fortunes eventually recovered when he inherited some Jarry family property in Laval (in 1888). After that point Anselme made his home there, but Caroline did not.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Charlotte Jarry in *OCG3*, 702; Arnaud 279-286.

<sup>99</sup> Arnaud 278-279; Brotchie, 19.

<sup>100</sup> As a child Jarry was powerfully affected by the countryside of this region. This is evident in Charlotte's notes, but also one assumes it because Jarry wrote detailed descriptions of this Breton landscape into many of his later novels, especially *L'Amour Absolu* [*Absolute Love*] (1899), where a fictionalized version of the terrain around Saint-Brieuc forms the book's main setting.

<sup>101</sup> Jill Fell, *Alfred Jarry* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 17. See also Henri Bordillon, *Gestes et opinions d'Alfred Jarry, écrivain*. (Laval, France: Éditions Siloe, 1986), 21.

Jarry began his formal education in Saint-Brieuc. He was extremely short and bowlegged — the other students at his lycée nicknamed him “Quasimoto” for these reasons — but he was also an astonishingly precocious student.<sup>102</sup> In 1886, 1887, and 1888 he won all of his school’s top academic prizes.<sup>103</sup> During these same three years (that is: starting in 1886 when Jarry was twelve years old) he began writing poems and short plays in his spare time. Many of these have survived. Notable among them are a series of short verse dramas that satirize life in the town.<sup>104</sup>

By the time Alfred reached the age of fifteen, Caroline had come to understand that her son had an intellectual gift and some literary talent. Accordingly, she developed academic ambitions for the undersized boy. She decided that the sleepy rural town was much too small to give him a truly top-notch education. Consequently — and with the aid of her distant husband’s financial recovery — she relocated with her two children to the district capital, Rennes.<sup>105</sup> In this larger city the schools would provide the sort of intellectual challenge needed to stretch her son’s capabilities. In a sense, her reasoning was absolutely correct, but not in the way she had hoped. In October 1888, when Jarry

<sup>102</sup> Henri Hertz, “Alfred Jarry, collégien et la naissance d’Ubu-Roi,” *Écrits Nouveaux* 11 (1922). Reprinted in *L’Étoile-Absinthe* 51-52 (1992): 7.

<sup>103</sup> Brotchie, 24.

<sup>104</sup> These are Jarry’s earliest surviving writings. They appear in *OCG1* pages 1-167. Notable among them are a series of short satirical verse dramas that feature the small town’s management of its sewage, and the violent contests that arise among inhabitants over what to do with it. Some have seen in this a sort of pre-disposition on the author’s part to the scatological and murderous motifs of the as-yet-undreamt-of *Ubu Roi*.

<sup>105</sup> Alfred was 15 years old at this point. Charlotte was 23.

began classes at the Lycée de Rennes, he met the inspiration that would become a lifelong fixation: the real life model for his most famous creation, Père Ubu.

### **Rennes, Félix-Frédéric Hébert, and the Théâtre des Phynaces (1888-1891)**

The living original for the legendary Père Ubu was the physics teacher at Jarry's new school. His name was Félix-Frédéric Hébert. He was pompous, an incompetent teacher, an aspiring (but ineffective) tyrant, and a ridiculous figure all around. This view was held not only by the students at the school, who made special efforts to provoke and torment him, but also by the school's supervisors, who eventually forced him into early retirement.<sup>106</sup>

There are several first-hand accounts of Hébert's teaching and interaction with the students of the Rennes Lycée that are available today. An especially vivid memoir of this teacher was published in 1924 by one of Jarry's classmates, Henri Herz.<sup>107</sup> But the most indispensable source for understanding Hébert's influence on Jarry is the 1921 publication *Sous le masque d'Alfred Jarry: les sources d'Ubu-Roi* [*Beneath the Mask of Alfred Jarry: The Sources of Ubu Roi*].<sup>108</sup> This is a pamphlet-length study written by a Parisian professor

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<sup>106</sup> Brotchie, 3.

<sup>107</sup> Henri Hertz, "Alfred Jarry, Ubu-Roi, et les Professeurs," *Nouvelle Revue Française* (1 September 1924), 265.

<sup>108</sup> Charles Chassé, *Sous le masque de Jarry: Les sources d'Ubu-Roi* (Paris: Floury, 1921). This work was later republished in 1947 as the first half of *Dans les coulisses de la gloire: d'Ubu-Roi au Douanier Rousseau* [*In the Wings of Glory: From Ubu the King to Rousseau the Customs Officer*] (Paris: Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue Critique, 1947). Though Chassé's writings about Jarry and *Ubu Roi* all date to 1921, my citations will all refer to the pagination of the 1947 publication, since copies of this later work are much more easily found than copies of the original 1921 publication.

of English, Charles Chassé. The work was intended to disparage Jarry's play — and, by extension, to demonstrate the worthlessness of the entire Symbolist movement in French literature. In effect, though, Chassé's investigation has done more than any other single work to further a general appreciation of *Ubu Roi*. This is because it compiles and quotes extensively from several eyewitness accounts of Jarry and the schoolboy culture of the Lycée de Rennes.

At the time when Jarry first appeared in his lecture hall, Professor Hébert was 55 years old. He was extremely fat, he waddled absurdly when he walked, and his legs were proportionally much too short for his body, which made it appear as though he were always sitting down.<sup>109</sup> Though he attempted to hide it, it was obvious to all that he was terrified of the students. Even after two decades as a teacher he was cripplingly disorganized. Worse: he had no ability at all to control his classes, which were pandemonium from start-to-finish. Worse still: he aspired to be an iron-fisted disciplinarian. Henri Hertz likened the teacher to a giant bloated insect crawling slowly across the blackboard of the room, face turned fearfully away from the boys, enormous coat tails dangling like wings, a trail of chalk appearing behind him to mark his ponderous progress while the carapace of his round back was pelted with projectiles.<sup>110</sup> When, at last, he could ignore the chaos no longer Hébert would suddenly wheel around to face the room and perform one of the behaviors that helped to immortalize him:

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<sup>109</sup> Hertz, "Professeurs," 265.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, 266.

To begin he drew a small silver snuffbox from his jacket pocket, took an enormous pinch, and then launched into his harangue to the class. It was a beautiful thing: carefully phrased, full of gravity and solemnity, and yet it was completely inappropriate. Irrelevancy was his special talent. His words conformed neither to his facial expressions, nor to the general situation, nor to the specifics of his difficulty. He menaced and threatened the innocent while carefully avoiding the known instigators. In the long run, we in the class all became lovers of justice, for we were so insulted by the obvious unfairness and injustice of this teacher.<sup>111</sup>

According to Hertz, the professor's oration was delivered with deep emotion supported by glittering tears. These rhetorical displays of Hébert's were prized by the students as spectacle, but they were not at all effective for imposing order. In fact, the teacher's performances were always hijacked and derailed by retorts and arguments from the cleverest of the boys (Jarry became a notable contributor), which reduced him to a confused and blubbing frustration. Brought to this point he would simply cease to function. He would then sit down in his chair and sob. The school's headmaster would be sent for to come and discipline the class. This was, apparently, a regular occurrence.

These and other idiosyncratic behaviors were caricatured by Hébert's students in juvenile satires of him.<sup>112</sup> Indeed, he already played the starring role in many extra-curricular literary efforts long before Jarry ever came to Rennes. Most often, the unfortunate professor was called "Père Hébert" ["Papa Hébert"] in the students' burlesques, but this name evolved over time.<sup>113</sup> Alternatives ranged from simple

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> Chassé, 26-27.

<sup>113</sup> In nineteenth-century France schoolteachers were often referred to by their students as "le père Insert-Name-Here" [literally: "Father Insert-Name-Here"]. In the latter part of the century this

condensations such as Père Eb and Le P.H. to more exotic forms such as Ébon, Ébance, and Ébouille.<sup>114</sup> (And eventually Ubu, at the hand of Jarry). Yet whatever he was called, this same figure was featured in cartoons, dialogues, pamphlets, and poems. At the time when Jarry arrived at this school the most celebrated Hébertique adventures were those invented by the brothers Charles and Henri Morin.<sup>115</sup> One of these was a playlet called *Les Polonais* [*The Poles*], which depicted Père Hébert's usurpation of the Polish throne. (A revised version of this work would later serve as the foundation for Jarry's own play *Ubu Roi*). The elder of the two Morin brothers, Charles, was three years older than Jarry — he finished his studies at the lycée during Jarry's first year. But the younger brother, Henri, was Jarry's age and in his class.<sup>116</sup> The two became close friends, collaborating together as they progressed through the curriculum to add many pieces to the ever-expanding Hébert saga.<sup>117</sup>

Many of the pre-Jarry Hébertique adventures had been written in dramatic form: sometimes as short scenes, sometimes as lengthy epic plays. Even so, it had not occurred

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courtesy title was applied to lay teachers as well as priests, but the custom evolved in Jesuit schools, where, of course, all of the teachers really were priests. The matter presently in hand, however, is a bit more subtle than this. In 1888 the schoolboy sense of the appellation "Père Hébert" is both comically familiarizing and mildly pejorative. This in spite of the religious origin of the courtesy title. In English the effect might be approximated by referring to a classroom teacher as "Papa Hébert," "Daddy Hébert," or "Old Man Hébert." Ironically, the addition of "Père" in this particular context is also somewhat infantilizing.

<sup>114</sup> Chassé, 19-22.

<sup>115</sup> Both Charles and Henri Morin were alive at the time Chassé was writing. They served as primary sources for his book. Mainly Charles, though — Henri's comments seem to be all in the footnotes and added in as afterthoughts.

<sup>116</sup> Chassé, 26.

<sup>117</sup> Chassé, 43-44.

to any of the young authors actually to perform them. This oversight was amended by Jarry.<sup>118</sup> In December 1888 — barely three months after he began attending the Lycée de Rennes — he, the Morin brothers, and a few of their schoolmates launched the “Théâtre des Phynaces” to enact Le P.H.’s adventures. (The theatre was named in honor of the Hébert character’s special lust for “phynance,” which, as Alistair Brotchie explains, signifies “money extracted [by P.H.] with maximum violence from persons weaker than himself”).<sup>119</sup> The boys used the large attic of the Morin home as their first theater space. According to letters sent by the Morin brothers to Chassé, the Théâtre des Phynaces employed a variety of techniques in presenting the Hébert plays: at first they used live actors to impersonate the characters, but later episodes were presented as narrated shadow plays, and, as the months passed, the stories came to be enacted most often with puppets.<sup>120</sup> This last was undoubtedly for the sake of convenience. It is worth noting, though, that Jarry had always been interested in the local puppet theaters, and even at the age of sixteen, was already developing considerable skills as a marionetteer. He was also, quite clearly, the main motivating force behind the Théâtre des Phynaces.

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<sup>118</sup> Chassé, 19, 44.

<sup>119</sup> Brotchie, 14.

<sup>120</sup> Chassé, 44-45. See also Charlotte’s notes in *OCGI*, 700. During its career the Théâtre des Phynances moved from the Morin attic to the basement of the Jarry home, where space was much more limited. It was after that move that the performances were done with marionettes and shadow puppets, rather than human character-impersonators.

### **Monsieur Ubu Arrives in Paris and Wins a Literary Contest (1891-1893)**

The first major step taken by “Le P.H.” toward his eventual appearance at the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre occurred in 1891, when the seventeen-year-old Jarry first came to Paris. There would, of course, be a number of intermediary stages that the character would have to pass through during the course of his five-year journey. Metaphorically, though, one can say that with Jarry’s arrival in the big city, the caterpillar of Le P.H. formed his chrysalis, only to emerge eighteen months later in his mature form as the butterfly of Père Ubu. A prizewinning butterfly, as it would turn out.

Back in Rennes, the young Jarry had achieved as much education as it was possible for him to acquire there. He completed the highest level of coursework offered at the Rennes lycée, receiving his baccalaureate with exceptionally good marks.<sup>121</sup> At this point his mother made another fateful decision. Caroline Jarry had always been a firm believer in her son’s genius, and she urged him to the loftiest possible academic achievement. At the end of the 1891 school year she transplanted the boy from the Breton capital to the much grander national capital. Here he would enroll in a special preparatory course offered at the prestigious *Lycée Henri IV*, which would, in turn, prepare him for the entrance examination for the *École Normale Supérieure (ENS)*, the gateway to a culturally approved life of letters. During the 1890s only twenty-five students were admitted to the *ENS* each year, with entry being determined by a competitive examination open to any French male who had received the baccalaureate.

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<sup>121</sup> Alastair Brotchie, *Alfred Jarry: A Pataphysical Life*. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 26.

Jarry attempted the entrance exam in July of 1891, but this was done more for the experience of the exam than for any realistic hope of scoring well on it. To actually achieve one of the top scores, specialized study — such as that which he was about to begin — was essential.

Among the possessions that Jarry brought with him to Paris were several of the puppets he had made in Rennes, and the manuscripts of two Hébertique dramas. One of these dramas was *Les Polonais (The Poles)*, which Jarry would later develop into the “Terrestrial Act” of his ultra-Symbolist play *Ceasar-Antichrist*, and after this into the infamous five-act *Ubu Roi*, and later still into the more compact two-act version *Ubu sur la Butte (Ubu on the Mount)*. The other was *Les Polyèdres ou Les Cornes du P.H. (The Polyhedrons or The Horns of P.H.)*, which would supply material first for Jarry’s “Puppet Play,” and later for “The Paralipomena of Ubu,” and later still for the two different versions of *Ubu Cocu (Ubu the Cuckold)*.<sup>122</sup>

Jarry spent the 1891-92 school year working hard at the *Lycée Henry IV* in Paris, watched over by his mother. In July 1892 he attempted the entrance exam for the *ENS* for the second time. His scores had improved considerably since the previous year, but his overall ranking was still not among the top twenty-five in the nation.<sup>123</sup> And so he returned to the lycée for yet another year of intensive preparatory coursework. By this

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<sup>122</sup> Specific publication information for these pieces will be given below, when they are discussed individually. As for “paralipomena”: this English word derives from Greek and signifies “that which has been left aside.” Paralipomena are supplements to a book or other work containing material that had been omitted previously.

<sup>123</sup> Brotchie, 41.

second year of his Parisian study, the artistically inclined Jarry had begun to be captivated by the extra-curricular possibilities available to him in the capital. He took increasingly more time away from studying to pursue his artistic, literary, and writerly interests. In March 1893 he was awarded a one hundred franc prize for a poetry submission to an open competition sponsored by the high-circulation newspaper *L'Écho de Paris*.<sup>124</sup> The following month he won another one hundred franc prize for the prose piece “Puppet Play.”<sup>125</sup> This piece was based on a single dialogue scene from one of his Hébertique scripts of the Rennes era, but the mimetic scene was framed within a richly Symbolist and sinister narrative description of a puppet show. Thus it was with an official triumph that the vulgar, murderous, and darkly comic central character of “Puppet Play — who was now definitively named “Ubu” — began his Parisian career.

At exactly the same time as this award-winning piece was published in the illustrated literary supplement to the *Écho de Paris*, Jarry himself was deathly ill with a flu that had advanced through bronchitis to pneumonia. He was nursed through it by his mother — but while caring for him, she became sick herself. She died on 10 May 1893, nine days after her son’s recovery from the same illness.<sup>126</sup> Jarry arranged her funeral, burying her in her own family’s tomb in Rennes, and then returning to Paris. That summer he again attempted the *ENS* entrance examination. Again his scores improved,

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<sup>124</sup> 100 French francs in 1891 is roughly equivalent in value to 500 American dollars in 2017.

<sup>125</sup> Alfred Jarry, “Guignol” [“Puppet Play”], *L'Écho de Paris* 23 Avril 1893: 2-3.

<sup>126</sup> Charlotte’s “notes” in *OCG3*, 702-703.

but he was still not one of the top twenty-five in the nation. This was his final attempt. Without his mother to insist on the academic qualification, Jarry chose to leave school and to pursue a career as a writer.

### **Jarry and Ubu are Welcomed by the Literary Avant-Garde (May 1893 - August 1894)**

The next year of Jarry's life, from the summer of 1893 through the summer of 1894, is usually drastically distorted in histories that acknowledge this aspiring author's role in the theatrical avant-garde. In accord with one of the three tenets of what Lance McKeel has called the "Ubu-Effect" of theater historiography, many theater scholars reduce this period of Jarry's development to two anecdotes which, taken out of context, suggest that, after the death of his mother, Jarry became an outrageous nonconformist in total revolt against the norms of society.<sup>127</sup> While the anecdotes — both of which are touched on below — do have some basis in reality, nothing could be more inappropriate than trying to view Jarry's behavior during this era in a framework of rebellion and nonconformity. As will be apparent in my own narrative of his activities, Jarry was

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<sup>127</sup> Lance McKeel, *From Irreverent to Revered: How Alfred Jarry's Ubu Roi and the "U-Effect" Changed Theatre History*, unpublished dissertation (Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH, 2013). McKeel's dissertation is a step-by-step illustration of how the famous premiere of *Ubu Roi* has been used by generations of theater scholars to bolster the Narrative of Modernism that was proposed by Postlewait in 2009 (see my discussion of Postlewait in the Introduction to this study). McKeel discusses specifically which scholars introduced which claims into the *Ubu Roi* legend in which years. He uses an overall analytic lens that he terms the "U-Effect." This involves three basic "truths" that have been manufactured and generally upheld by theater historians: (1) that the 1896 premiere of *Ubu Roi* offended its audience and provoked a riot; (2) that the riot was brought about by the revolutionary dramaturgy of the play (which includes both the play's structure and its unconventional vocabulary); and (3) that the riot was co-equally brought into existence by the outrageously anti-conventional and habitual performance of deviance on the part of the play's author, Jarry.

making every effort to get his literary foot in the door in an attempt to join a well-established artistic community. In fact, I would argue that this year of Jarry's artistic life was its most crucial period, for it was at this time that he made the fundamental social connections to the progressive literary community that allowed him to develop a viable career as a writer. And, of course, this also allowed him to introduce the good news of Ubu to the nucleus of the Parisian avant-garde.



Figure 1.1: On the left: photograph of Jarry taken in spring of 1893. On the right: Jarry in autumn 1894.<sup>128</sup>

To the extent that there was rebellion and non-conformity in Jarry's behavior during this year, it was in the more ordinary sense of a twenty-year old collegian

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<sup>128</sup> The image on the left is from the Granger Historical Picture Archive, <[www.granger.com](http://www.granger.com)>. The image on the right is reproduced from Alistair Brotchie, *Alfred Jarry: A Pataphysical Life* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 94.

deceiving his father about his activities in order to secure a greater living allowance. Charlotte's notes make it clear that Jarry did not tell his father that he was giving up on his attempts to enter the *ENS* and would no longer be pursuing formal coursework. Rather, he led the man to believe just the opposite. Consequently Anselm continued to provide enough money to pay for his son's Parisian living and educational expenses.<sup>129</sup> In truth, though, Jarry now began devoting his full time and energy to cultivating a literary career.

Thanks to contacts he had made during his past two years at the *Lycée Henry IV*, Jarry became first a contributor to, and then, by November, the editor of a minor Parisian literary periodical called *L'Art Littéraire*. This was a four-page broadsheet, published once per month.<sup>130</sup> He also began to seek out and to attend exhibitions of aesthetically experimental art. By midwinter of 1894 he had begun to write commentaries on these exhibitions, and to publish his observations in a survey column that he contributed to another minor magazine called *Essais d'Art Libre*, which was published quarterly.<sup>131</sup> Both journals were fairly amateurish, yet they gave Jarry a beginning. They were his first platform for real participation in the literary and artistic counterculture of the capital.

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<sup>129</sup> Charlotte Jarry in *OCG1*, 703. See also Brotchie, 77. Here Brotchie discusses a recently re-discovered letter (rediscovered in 2008) from Jarry to his sister, dated 18 June 1894, in which Jarry refers very plainly to the financial deception that he was practicing on his father.

<sup>130</sup> Brotchie, 55. See also *OCG1*, 1003-1010, 1270-1272.

<sup>131</sup> Brotchie, 75. See also *OCG1*, 1015-1023, 1273-1274.

It was obvious, though, that the young would-be author had loftier aspirations. His sights were firmly set on placing a piece of his creative writing in the *Mercure de France* before the end of the spring. Unlike *L'Art Littéraire* and *Essais d'Art Libre*, the *Mercure* was a very prestigious—and certainly the most aesthetically advanced—of the many and various avant-garde art journals that flourished in Paris during the *fin de siècle*.<sup>132</sup> This journal was predominantly Symbolist in its orientation. It embraced a mystical and hermetic literary style that particularly appealed to Jarry. He seems to have begun composing his own mystical and hermetic “Tragical History of Haldernablou,” an oddly Platonic, homoerotic, and sadomasochistic tale of the noble Haldern and his page Ablou, with the specific intention of presenting it to the *Mercure*.<sup>133</sup>

At this time (Fall 1893/Winter 1894) Jarry still lived in the Parisian apartment that had been leased for the previous year by his mother at number 84 on the Boulevard Port-Royal. The rental arrangement also included a garret room in a neighboring building, number 78 Boulevard Port-Royal, that had been given to Jarry to use for his studies. Now that his mother was deceased, he lived and wrote in the main apartment, and used the detached attic room as an art studio and for entertaining. There are

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<sup>132</sup> For a first-hand account of the reverence in which aspiring French authors of the 1890s held the *Mercure de France*, see the memoir of Léon-Paul Fargue, *Portraits de Famille* (Paris: J. B. Janin, 1947), 149-153.

<sup>133</sup> “Haldernablou” was indeed published by the *Mercure de France* a few months later (July 1894): 213-228. The piece is more readily accessible, though, in *OCG1*, 214-229. It is also available in an English translation by Paul Edwards in the *Collected Works of Alfred Jarry*, vol. 1 (London: Atlas Press, 2001), 69-86.

accounts of him having conducted a sort of “black mass” there during February 1894.<sup>134</sup> This was apparently a demonstration for some friends he had made at Chez Ernest, a café near Jarry’s apartment where he dined regularly. The occasion of the “initiation” involved bloody handprints, darkness, candles, live owls, skulls, skeletons, collapsing chairs, fecal matter, and selected readings from his own *Haldernablou*.<sup>135</sup> More significant to this narrative though, is the fact that he occasionally used this space to put on puppet shows depicting the various adventures of Ubu. There is no useful first hand description of one of these puppet shows, only the mention by some of the attendees that they existed. Most helpful for citation purposes is a surviving letter from Jarry’s friend and neighbor, the self-taught post-impressionist painter Henri Rousseau (who was thirty years older than Jarry) assuring the young man that he (Rousseau) had retrieved Jarry’s “box of famous actors” — that is: his marionettes — from the garret room, and would keep them safe until Jarry could come for them.<sup>136</sup> But this letter dates to the end of June 1894, when Jarry was moving to a new apartment, and will be addressed a bit later.

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<sup>134</sup> A first-person record of this occasion is given by Georges Rémond, “Souvenirs sur Jarry et autres,” *Mercure de France* (1 April 1955), 661-664.

<sup>135</sup> Satanism and many other forms of mysticism played a large part in the 1890s Parisian zeitgeist. For a quick overview of this topic see Eugen Weber, *France: Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1986), 32-36. The point I would make here is that Jarry’s hosting a Black Mass is not an exceptional act of deviant nonconformity, rather it is a diversion that is entirely *au courant* with the spirit of the era.

<sup>136</sup> Rousseau’s letter to Jarry, dated 26 June 1894, is reproduced in its entirety by Arnaud, page 112. Although the relationship between Rousseau and Jarry does not figure much into this dissertation, it should be noted that there was a definite bond between them. Not only were they Parisian neighbors when Jarry lived on the Boulevard Port Royal, but they were both originally from Laval. Moreover, Rousseau had attended school with Jarry’s father. Jarry would later commission this unschooled “primitivist” painter to create images for *L’Ymagier* — and the painter would later paint Jarry’s portrait (now lost, unfortunately) and even took the younger man in as a roommate for a while.



**Figure 1.2: Photograph of Jarry's own marionettes for Ubu, Bougrellas, and the Tzar. Collection of the Bibliothèque littéraire Jaques Doucet, place du Panthéon, Paris.<sup>137</sup>**

A significant artistic breakthrough occurred for Jarry in early Spring of 1894. This was approximately one year after the publication of his prizewinning “Puppet Play” (featuring Ubu) in the *Echo de Paris*. At last, Jarry had managed to get an appointment to present a portfolio of his writing to Remy de Gourmont (age 36), an influential Symbolist novelist, poet, and critic. Gourmont was also one of the founding triumvirate who controlled the *Mercure de France* — and he also happened to have another visitor on the day of Jarry’s appointment. This was the British Symbolist poet and critic Arthur Symons (age 28). Symons recorded the occasion of Jarry’s meeting with Gourmont in his journal:

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<sup>137</sup> Image reproduced from Jill Fell, *Alfred Jarry: An Imagination in Revolt* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005), 146.

In the middle of our conversation, someone knocked. Gourmont went out and returned with Alfred Jarry, a small, nervous, sad youth [age 20], with a square face, and black savage eyes, and, as he spoke, we noticed a kind of pose in the way he weighed his words: for he was face to face, for the first time in his life, with two writers, before whom he assumed a surprising humility. He laid on the table with hieratic gestures a huge portfolio, which contained some of his prose [. . .]. After he had gone Gourmont and I began by laughing at his meager appearance and at some of his prose; but the prose turned out much better than we had imagined. Gourmont took up Jarry, introducing him to Huysmans and Vallette and Rachilde.<sup>138</sup>

The Huysmans mentioned here is Joris-Karl Huysmans, one of the foundational writers of the Decadent movement in French literature (which later evolved into the Symbolist movement). Vallette and Rachilde are the other triumvirs who shaped the editorial program of the *Mercure*.<sup>139</sup>

After this meeting, and after some reflection on Jarry's writing, Gourmont apparently invited the youth to attend one of the regular Tuesday afternoon gatherings at the offices of the *Mercure de France*. These were the famous *mardis de Mercure*, where all the avant-garde authors associated with this publication socialized together for a few hours each week.<sup>140</sup> For Jarry, this invitation meant direct entrée into exactly the society he was

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<sup>138</sup> Arthur Symons, *The Memoirs of Arthur Symons: Life and Art in the 1890s* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), 199.

<sup>139</sup> The *Mercure de France* was run by three key figures. The practical details of contracts, printing, finances, and day-to-day business were handled by the Editor-in-Chief, Alfred Vallette, a very down-to-earth and pragmatic personality. The public face of the magazine was his wife, who was known primarily by her masculine *nom de plume*, Rachilde. She was a famous, scandalous, and best-selling novelist in her own right, and also the literary editor for the journal. But the real philosophical backbone and vision behind the publication came from Remy de Gourmont, Symbolist thinker, poet, literary theorist, and critic. For more commentary on these figures see Brotchie, 68-75.

<sup>140</sup> André Gide, "Le Groupement littéraire qu'abritait le 'Mercure de France.'" ["The Literary Group Embraced by the 'Mercure de France.'"], *Mercure de France* 1 October 1946, 168-170. See also: Rachilde, 12; Fargue, 149-150; and Antoine de Gaudemar, "Plongé dans le *Mercure*" ["Journey into the *Mercure*"], *Digraphe* 73 (March 1995), 248-253.

seeking. At his first visit he made a hugely successful impression on his hosts Alfred Vallette (age 37), director of the *Mercure*, and his wife, the novelist Rachilde (age 35), whose memoir of the occasion recalls his entry into the salon “like a wild animal” entering a show ring, but one who is “wary of being put through his paces in public.”<sup>141</sup> She noted his exquisite manners coupled with the unpredictability of his behavior, his oddly mechanical accent, his ability to converse on absolutely any topic, and his sudden, passionate, and pyrotechnic displays of paradox, wit, and erudition.<sup>142</sup> After this first visit Jarry assiduously attended all the subsequent *mardis* for the season. In his odd way he became the life of the salon. The Vallettes, in fact, would become his closest friends and the *Mercure* would provide his artistic home for the rest of his life.<sup>143</sup>

Late in the Spring of 1894 Jarry did in fact submit his “Tragical History of Haldernablou” to the *Mercure* for possible publication. (It was accepted and would be printed in the July issue of the magazine).<sup>144</sup> But at the end of that year’s salon season, in late May, he was summoned back to Laval to the bedside of a mortally ill uncle. The

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<sup>141</sup> Rachilde, 13.

<sup>142</sup> Jarry’s unusual manner of speaking is mentioned in nearly every written recollection of him. One of the most helpful descriptions appears in a 1946 memoir by André Gide (see note 88, above), who remembers Jarry when he first appeared at the *Mercure* salon in the mid 1890s. As Gide writes: “at this time Jarry exercised a sort of fascination at the *Mercure*. Everyone attempted to imitate him, his humor, and especially his rigid way of speaking: without nuance or inflection, placing an equal emphasis on every syllable, including the silent ones. A nutcracker, if it could speak, would sound just like this” (Gide 168). It is also worth noting an intriguing proposition by Alistair Brotchie: namely, that Jarry may have developed this manner of speaking in order to disguise his provincial accent (Brotchie 39).

<sup>143</sup> Brotchie 68.

<sup>144</sup> For publication details see note 81, above.

uncle's condition neither improved nor worsened for several weeks, causing Jarry to spend most of the summer away from Paris.<sup>145</sup> It was during this period that the lease on Jarry's apartment in the Boulevard Port-Royal expired. As he had already arranged to move to a new (and much more prestigious) address on the Boulevard Saint-Germain — and as he was on excellent terms with his landlord and neighbors — a group of them got together and moved Jarry's things to his new apartment while he was tied up with family business in the provinces.<sup>146</sup> It was this occasion that precipitated Rousseau's letter mentioning Jarry's box of marionettes. It is especially worth noting the friendly relationship that Jarry had with his landlord and neighbors at this time. Their inclination to help him suggests that he was a good, courteous, and desirable tenant and neighbor. Insofar as they were concerned he was the nice boy next door — hardly an antisocial rebel against the conventions of bourgeois society.

***Les Minutes de Sable Mémorial: Ubu Strikes Again (August – November, 1894)***

The next major step in Ubu's progress from stage of the Théâtre des Phynances to that of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre occurred the following autumn. It came in the form of a new, much more prestigious, representation of the fat fellow on the printed page. By the start of August 1894 Jarry had returned to Paris, where he could now think of himself as an acknowledged junior member of the “official” literary avant-garde. From

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<sup>145</sup> See Jarry's correspondence from summer 1894 in *OCGI*, 1036-1039.

<sup>146</sup> This information is known from Rousseau's letter, reproduced in Arnaud, 112. See note 84, above.

his uncle's death he had received a small inheritance, but not enough to keep him in food, rent, and clothing for the entire season.<sup>147</sup> Therefore he must still have been supported by his father, who may still have thought that his son was studying to attempt the exam for the *ENS* one more time.<sup>148</sup> Or perhaps Anselme was simply indulging Alfred in the final few months that remained before his compulsory military service would begin.

However it came to be paid for, Jarry was now installed in new chambers at 162 Boulevard Saint-Germain. (In this apartment he cut a hole — more precisely: a puppet-sized proscenium opening — into the wall between the bedroom and the main room, which enabled him to use the bedroom as a booth for performing Ubu-derived puppet shows for invited guests).<sup>149</sup> Well aware that his conscription was looming, the young writer was a whirlwind of productivity. He published the first “Prologal Act” of his new project, a densely Symbolist drama that would be called *Caesar-Antichrist*, in the August 1894 issue of *L'Art Litteraire*.<sup>150</sup> He contributed an essay on the reclusive “primitivist” Breton painter Charles Filiger (1863 – 1928) to the September 1894 issue of

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<sup>147</sup> Alfred Jarry's uncle, Julien Jarry, died on 21 June 1894. Additional details are given by Brotchie, 75-77.

<sup>148</sup> Charlotte's biographical notes on her brother make it clear that Anselme still believed this to be the case at the end of July 1894. See *OCG3*, 703. See also Jarry's summer 1894 letter to her, quoted in Brotchie, 77.

<sup>149</sup> Albert Haas, “Souvenirs de la vie littéraire de Paris,” *Les Soirées de Paris* (15 March 1914), 270.

<sup>150</sup> At this time Jarry still contributed to this broadsheet, but he no longer served as its editor.

the *Mercur*.<sup>151</sup> And in October, the book publishing arm of the *Mercur de France* would print his first book, which had the untranslatable title of *Les Minutes de Sable Mémorial*.<sup>152</sup> It was here that Ubu made his second major appearance in print.

*Les Minutes* collects together nearly all of Jarry's non-critical writing of the past two years. It has the appearance of a book of poetry, but in addition to poems it contains dialogues, prose pieces, speculations, and several of Jarry's own woodcuts as illustrations. It includes a somewhat more elaborated version of the prizewinning "Puppet Play" under the title of "*L'Autoclète*" ["The Self-Invited Guest"].<sup>153</sup> This part of the book draws particular note in the book review written by Remy de Gourmont for the *Mercur de France* magazine:

The scenes of "Puppet Play" where Monsieur Ubu parades about, [. . .] show a double aptitude in both philosophical and ironical drama. From this figure, who is still in an early stage of development, one can derive a character of highly comical malevolence. Monsieur Ubu undoubtedly has a great deal to say to us that he has not yet revealed, but that he will reveal in the future.<sup>154</sup>

Gourmont had indeed "taken up" Jarry. In addition to supplying a highly favorable review of Jarry's first book, he also invited the energetic young writer to co-

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<sup>151</sup> Alfred Jarry, "Filiger," *Mercur de France* (1 September 1894), 73-77. Reproduced in *OCG1*, 1024-1028.

<sup>152</sup> This title cannot be satisfactorily translated into English because two of the key words "*minutes*" and "*sable*" have three different meanings in French, and the third word "*mémorial*" has two. Thus the title has eighteen different possible meanings by literal translation alone, and even more by suggestion. The most effective, but still inadequate, English version that I have found is Paul Edwards's proposed translation as *Black Minutes of Memorial Sand*.

<sup>153</sup> *OCG1*, 180-185. Also available in English in *Collected Works of Alfred Jarry, Volume I* (London: Atlas Press, 2001), 35-39.

<sup>154</sup> Remy de Gourmont, "Les Minutes de sable mémorial," *Mercur de France* (1 October 1894), 178.

edit a new art journal that Gourmont was in the process of launching with financial backing from his millionairess mistress, Berthe de Courière. This journal would be called *L'Ymagier* [*The Print Seller*], and will be discussed presently. But with regard to Gourmont's prophetic review of *Les Minutes de Sable Mémorial*, it is safe to assume that the critic had access to inside information. Gourmont was certainly privy to Jarry's plans for his second book (*Caesar-Antichrist*), which would indeed contain still more adventures featuring this character of "highly comical malevolence." It is also likely that he had attended one of the puppet presentations of scenes derived from Hébert/Ubu plays that were given at Jarry's apartment, and therefore had specific knowledge of which episodes were being prepared for publication.

For the purposes of my own narrative, though, the key point I wish to underscore is this: thanks to highly respectable backing from the *Mercure de France* — and to vocal support from this publishing house's philosophical guru Remy de Gourmont — Ubu was now well and truly launched among the highest echelon of the Parisian avant-garde. After this Jarry's future work would serve to further entrench Ubu's place within the counterculture. And as it turned out: not even the author's induction into the army could slow the progress of Ubu's advance.

**(Aside): Rachilde's Practical Joke (1894-1895)**

At this point it is necessary to say a few words about Rachilde, the literary editor of the *Mercure de France*, celebrated author in her own right, wife of the *Mercure's* editor in

chief, and official hostess of the *Mercur*e's Tuesday afternoon salon. Rachilde was something of a practical joker, and the literary salon over which she presided was the setting for all sorts of avant-garde high jinks.<sup>155</sup> Around September of 1894 she initiated a practical joke that targeted Jarry, and which ultimately had an extremely destructive effect on his career.<sup>156</sup> The joke also targeted Berthe de Courrière, Gourmont's phenomenally wealthy mistress, who had literary aspirations. Courrière was tolerated at the *Mercur*e Tuesday afternoon gatherings for Gourmont's sake, though she was generally considered to be ridiculous and pretentious by the others who attended.<sup>157</sup> She was also infamous for her promiscuity and unorthodox sexual conquests.<sup>158</sup> She derived a particular pleasure from the challenge of seducing and "converting" homosexual men

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<sup>155</sup> The general culture of 1890s Paris held practical jokes in high esteem: the larger the scope the better. My researches on this topic could easily outfit this dissertation with yet another chapter by considering the production of *Ubu Roi* as part of the decade's tradition of large-scale practical joking. For a useful orientation to this subject see the article "Le Prince des Mystificateurs, Lemice-Terrieux" attributed to Oktav Votka in the *Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique* 5-6 (1952), 74-78. I would also note here, once again, that Rachilde herself will be a principal subject of Chapter 3 of this dissertation, wherein her personality and agenda will be discussed more thoroughly.

<sup>156</sup> In her 1928 biography of Jarry, Rachilde clearly repents having played this joke. There is no doubt that Jarry's life would have turned out quite differently if she had never done it. It is also clear that Jarry never found out that she was behind the situation. He was not a forgiving person. In the course of his life he alienated many friends for much lesser affronts than this joke of Rachilde's. For her own account of the episode see Rachilde, *Alfred Jarry ou Le Surmâle de lettres*. (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1928), 45-66.

<sup>157</sup> Maurice Saillet, "Notes pour servir à la grande histoire de la Vielle Dame," *Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique* 5-6 (1952): 17-22.

<sup>158</sup> In addition to Rachilde and Saillet (see previous two footnotes) more information about Courrière can be found in Per Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (Stockholm: Molin & Sorgenfrei, 2014), 419-422. For a less rigorous but more easily obtained account of her see the online article by Madeleine LeDespencer, "The Flowers of Evil: Satanic Feminists of Bohemian Paris Part 1 — Berthe de Courrière," *Dirge Magazine* 3 March 2016, <<http://www.dirgemag.com/flowers-evil-satanic-feminists-bohemian-paris-part-1-berthe-de-courriere/>>.

and members of the clergy. Jarry fell into the former category, though he was not particularly overt about his sexuality.

The joke worked like this: Rachilde (who was 35) indicated to Courrière (who was 43 and nearly six feet tall) that Jarry (who was 21, barely over five feet in height, and homosexual) harbored a secret passion for her (for Courrière, that is). Courrière fell for this bait, and from the beginning of September 1894 vigorously and persistently tried to maneuver Jarry into her bed. What made this so entertaining for the *Mercure*-ists is the fact that, at this point, Jarry was obliged to spend a great deal of time at Courrière's home. In truth it was a mansion where Remy de Gourmont lived with her, and which served as the offices for the newly-founded *L'Ymagier* magazine of which Jarry and Gourmont were co-editors. Jarry managed to keep Courrière politely at arms length without mortally offending or completely alienating her (or Gourmont) for over a year. Part of the reason that her pursuit continued for so long (it is well documented, her many letters and telegrams to him have survived) is that Jarry's military service — compulsory for all French men in his age group — was scheduled to begin on 13 November 1894.<sup>159</sup> This removed Jarry from Courrière's immediate proximity for a significant amount of time quite shortly after her pursuit began. Nonetheless, she was persistent and the situation eventually turned quite ugly.

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<sup>159</sup> Jarry included the verbatim contents of many of Courrière's letters and telegrams to him in a nasty chapter called "Chez la Vielle Dame" ["At the home of the Old Lady"] of his 1898 book *L'Amour en visites* (OCG1, 858-865). An English translation of the book, done by Iain White, is available under the title *Visits of Love* (London: Atlas Press, 1993).

*Caesar-Antichrist: Jarry in the Army / Ubu in the Mercure de France (1895)*

Up until the time of Jarry's army service, all of Ubu's published exploits had been based on the Hébertique play "*The Horns of P.H.*" It was through this one line of adventuring that the monstrous-but-comic character infiltrated and gained popularity among the Parisian literary avant-garde.<sup>160</sup> But during Jarry's year of military service the Ubu who is much more widely recognized today — Ubu as the would-be king of Poland — made his debut on the printed page. He emerged by degrees, through a series of publications that Jarry put together in his time "off" from the army: whenever he was not marching, drilling, or otherwise following military discipline. With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to see that these new publications moved Ubu significantly forward on his road toward becoming a real live Parisian theater star.

Jarry's life in the military was, at first, very difficult. Yet it soon turned remarkably soft. Both conditions owed largely to the fact that he was only five feet and three inches tall, and that his legs were notably short.<sup>161</sup> Because of this it was physically impossible for him to march in step and in formation with other soldiers. His slight stature made it similarly unfeasible for him to perform other precision drills. Though he tried hard to conform, there was literally nothing that Jarry could do about this physical limitation. Uniforms and boots did not exist in a size small enough to fit him. The 21-

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<sup>160</sup> André Gide, for instance, considered the Ubu episode in *Les Minutes de Sable Mémorial* to be "an extraordinary, incomparable, and perfect masterpiece" (Gide, 169).

<sup>161</sup> The army's official record of Jarry's physical attributes is reproduced in the biography written by Noël Arnaud, *Alfred Jarry, d'Ubu roi au Docteur Faustroll* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1974), 136.

year-old Jarry looked ridiculous in his military attire — like a child wearing an oversized costume. According to the memoir of Jarry’s sergeant, Gaston Roig, the physical inadequacy of the undersized newcomer was demoralizing for the entire regiment. He was therefore excused from many drills and from all formal parade exercises.<sup>162</sup>

Coupled with these challenges deriving from his physical stature was a significant bit of good fortune. As it turned out, Jarry had been assigned to serve at the army garrison in his own hometown of Laval, where both the base commander and the regimental doctor were close personal friends of his father. According the biographical notes of Jarry’s sister Charlotte, through these connections the young soldier was regularly granted extended leave from his military service.<sup>163</sup> This gave him a great deal of unstructured time that he used to further his writing career and to tend to other business in Paris. Indeed, his literary achievements during his 1895 military service are remarkable.

One of these achievements was the composition and publication of his densely Symbolist drama *Caesar-Antichrist*. Jarry published this play in four parts. The first part, the “Prologal Act,” as noted earlier, had already appeared in the August 1894 issue of *L’Art Litteraire*, a few months before his conscription. But the play’s second “Heraldic Act” was printed in the March 1895 issue of the *Mercure de France*, barely three months after the start of his service. This publication is highly significant to Ubu’s history

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<sup>162</sup> Géroy [Gaston Roig], “Mon ami Alfred Jarry,” *Le Courier d’Épidaure* 3-4 (March-April 1949), reprinted in *L’Étoile Absinthe* 59-60 (1993). The details given here are from pages 26-28. Roig’s memoir is the main source of information for Jarry’s military experience.

<sup>163</sup> Charlotte Jarry’s notes, *OCG3*, 703.

because the Heraldic Act ends with the “hatching” (from an egg) of the Ubu character. A few months later, again in the *Mercure* (of September 1895), Jarry published the “Terrestrial Act” of this play, which is, in essence, a condensed one-act version of *Ubu Roi*. However, the final act of *Ceasar-Antichrist* — titled “Judgement” — was not published on its own. It first appeared in October 1895 when the entire play was printed as a single volume.<sup>164</sup> With these four publications, the sinister but delightful Monsieur Ubu became even more firmly established in the thought world of Paris’s literary elite of the 1890s.

Also during Jarry’s military service, he somehow managed to shoulder his editorial responsibilities for *L’Ymagier*, the avant-garde art journal that he co-founded with his friend, mentor, and advocate, Remy de Gourmont. *L’Ymagier*’s first issue was published just one month prior to Jarry’s entry into the army. The magazine was devoted to publishing (and commenting upon) “*images d’Épinal*.” These are “folk” or “naive” woodblock prints, which often show religious or mythological subjects. They were popular during the previous century, but had been abandoned by nineteenth-century modernity. Now, though, in the 1890s, they were experiencing a sudden revival thanks to a reinvigorated (avant-garde) interest in their “primitive” appearance. In visual style, a typical *Épinal* print comes quite close to the appearance of Jarry’s own woodcut “the true portrait of Monsier Ubu” (see figure 1.3). For the magazine Jarry researched and wrote

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<sup>164</sup> It was produced by the publishing house of the *Mercure de France*, of course. The play *Ceasar-Antichrist* is reprinted in *OCCI*, 271-335. It also appears in an English translation in the *Collected Works of Alfred Jarry, Volume I* (London: Atlas Press, 2001), 121-196.

essays, acquired visual content, and took part in the curation of each issue. It was published quarterly with Jarry actively contributing to the January, April, July, and October 1895 issues — all while he was writing *Ceasar-Antichrist* and serving his country in the army (this latter in only a part-time capacity, apparently).

The compulsory term of French army service during this era was three years.<sup>165</sup> After a single year of it, though, Jarry managed to procure a formal medical discharge. It has been persuasively argued that he obtained this after poisoning himself with picric acid — the ingestion of which can simulate the symptoms of gallstones.<sup>166</sup> At any rate, the official reason for his emancipation was recorded as “chronic biliary lithiasis” (i.e.: gallstones).<sup>167</sup> It is also possible, even likely, that some of Jarry’s literary connections had some significant influence with high-ranking army officials. . . and this may have helped to secure his early liberation.<sup>168</sup> He was set free — from both the military and from the Val-de-Grace Military Hospital in Paris (where he was treated for the biliary lithiasis) — on 14 December 1895. In addition to the date and reason for his release, his discharge papers also grant Jarry a commendation for good conduct during his year of service.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Jill Fell, *Alfred Jarry* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 67.

<sup>166</sup> Brotchie, 113.

<sup>167</sup> *Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique* 26-27 (1957), 53. This issue of the CCP reproduces in facsimile the French Army’s official record of Jarry’s service from 13 November 1894 until 14 December 1895.

<sup>168</sup> Rachilde, 66.

<sup>169</sup> CCP 26-27, 53.

Such a commendation stands in distinct contrast to the common misperception that Jarry was an uncompromising and perpetual non-conformist.

Two other events that occurred during Jarry's year of military service are particularly worth noting. The first is the death of Jarry's father, who died after a short illness on 18 August, 1895 (age 58), leaving Jarry a sizable inheritance.<sup>170</sup> The second was the ultimate aftermath of Rachilde's practical joke, which had been simmering ever since August 1894. Rachilde, as noted earlier, had set Gourmont's wealthy middle-aged mistress, Berthe de Courrière, to a sexual pursuit of Jarry. This began around September 1894, just when Jarry was beginning work with Gourmont on *L'Ymagier*, which had its offices in Courrière's magnificent home. Gourmont was apparently aware of, but did not object to, the many dalliances of his mistress (one of which was with his own brother).<sup>171</sup> Possibly this tolerant attitude was because he lived in her house and at her expense. In November of 1895, though, in order to discourage further advances from Berthe, Jarry began circulating a cruel and satirical poem about her among the *Mercure* faithful.<sup>172</sup> Though Gourmont was tolerant of Berthe's promiscuity, he could not fail to take retribution against Jarry for the public humiliation of de Courrière. Thus the principal result of Rachilde's joke was that this important writer and editor, who has taken a special interest in helping to promote Jarry's career, never spoke to his young friend

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<sup>170</sup> Arnaud, 157, 181, 285.

<sup>171</sup> Brotchie, 107.

<sup>172</sup> The poem is included in the Gallimard edition of Jarry's complete works. See *OCG1*, 905-906.

again after November 1895. Jarry's name disappeared entirely from *L'Ymagier* — and Gourmont, who had previously been Jarry's chief advocate, now actively obstructed opportunities for the young writer to publish his work.

It may have been the newly inherited money resulting from his father's death that made Jarry feel secure enough in himself to alienate his mentor. Just as soon as he was free of the army, the 22-year-old Jarry liquidated all that remained of his father's estate in exchange for a lump sum of slightly more than 15,000 francs.<sup>173</sup> Jarry then used this money to launch a magazine of his own, which he called *Perbinderion*.<sup>174</sup> *Perbinderion* was clearly intended as a rival to *L'Ymagier*, presenting essentially the same subject matter (antique woodcut images and articles related to them), but in a larger format (folio rather than quarto) and on higher quality paper. The new magazine was also printed in specially cast “characters of the fifteenth century” which Jarry commissioned (at great expense) to increase the authenticity and visual appeal of his magazine.<sup>175</sup> In every respect *Perbinderion* was luxuriously and artfully crafted, but it did not make any money. The enormous cost of publishing the first (and only) two issues (March and June 1896) consumed nearly all of Jarry's inheritance.

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<sup>173</sup> Arnaud, 181; Brotchie, 114. As for the buying power of 15,000 French francs in 1896: in 2017 terms this amount is roughly equivalent to 75,000 American dollars.

<sup>174</sup> Jarry explains in the editorial with which he introduces the magazine's first issue that “Perbinderion is a Breton word that means Pardon in the sense of a Pilgrimage” (*OCG1*, 995). Alistair Brotchie adds to this the clarification that it was at the end of such pilgrimages that the print sellers — the *Ymagiers* — sold their devotional images to the pious (Brotchie, 129).

<sup>175</sup> P. Lie, “Comment Jarry et Lugné-Poe glorifièrent *Ubu* à l'Oeuvre” *Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique* 3-4 (1951), 38. See also the receipt for the casting of the “characters of the fifteenth century” which is reproduced in *CCP* 10 (1953): 74.

### Jarry and Ubu Stalk the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre (January – June, 1896)

With the start of 1896 Jarry's time and finances became, for the first time in his life, entirely his own. He used a portion of these resources to launch *Perhinderion*. Yet simultaneously he set himself to work on another goal that seems to have been more important to him than the success of the magazine. This was to get some version of his Hébert/Ubu plays performed by real actors on the Paris stage. And at that time there was only one theatre in Paris that could possibly be suitable for this purpose: the elite, experimental, and Symbolist-inclined Théâtre de l'Oeuvre company that was run by the 26-year-old actor/producer/director Aurélien Lugné-Poe.

During an active production season that lasted for eight months each year (from early November until late June), this tiny avant-garde theatre mounted one performance per month.<sup>176</sup> The cost of the company's full annual menu of eight performances was entirely financed each year by a small number of connoisseur patrons who purchased subscriptions in advance for the whole year's offerings.<sup>177</sup> This "paid-in-advance" and "members only" production and marketing model that was used by the Théâtre de

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<sup>176</sup> See the appendix to Bettina L. Knapp, *The Reign of the Theatrical Director: French Theatre, 1887-1924* (Troy, NY: Whitston Publishing Co., 1988), 239-244. Here Knapp gives a complete list of productions mounted by the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre from 1893-1899, including the venues in which the performances were presented. While the company's schedule is not entirely regular, it is clear that, on average, one production was mounted for each calendar month.

<sup>177</sup> Jacques Robichez, in *Le Symbolisme au théâtre: Lugné-Poe et les débuts de l'Oeuvre* (Paris: L'Arche, 1957), makes it clear that the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre had about 100 paying subscribers (376). We know from the advertisements for the company that a box in the first balcony subscribed for 500 francs, and a seat in the orchestra went for 100 (*OCG1*, 1000). Some rough calculation suggests that the director was therefore able to spend only around 3,000 francs in order to cover the total expenses of each show — which means that each play had to be mounted with extreme economy.

l'Oeuvre had actually been pioneered during the previous decade by Lugné-Poe's mentor, the amateur theatre director André Antoine, who came up with the system in 1887 in order to launch his own (earlier) avant-garde theatre enterprise that he called the Théâtre Libre.<sup>178</sup> In this operating scheme, when a play was ready to be presented, the company's director would rent a small performance venue for one day only, and all the well-heeled subscribers would attend at the same time.<sup>179</sup> Both Antoine and Lugné-Poe followed this procedure — yet it should be noted that the two directors differed greatly in their artistic goals and their staging methods. Antoine's theatrical explorations developed new techniques of ultra-lifelike-ness, which came to be known as stage Naturalism.<sup>180</sup> Lugné-Poe, on the other hand, focused on the evocation of various

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<sup>178</sup> See the article by André-Ferdinand Herold, "M. Antoine and the Théâtre Libre," *The International Monthly: A Magazine of Contemporary Thought* 3.5 (1901). Herold was a Parisian writer, a part of the *Mercure* crowd, and an enthusiastic participant in and supporter of the theatrical experiments of the *fin de siècle*. In 1901 his article for *The International Monthly* surveyed the development of the Parisian fringe theaters of the 1880s and 1890s in relation to their first celebrity producer/director, André Antoine. On the subject of Antoine's invention of the season ticket and the founding of the Théâtre Libre, see pages 514-516 of Herold's article.

<sup>179</sup> The meaning of "small" as an adjective to describe a theatre varies from era to era. The first performance venue used by Antoine for the Théâtre Libre was able to accommodate 349 patrons when crammed full. See Jean Chothia, *André Antoine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 7. As for Lugné-Poe: even though he had only about 100 subscribers he preferred to use the Nouveau Theatre (at 15 rue Blanche in Montmartre) when it was available, and this could accommodate about 1,000 spectators when full. See Brotchie, 158-159.

<sup>180</sup> Contrary to contemporary mainstream acting conventions, Antoine insisted that his actors avoid "playing to the audience." Consequently he developed a highly voyeuristic sort of theater in which the actors would ignore the audience and respond only to one another, behaving as if they were in a real room with the "fourth wall" missing. In fact, the settings for his productions attempted to recreate "real" three dimensional and object-filled rooms to the best of his ability. This intensified voyeurism was a powerful aesthetic innovation at the time. It should also be noted that the company's extremely realistic *mise-en-scène* arose from the aesthetic ideals of the Naturalist movement in literature and drama — a movement that Antoine particularly endorsed. One of Naturalism's key precepts was that the social, material, and economic environment in which characters functioned determined their behavior. As Naturalism often engaged some sort of contemporary social problem, recognizable just-like-life settings

moods and of spiritual presence in the theatre, as well as on the theatricalization of abstract and eternal ideas.<sup>181</sup> In the early days of these *théâtres à côté* [fringe theatres], as they were called at the time, the Théâtre Libre flourished. Its production model soon had imitators, however.<sup>182</sup> By the 1890s the artistic taste among the Théâtre Libre's subscribers was turning away from Naturalism and more toward the sublime. In 1893 the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, directed by Lugné-Poe (who had, by that point, had a significant falling-out with his former mentor), emerged as a Symbolist response to (or rejection of) Antoine's aesthetic. In the contemporary marketplace of ideas, the newer company soon became the more attractive of the two leading fringe theatres for the Parisian literati . . . and by 1896 it was the only one still operating.<sup>183</sup>

Thus, it was Lugné-Poe that Jarry would approach with his latest passion for putting Monsieur Ubu on the larger-than-puppet stage. The young writer's interest in the

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were an important "scientific" illustration in this movement's theatrical manifestation. For more on this subject see Chothia, 24-25.

<sup>181</sup> This topic is discussed in a later chapter of this dissertation.

<sup>182</sup> Adolphe Aderer, *Le Théâtre à Côté* (Paris: Librairies-Imprimeries Réunies, 1894). See especially the introductory chapter, pages 3-17. Today we mainly remember the Théâtre Libre, the Théâtre d'Art, and the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, but there were at least a dozen other "similar" theatres that sprang up in Paris in the decade surrounding Aderer's book. Aderer felt that the three companies just named had already been adequately treated in the contemporary newspapers by his fellow critics. He therefore devoted his study to discussing the other companies (6). See also Robichez, who gives a convenient summary of the names of companies that came to exist after Aderer's book was published: the Théâtre d'Appel, Théâtre des Refusés, Théâtre de l'Audition, Théâtre des Modernes, Théâtre Féministe International, Théâtre d'Art Social, and the Théâtre Civique, to list but a few of them (388-389).

<sup>183</sup> André-Ferdinand Herold (see note 126, above), describing the artistic climate of 1894 (the year in which André Antoine abandoned the Théâtre Libre for lack of support), remarks on the preeminence of Symbolist theater and the decline of its Naturalist counterpart: "The fashionable public, which [had previously] assured the prosperity of the Théâtre Libre, no longer affected to enjoy naturalist plays. The public followed the fashion, and the fashion was becoming idealistic and mystical" (518).

Théâtre de l’Oeuvre was not, however, a sudden enthusiasm that he discovered only at this particular moment. Jarry had followed the small theatre’s development attentively since its foundation in 1893. He had written about its performances and goals in *L’Art Littéraire* and had also corresponded with Lugné-Poe to request “reviewer” tickets for *L’Ymagier* for the 1894-1895 season.<sup>184</sup> He knew the company to be provocative, literary, experimental, counter-cultural, and sometimes deliberately scandalous — as well as specifically interested in staging Symbolist works. In other words: he knew it to be ideal for his purpose.

The most helpful primary account of Jarry’s entrée into formal relations with the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre was recorded by Lugné-Poe in the memoir that he wrote some 35 years later.<sup>185</sup> In addition to this testimony, other details of the story of that relationship can be gleaned through a careful reading of Jarry’s surviving correspondence from 1896.<sup>186</sup> There is also a fairly clear teleological narrative that appears when one considers the sequence and progression of Jarry’s publications during that year. It is mainly from these three sources that the following step-by-step account of Ubu’s final march onto the Parisian stage has been constructed.

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<sup>184</sup> See *OCG1*, 1003-1006, 1039-1040.

<sup>185</sup> Aurélien Lugné-Poe, *Acrobaties* (Paris: Gallimard, 1931), 159-195. The director devoted one of the longest chapters of his autobiography to an account of his relationship with Jarry and to recording various details pertinent to the 1896 production of *Ubu Roi*.

<sup>186</sup> See *OCG1*, 1045-1059.

To begin his campaign Jarry mailed a copy of the “Terrestrial Act” of *Caesar-Antichrist* to Lugné-Poe, on 18 December 1895, inquiring whether this one-act piece might be included in the theater’s next season. At that time the actor/producer/director had never met Jarry in person, though the two had previously exchanged some business correspondence. Lugné-Poe sent a reply thanking Jarry for the script. He indicated that, while he found the play to be very amusing, he saw too many practical difficulties to consider staging it. (The brevity of the scenes, its need for so many actors, and the large number of scene changes were among his specific concerns). In response to this response, Jarry wrote a second letter, dated 8 January 1896, which has since become a famous document in theater history. In it he suggests ways in which the seeming difficulties might be bested in an inexpensive and comedic manner. It should be noted that this letter met with no success whatsoever in selling Lugné-Poe on the project. (Not at this point in time, anyway). Nonetheless, the letter is worth quoting at length because it gives us a good sense of Jarry’s aesthetic preferences in regard to his play, and also because most of these ideas were actually implemented when he did get the play onto the stage eleven months later:

I could, if you like, simplify it somewhat, and then we would have something which could not fail to be funny [. . .] It would be interesting, I think, to produce this (at no cost, incidentally) in the following manner:

1) Mask for the principal character, Ubu; I could get this for you, if necessary. And, in any case, I believe that you yourself have been studying the whole question of masks in the theater.

2) A cardboard horse’s head which he would hang round his neck, as they did on the medieval English stage, for the only two equestrian scenes; all these details fit in with the mood of the play, since my intention was, in any case, to write a puppet play.

3) One single stage-set, or, better still, a plain backdrop, thus avoiding the raising and dropping of the curtain during the single act. A formally dressed individual would walk on stage, just as he does in puppet shows, and hang up a placard indicating where the next scene takes place. (By the way, I am absolutely convinced that a descriptive placard has far more “suggestive” power than any stage scenery. No scenery, no array of walkers-on could really evoke “the Polish Army marching across the Ukraine.”)

4) The abolition of crowds which usually put on a terrible collective performance and are an insult to the intelligence. So, just a single soldier in the army parade scene, and just one in the scuffle when Ubu says “What a slaughter, what a mob, etc....”

5) Choice of a special “accent,” or, better still, a special “voice” for the principal character.

6) Costumes as divorced as far as possible from local color or chronology (which will thus help to give the impression of something eternal): modern costumes, preferably, since the satire is modern, and shoddy ones, too, to make the play even more wretched and horrible.

There are only three important characters who do much talking, Ubu, Ma Ubu and Bordure. You have an actor whose appearance is exactly right for Bordure and would make a splendid contrast with Ubu’s bulk — I mean the tall fellow who declaimed “It is my right.”<sup>187</sup>

After this Jarry compliments Lugué-Poe on the latest production by the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre, which was an offering of four one-act plays that Jarry had attended the previous evening, 7 January 1896. It had been the third performance of the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre’s 1895-96 season. It is unknown whether Lugué-Poe responded to this second missive.

A few weeks later, on 11 February 1896, Jarry attended the next performance to be given by the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre. He went prepared, having arranged in advance for a

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<sup>187</sup> The letter was reproduced in its entirety in Lugué-Poe, 161-162. The director obviously had the original document at hand when writing his memoir. Today, though, the letter is more readily accessible in *OCG1*, 1042-1044. It has also been reprinted and translated many times in various studies of avant-garde performance. The particular translation that I have included here was done by Simon Watson Taylor. It appears in the *Selected Works of Alfred Jarry* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1965), 67-68.

mutual friend to introduce him to the director on this occasion.<sup>188</sup> The theatrical bill of fare that evening was intentionally controversial. As a protest against the recent imprisonment of Oscar Wilde, the company was premiering Wilde's 1893 play *Salomé*, which had been written by Wilde directly in French, but which remained unperformed.<sup>189</sup> Jarry attended the production and participated in the *de rigueur* demonstrations as pro-Wilde supporter. At some point during the evening, he achieved his introduction to Lugné-Poe. Jarry always had a knack for making first impressions that intrigued people, making them want to know more about him. Such was the case with Lugné-Poe. In his memoirs, the director recalled his encounter with Jarry, writing: "I had faith in him and he excited my curiosity."<sup>190</sup>

After *Salomé*, Jarry again took up a postal correspondence with the director. The letters now become significantly less formal than they had been previously (the salutations, for instance, shift from "Monsieur" and "Dear Monsieur" to "Dear Lugné" and "My Dear Friend").<sup>191</sup> On 12 March 1896 Jarry sent him a complimentary copy of

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<sup>188</sup> Lugné-Poe, 159; Lie, 38. The mutual friend was A. Ferdinand Herold, who Jarry knew from the Tuesday salons of the *Mercure de France* and who would be the future author of the 1901 article cited earlier (see note 126, above). Herold regularly volunteered to help as a stagehand for the productions of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre.

<sup>189</sup> Lugné-Poe, 149. Wilde had been sentenced in May 1895 to two years of hard labor after being convicted of gross indecency. He was an extremely popular figure in Paris, especially among the literary elite. As it happens, the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre's production of *Salomé* was attended by Wilde's friend and lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, whose relationship with Wilde was really at the core of the famous author's troubles. Douglas had fled to France at the time of Wilde's trial and had begun to spend a good deal of time around the *Mercure* crowd, for many of the *Mercure*-ists were personal friends of Wilde.

<sup>190</sup> Lugné-Poe, 159.

<sup>191</sup> See salutations on Jarry's letters to Lugné-Poe in *OCG1*, pages 1039, 1042, 1049, 1051.

the first issue of his just-published *Perbinderion*. The magazine included Lugné-Poe's standard advertisement for the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, which showed the company's logo, a listing of the performances of the current season, and contact information for inquiries. And placed immediately beneath this Jarry ran an advertisement of his own, announcing the imminent publication of a new art book that would be called *Little Drawings of the Most Notorious Exploits of Monsieur Ubu, Master of Phynances: An Album in Color* (in preparation).<sup>192</sup> This work was never actually published, but the announcement of its immanence was placed where Lugné-Poe could not fail to notice it. (And, presumably, in a place where other readers might be inspired to make an association between *Ubu* the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre). The complimentary magazine came also with a cover letter, in which Jarry pretended to give up on the idea of having *Ubu Roi* produced by the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre.<sup>193</sup> Instead, knowing Lugné-Poe's interest in antique plays, he suggested the production of his own translation of a play by "a drunken author celebrated in Germany," Christian-Dietrich Grabbe.<sup>194</sup>

Even while Jarry *pretended* to give up the idea of having *Ubu* produced, he was actively working to build an audience who would clamor to see it on stage. Throughout

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<sup>192</sup> This advertisement page of the first issue of *Perbinderion* is reproduced in facsimile in *OCG1*, 1000.

<sup>193</sup> *OCG1*, 1045; Lugné-Poe, 162.

<sup>194</sup> The specific piece that Jarry was referring to was Grabbe's 1822 play *Scherz, Satire, Ironie und tiefere Bedeutung* [*Fun, Satire, Irony, and Deeper Meaning*], which Jarry translated into French under the more economical title *Les Silènes* [*The Followers of Silenus*]. His translation of the Grabbe play appears in *OCG2*, 27-49.

1896 he gave readings of the play, or parts of it, at the *Mercure mardis*.<sup>195</sup> He also performed puppet presentations of various scenes at his apartment at 162 Boulevard Saint-Germain. He was also refining an expanded full-length version of the script for new publication entirely on its own.

This new-and-improved version of the play first appeared in print late in May 1896 in a newly launched literary revue called *Le Livre d'Art* (*The Book of Art*). This new journal had been founded the previous month by one of Jarry's *Mercure*-ist friends, the Symbolist poet Paul Fort.<sup>196</sup> Its mission was to publish experimental contemporary literature illustrated with the same style of woodcuts as were featured in *L'Ymagier* and *Perhinderion* (these "primitive" images were very fashionable at the time). Jarry's five-act play was to be serialized over two issues of the magazine: the May issue contained its first three acts, and the following issue held the final two. But the thing that is especially worth noting about *Ubu*'s publication in the *Livre d'Art* is the fact that this is where Jarry's iconic woodcut, the "True Portrait of M. Ubu," was first presented to the public. (see figure 1.3, below). Indeed, that woodcut had been carved specifically as an illustration to fit the program of the new journal.

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<sup>195</sup> One witness to these readings was the *Mercure*-ist author Jean de Tinan, who recalls them fondly in a letter that he wrote to Jarry. The letter is quoted at length by Jean-Paul Goujon in his biography *Jean de Tinan* (Paris: Plon, 1990), 229. See also Brotchie, 74-75.

<sup>196</sup> Paul Fort had actually preceded Lugné-Poe in the operation of a Symbolist fringe theater in Paris. His company was called the Théâtre d'Art, and it was founded in 1890 when Fort was eighteen years old. The endeavor ultimately failed because Fort really had no idea how to go about operating a theatre in a practical manner — his background was in poetry. In 1893 the Théâtre d'Art was taken over by Lugné-Poe, who did have some practical theatrical know-how (though he was only two years older than Fort). From that point the company was transformed and continued under the new name of Théâtre de l'Oeuvre.

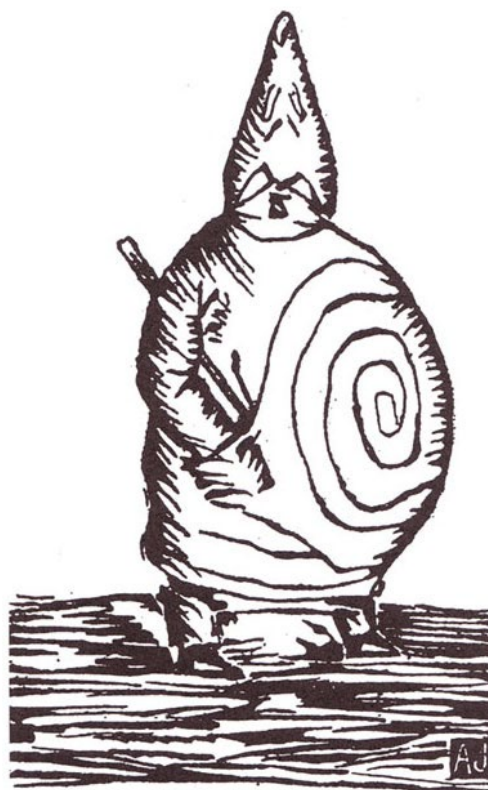


Figure 1.3: Alfred Jarry's "*Veritable portrait de Monsieur Ubu.*" This woodcut was first published in the second issue of Paul Fort's literary magazine, the *Livre d'Art* (April-May 1896). The image also served as frontispiece for the June 1896 *Mercure de France* edition of *Ubu Roi*.

Yet the Parisian parade of all-things-Ubu did not stop with the mere inclusion of his adventures in a new journal.<sup>197</sup> On 11 June 1896, exactly half way in between Ubu's

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<sup>197</sup> If we take only the preceding nine months into account, this parade of Ubu can be said to be begin with (1) the re-publication of "Puppet Play" as part of Jarry's *Les Minutes de Sable Memorial* (August 1895). It continued with (2) the publication of "Terrestrial Act," the one-act version of *Ubu Roi* printed in the *Mercure de France* magazine (September 1896); closely followed by (3) the re-appearance of this act as part of Jarry's apocalyptic play *Caesar Antichrist* (October 1895). The cavalcade is then continued by (4) the readings and recitations of Ubu's adventures given by Jarry at the *Mercure* salon all throughout 1896 as well as (5) the puppet performances of scenes from the play that took place at Jarry's home during this same period. It arrives now at (6) the publication of a newly revised and expanded version of the play, which

two appearances in the *Livre d'Art*, the most singularly definitive version of the play was printed, packaged, and made available for purchase. This was the “official” first edition of *Ubu Roi*: an unusually handsome volume brought out by the book-publishing branch of the *Mercure de France*. It was subtitled “A Play in Five Acts in Prose, Restored in Its Entirety as It was Performed by the Marionettes of the Théâtre des Phynances in 1888.”<sup>198</sup> Jarry’s woodcut of Ubu appeared in orange ink on the butter-yellow cover, and all of the pages were printed using the mock-archaic typeface that Jarry had had specially cast for *Perhinderion*.<sup>199</sup>

This *Mercure* edition of *Ubu Roi* received several enthusiastic reviews. It sold extremely well, and its striking visual appearance was celebrated as part of a July 1896 article devoted to modern book design.<sup>200</sup> It had sold out its first three print runs before the end of the summer.<sup>201</sup> Even judging by this fact alone, it seems safe to assert that

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takes place spread over two issues of the *Livre d'Art* (May 1896 and June 1896). And there are still several more installments to come between June and December 1896. It seems likely that no unperformed play had ever before been printed in so many different editions in the few months immediately preceding its premiere.

<sup>198</sup> It is worth noting that the titular claim that the play has been “restored in its entirety as it was performed by the marionettes of the Théâtre des Phynances” is not actually true. The play had in fact experienced many refinements, revisions, and expansions since 1888; and, as we know, the first production of the Théâtre des Phynances used live actors instead of marionettes. (It was not until the following year that it became a primarily a puppet theater). Nonetheless, the subtitle’s indication that the author thinks of the characters in this work as puppets is a helpful point of orientation for the first time reader. Moreover, the grandiose rhetorical flavor of the statement helps to create the illusion that the work had already achieved some sort of historical importance.

<sup>199</sup> Lie, 38. See also *OCG1*, 345-347, 416, 1146 n.2, 1269 “notice.”

<sup>200</sup> Edmond Cousturier, “Exposition internationale du livre moderne à l’art nouveau,” *La Revue Blanche* 1 July 1896, 43.

<sup>201</sup> Brotchie, 137-138.

Jarry's relentless promotion of his play during the past twelve months had successfully developed an audience who wanted see the work on stage. In this way, then, he never really ceased his campaign to get the play produced by Lugné-Poe. He merely approached the challenge from the other side of the proscenium, as it were, with the idea of creating audience demand for the work.

We gain a different insight into the commerce between Jarry and Lugné-Poe by looking at the matter from Lugné-Poe's point of view. In Jarry, the director undoubtedly saw an ambitious, experimental, and erudite young artist — one who had also become a savvy and determined publicist. These two twenty-somethings had many artistic interests and friends in common. All of these were elements that aided Jarry's agenda.

Undoubtedly, though, the thing that made the most favorable impression on Lugné-Poe was the aura of wealth that the young writer was able to project during the first half of 1896. More than any other single factor, as it seems to me, it was this economic (mis)perception that opened the way for the production of Jarry's play.

For Lugné-Poe, the situation was this: sometime before the arrival of summer, he would need to find a new administrative associate for his Théâtre de l'Oeuvre company. Shortly after *Salomé* he had lost his longtime assistant Adolphe Van Bever, who had been with him ever since the theatre's start in 1893.<sup>202</sup> Van Bever had quit because the director could not afford to pay a living wage to his associate. (Van Bever had spent the past year living in one of the office's windowless storage rooms, sleeping in a hammock while

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<sup>202</sup> Lugné-Poe, 159.

wearing his only suit of clothes, but his health problems forbade continuation of that existence).<sup>203</sup> To Lugné-Poe, it looked as if the lack-of-salary issue would not be a problem for the seemingly affluent Jarry. Indeed, when June arrived there were new signs of the writer's prosperity. A complimentary copy of the second issue of *Perhinderion*, just as splendid as the first, arrived at the director's home. It was followed a week later by a complimentary copy of the deluxe Mercure de France edition of *Ubu Roi*.<sup>204</sup> Jarry was, of course, aware of the vacancy and had been angling for the position.

With these gifts in hand, Lugné-Poe made up his mind to offer the job of general manager for the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre to Jarry. The young writer was delighted. He accepted and began work immediately. Indeed, he inspired such confidence that the very next week Lugné-Poe felt comfortable leaving the city for a two-month summer vacation. In his autobiography he indicates how pleased he was with Jarry's administrative know-how:

Installed in his new post Jarry takes his duties seriously. In cyclist's attire, his habitual dress, he helps me with everything and removes all obstacles in my path. When I escape from the office at the end of the season in order to find a bit of calm, it is he who keeps it open for business. [ . . . ] He opens the mail and sends it on to me, sidesteps problems in a brotherly and sensible way. Even better, he organizes the publicity for the upcoming season.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Gertrude R. Jasper, *Adventure in the Theatre: Lugné-Poe and the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre to 1899* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1947), 222, 255. See also Paul Léautaud, *Adolphe Van Bever* (Abbeville, France: Imprimerie F. Paillart, 1927) 13-15.

<sup>204</sup> Lie, 38.

<sup>205</sup> Lugné-Poe, 163.

Just as Jarry's many prior accomplishments suggested, he proved himself to be a skillful, industrious, and enthusiastic collaborator. He was a significant asset for the company, especially since he had many influential friends among the progressive media and the avant-garde journals. And yet, even as Lugné-Poe made the job offer, the director still harbored one qualm about his new associate, for he knew that the true price of Jarry's services would be a production of his recently published — and (already) much ballyhooed — play.

Lugné-Poe was utterly baffled by that script.<sup>206</sup> He found *Ubu Roi* amusing, but had little notion of how to stage it. On the other hand, his highly capable new colleague had no shortage of ideas. During their extensive summer correspondence in regard to the upcoming 1896/97 Théâtre de l'Oeuvre season, the author/administrator showered the director with several ideas for the *mise-en-scène* of his elevated schoolboy puppet play.<sup>207</sup> “At every point he advances *King Ubu's* pawn,” commented Lugné-Poe wryly.<sup>208</sup> Of course, we already know how that chess game turned out. Within six months the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre did indeed mount a production of Jarry's play, and that production would become a landmark in the history of modern theater.

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<sup>206</sup> *Ibid*, 160.

<sup>207</sup> As evidenced in Jarry's letters to Lugné-Poe during the summer 1896. See *OCG1*, 1049-1053.

<sup>208</sup> Lugné-Poe, 163.

### **A Summary of the Plot of *Ubu Roi***

Thus far, many topics closely *related to* the play *Ubu Roi*, have been discussed — yet very little has been said about the script itself: about its plot, about any specific events depicted within the story, or about any literary or dramaturgical elements of the play *as a text that can be read on the printed page*.

The following few paragraphs are intended to fill that gap. They are comprised mainly of a summary of the play's plot, but they are also enhanced with some commentary on *Ubu Roi's* linguistic style, its satirical tone, its pastiche of other literature, and its overall form. Such a summary is included at this specific point in the story because we have now arrived at the particular moment in the chronological narrative of the play's development when the definitive version of *Ubu's* satirical and dramatic adventure has been published . . . and the director of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre has agreed to produce it . . . and yet the production has not yet taken place. Thus, it is a fulcral moment in the life of the play. Similarly, it is also a fulcral moment in this dissertation; for, while the current chapter traces the prehistory of the play's 1896 premiere, after this point all of the later chapters deal with various aspects of the enactment and aftermath of the production. Indeed, to have a plot summary just now is actually trebly fulcral because several of the analyses of *Ubu Roi, the live theatrical event*, that appear in the upcoming chapters cannot be accomplished without some discussion of *Ubu Roi, the*

*published script*.<sup>209</sup> For all of these reasons, then — even though this study is not especially concerned with explicating any of the truly literary aspects of *Ubu Roi*<sup>210</sup> — it will be quite helpful for the reader to have a casual familiarity with the play’s main characters, the flavor of its dialogue, and the major episodes that comprise its dramatic action.

A reading of the play now begins. The opening moments of *Ubu Roi* show us a domestic scene in the life of the title character, Père Ubu, and his wife. As presented in the best-known English translation of the play, that done by Barbara Wright in 1961, here are the first few lines:

**PÈRE UBU:** Shittr!<sup>211</sup>

**MÈRE UBU:** Oh! That's a nice way to talk. Père Ubu, ye are a bloody great oaf.

**PÈRE UBU:** Why don't I bash your brains in, Mère Ubu.

**MÈRE UBU:** It's not me you ought to do in, Père Ubu, it's someone else.

**PÈRE UBU:** By my green candle, I don't understand.

**MÈRE UBU:** Well, Père Ubu, are ye content with your lot?

**PÈRE UBU:** By my green candle, shittr, madame, certainly I am content. I could be content with less; I'm a captain of dragoons, I'm King Wenceslas'

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<sup>209</sup> For example: a notable crescendo in the audience’s vocal response to the performance was provoked by the production’s omission of the “scene of the bear” (act 4, scene 6). The clamorous demand for this missing scene is a clear proof that (some of) the spectators’ behavior was influenced by their foreknowledge of the script. This event is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. It is mentioned here merely as an illustration of the need for including a précis of the plot of the play.

<sup>210</sup> For those readers who are specifically interested in literary treatments of *Ubu Roi* there are two which are written in English that make excellent surveys of the play’s text. Judith Cooper’s, *Ubu Roi: An Analytical Study* (New Orleans, LA: Tulane University Studies in Romance Languages and Literatures, 1974) has chapters devoted to: Plot Structure and Episodes; Ubu as Comic Type; and Le Parler Ubu [Ubu-speak]. A decade later Keith Beaumont’s, *Jarry: Ubu Roi* (London: Grant & Cutler, Ltd., 1987) examined the work under the headings of: Structure and Plot; Characters and Characterization; Satire; Language and Verbal humor; and Myth and Childhood Vision. The scholarship on this topic that has been written in French, however, is simply too abundant to mention here.

<sup>211</sup> This first word, “Merdre” in French, is a bit challenging to translators. It has been variously rendered as: Pschitt, Shrit, Shittr, Shit-re, Shitsky, Shite, Shee-yit, and Crrrrrrrapp.

confidential officer, I've been decorated with the Order of the Red Eagle of Poland, I'm ex-King of Aragon, what more do you want?<sup>212</sup>

As one can easily see in these first hundred words, the language used in Jarry's play (for at this point he has revised and refined it so many times since *Le Polonais* that it seems safe now to call it "his") blends elevated coarseness with carefully wrought stupidity. All throughout the work, the dialogue continues to combine elements that are childish ("oh, that's a nice way to talk"), mock-archaic ("ye are a bloody oaf," "by my green candle"), scatological ("shittr"), knockabout ("why don't I bash your brains in"), bombastic ("madame, certainly I am . . . what more do you want") and generally fatuous. Nowhere in any of its five classically divided acts, does the play waver from this child-like and puppet-inspired aesthetic. Yet despite the linguistic ridiculousness, Ubu's story also begins as a clear parody of *Macbeth*.

Needled by his ambitious wife, Ubu, a captain of the Polish dragoons, considers assassinating the king of Poland and claiming the crown for himself. If he does this, his wife explains, he would become incredibly rich and could gorge himself on sausages all the time. This last detail wins over her idiot husband, and King Wenceslas' fate is sealed.

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<sup>212</sup> Alfred Jarry, *Ubu Roi* (New York: New Directions, 1961), translated by Barbara Wright, 9-10. Readers of French may find Jarry's linguistic distortions to be a bit more radically odd than they appear in translation. Here is the original as it appears in *OCG*, I:353:

**PÈRE UBU:** Merdre.

**MÈRE UBU:** Oh! voilà du joli, Père Ubu, vous estes un fort grand voyou.

**PÈRE UBU:** Que ne vous assom'je, Mère Ubu!

**MÈRE UBU:** Ce n'est pas moi, Père Ubu, c'est un autre qu'il faudrait assassiner.

**PÈRE UBU:** De par ma chandelle verte, je ne comprends pas.

**MÈRE UBU:** Comment, Père Ubu, vous estes content de votre sort?

**PÈRE UBU:** De par ma chandelle verte, madame, certes oui, je suis content. On le serait à moins: capitaine de dragons, officier de confiance du roi Wenceslas, décoré de l'ordre de l'Aigle Rouge de Pologne et ancien roi d'Aragon, que voulez-vous de mieux?

Ubu immediately enlists the conspiratorial aid of another captain of dragoons, Bordure,<sup>213</sup> who is promised a dukedom in return for his help. Together they plan the regicide, and by the second scene of act two they have successfully massacred the entire royal family — all except for the king’s fourteen-year-old son, Bougrelas,<sup>214</sup> who escapes to the mountains where the spirits of his ancestors appear to him to demand vengeance on Ubu. Meanwhile Ubu is popularly acclaimed as the new king of Poland. At this point we have reached the end of Act II.

While Ubu’s initial debt to *Macbeth* is obvious in the evolution of his story-so-far, it is also clear that the author(s) cribbed plot devices from other Shakespearean tragedies as well. Even in this schematic overview we can already see that *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, and *Richard III* lent a hand in the construction. And if we examined *Ubu Roi* more closely we would also find a good measure of *Henry IV* (mainly Falstaff) as well as several more incidental elements taken from the Bard’s other works (such as the episode of the bear, from *The Winter’s Tale*). In fact, the play’s satirical relationship to Shakespeare — just as with its puppet aesthetic — is signaled by the front matter of the 1896 *Mercure de France* edition. Here one finds this epigraph: “then Père Ubu shook his pear-head, thereafter causing him to be called Shakes-peare by the English, and you have from him

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<sup>213</sup> In French this name suggests “ordure” — literally “filth,” or, more politely, “garbage,” but of a particularly smelly variety. Thus the translated sense of his name is something like “Captain Rhymes-with-Smelly-Garbage.”

<sup>214</sup> Another name which resists translation. In French a “bougre” is, roughly, a “good sort of chap,” but the term also means “sodomite.” “Prince Buggerboy” seems like a fair approximation in English.

many beautiful tragedies written under this name.”<sup>215</sup> So at the same time that the role of lowbrow puppetry is being elevated to the legitimate stage, the sanctity of Shakespeare is simultaneously downgraded through parody.

But it is not merely Shakespeare who is downgraded and recycled by *Ubu Roi*. One also finds textual quotations and paraphrases from Rabelais, Corneille, Molière, Racine, Hugo, and a host of other French literary classics — and from Latin and Greek and German and Spanish classics as well. (These are all certainly nuances that Jarry added into the script during its several year’s development). Indeed the title itself is meant to evoke the idea of Sophocles’ tragedy *Oedipe Roi* (*Oedipus the King*), just as the title of Ubu’s sequel, *Ubu Enchaîné* is meant to evoke that of Aeschylus’ tragedy *Prométhée Enchaîné* (*Prometheus Bound*). Thus “the masterpieces of the past,” as Rosette C. Lamont argued in a 1974 essay, have been “cut up by the adroit scissors of Jarry’s erudite mind and reconstructed to compose a collage that presents these elements in the context of a new work.”<sup>216</sup> Lamont makes an excellent and useful point here, yet her observation can be improved by a bit more contextualization. It is quite true that Jarry was erudite. It

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<sup>215</sup> OCG, I, 349. This epigraph from the 1896 *Mercure de France* edition of *Ubu Roi* is, in keeping with the mock-archaic aesthetic of the text. It is written in imitation Middle-French language with obsolete spellings. “Pear” in this case is slang for “head,” which doubly makes sense for Ubu as his head is pear-shaped in the accompanying illustration (see figure 1.3). Here is the epigraph in the original: “Adonc le Père Ubu hoscha la poire, dont fut depuis nommé par les Anglois Shakespeare, et avez de lui sous ce nom maintes belles tragoedies par escript.”

<sup>216</sup> Rosette C. Lamont, “*Ubu Roi*: A Collage,” *Dada/Surrealism* 4 (1974), 20. This article is a good Anglophone introduction to the numerous literary allusions of Jarry’s play. Readers of French can decode these allusions even more readily, for they are frequently annotated on a line-by-line basis in the many “study editions” of *Ubu Roi* that are available today. For instance, I use the 2006 Pocket Classiques edition with “preface, notes and *Clés de l’oeuvre*” by Henri Béhar.”

should also be noted, though, that such creative borrowing from literary classics as Lamont is acclaiming had been a traditional dramaturgical practice among French puppeteers (and other makers of French puppet theater) for longer than Jarry had been alive.<sup>217</sup> Consequently the play's element of pastiche should therefore be seen, not merely as highbrow and erudite literary titillation, but also as another way in which the aesthetics of popular lowbrow puppet theater are present in *Ubu Roi*.

As for the synopsis: Act III shows us the true character of Ubu's reign over Poland. Within a very few scenes he slaughters all the nobles for their "phynance" and ravages the countryside personally collecting double and triple taxes from the peasants (see figure 1.4, below). Bordure, who has been imprisoned rather than rewarded, then escapes to Russia and persuades the Czar to invade Poland to destroy this horrible new king. Upon hearing the news of an impending attack Ubu whines and blubbers like a baby, but refuses to spend any money to defend the country. Nonetheless, the third act ends with Ubu setting off for war at the head of the Polish army armed with his "shrit sabre," "phynance hook," and his little wooden "earens pick."

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<sup>217</sup> According to Léopold Delannoy, a historian of French puppetry, rural French puppeteers of the nineteenth century often cribbed their plays from classic works of French and European authors. In his *Theatres de marionnettes du nord de la France* (Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1983), Delannoy attributes this practice to the newly available, inexpensive, and widely distributed "*livraisons*" — cheaply bound editions of world classics that were published by the French *Bibliothèque Nationale* as part of a national literacy initiative that began around 1850. Thanks to these discount classics, barely literate rural puppeteers began to ransack Aristophanes, Dumas, Scribe, Cervantes, and many others for material that they then reduced to simplified scenarios within which they could improvise with their established puppet characters (Delannoy, 97). The puppet plays that resulted from this process tended to be episodic, not entirely coherent, and were always rich in (often unnoticed-by-the-rural-audience) literary references. It is evident from Lamont's comments on *Ubu Roi* as "literary collage" that this tradition was very consciously embraced by Jarry during his many rewritings of the play.

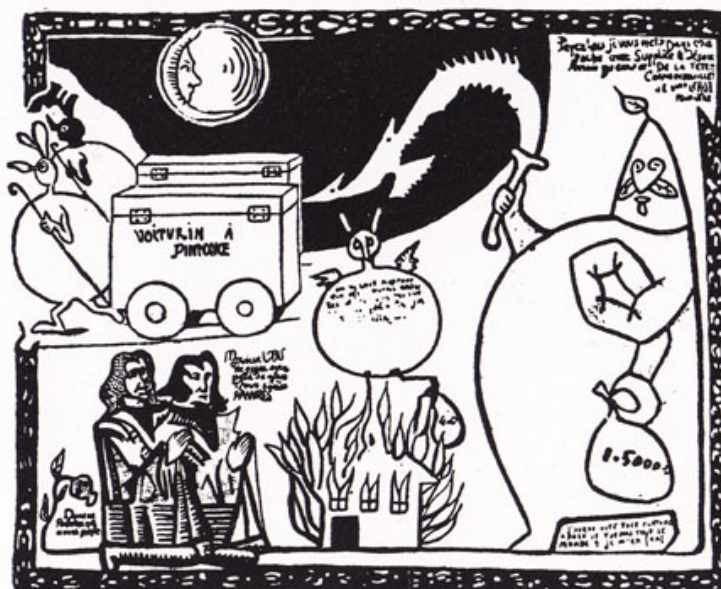


Figure 1.4. The lithographic poster created by Jarry for the 1896 Théâtre de l'Oeuvre production of *Ubu Roi*. The original measures 24 x 32 cm (roughly 9.5 x 12.5 inches) and is printed in red, green, purple, and gold. It depicts a scene from Act III of the play.<sup>218</sup>

The rest of the play deals with Bougrellas's recapture of Warsaw, from whence Mère Ubu escapes to the mountains; and the Russian army's defeat of Ubu, who also escapes to the mountains. There he is attacked by a bear, which he ends up eating for dinner. Soon the Ubuses, Mère and Père, find one another in the wilderness. But Bougrellas

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<sup>218</sup> This image of the poster is from the *Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique* 3-4 (1951), page 15. The lines of text appearing on it are quotations (mainly) from Act III, scene iv. Over Ubu's head: "Pay up! or into my pocket with torture and decapitation of the neck and head. Horngibolets! I am the king, I suppose?" (III, iv). Beneath his feet: "I shall soon have made my fortune, then I'll kill everybody and go away" (III, iv). To the left of the kneeling peasants: "We can't, we've already paid" (III, iv). To their right: "Monsieur Ubu, have mercy, have pity on us, we are poor" (III, iv). In the belly of the floating Palotin (a special creature made of rubber that serves Ubu as henchman): "Everywhere one sees nothing but burnt-out houses and people bending under the weight of our phynances" (III, vii). The text, of course, is in French — these English versions are from Barbara Wright's translation of the play.

finds them too — resulting in a three-way mêlée that gives a new variation on the verbal shenanigans and physical violence that have pervaded the entire story:

**BOUGRELAS** (*punching Ubu*): Take that, coward, vagabond, braggart, miscreant, mussalman!

**PÈRE UBU** (*bitting back*): Take that, Polognard, drunkard, bastard, hussar, tartar, dozener, cozener, liar, savoyard, communard!

**MÈRE UBU** (*beating him as well*): Take that, swindler, porker, traitor, play-actor, perjurer, dog-robber, bolster!<sup>219</sup>

Seeing that Bougreilas is about to be torn to pieces, his soldiers fling themselves into the fray . . . but in the confusion the usurping couple again manage to make good their escape. In the final scene Ubu and his gang are fleeing on a ship bound for France (they will have to sail all the way around Denmark!), with Ubu fantasizing of an official appointment by the French government as the new Master of Phynances in Paris when he arrives. Ultimately this ending amounts to Ubu being driven out of Poland, but also getting away with all of his monstrous crimes — with the implication that he will simply start all over again someplace else.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> This text is again from Barbara Wright's 1961 translation of *Ubu Roi* (152-153). Readers of French, however, will note that her translation choices for this passage have at least as much to do with the sonance and rhyme of the words as they do with the literal meaning. For the sake of the former she sometimes departs from the latter. Here is the passage in French:

**BOUGRELAS** (*le frappant*): Tiens, lâche, gueux, sacripant, mécréant, musulman!

**PÈRE UBU** (*ripostant*): Tiens! Polognard, soûlard, bâtard, husard, tartare, calard, cafard, mouchard, savoyard, communard!

**MÈRE UBU** (*le battant aussi*): Tiens, capon, cochon, félon, histrion, fripon, souillon, polochon!

It is perhaps worth calling attention to Wright's translation of Mère Ubu's final insult of "polochon." Literally this word does indeed mean "bolster" (a type of extra-long pillow) in English, but in Ubu's private universe "polochons are animals similar to large pigs; they have no head, but instead they have two asses, one in the front, the other in the rear." This definition comes from Chassé's explication of the established Hébert/Ubu Lore at the Rennes Lycée, and is undoubtedly what the dialogue of the play means to indicate (Chassé, 29).

<sup>220</sup> As yet another example of Ubu's connection to puppet theater, compare the broad outline of his story to this typical plot of a contemporary *Punch and Judy* puppet show, as summarized by puppetry

Such is the story of the play as we know it today. And indeed, such was the text of the play that Lugué-Poe had just agreed to produce. Even though the director, at that time (July 1896), “could not fathom how to put this on the stage,” as he wrote in his memoir, that would be a problem for later.<sup>221</sup> For the present, there were still several months remaining before the production would actually take place.

### **The Extravagant Publicity Campaign Preceding Ubu’s Premiere**

In his new position as “serétaire-régisseur” [general manager] for the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre one of Jarry’s main duties was to take charge of the publicity for the upcoming season. He threw himself into this task, making certain that there was a significant pre-production build-up to his play in the Parisian newspapers and literary journals. In fact, Jarry seems to have overdone the task, for the extensive publicity campaign before *Ubu’s* premiere is one of the particular topics that many contemporary theatre critics comment on (mainly in a tone of complaint) in their reviews of the performance. In *Le Temps*, for

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historian John Bell in *Strings, Hands, Shadows: A Modern Puppet History* (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 2002): “The big-nosed, hump-backed Punch, whose voice is a reedy whistle [. . .] accidentally kills his baby, and then (with a certain glee) similarly eliminates his entire community: his wife, the Doctor, the Judge, the Policeman, Jack Ketch the Hangman, and any other characters a puppeteer might want to add in. The threat of retribution occurs in a series of appearances by Ghosts, the Devil, and a man eating Crocodile, and the ending of the show heads toward a finale of sin punished [. . .] Yet either implicitly or explicitly, Punch manages to get away with his transgressions: he cheats the Hangman and tricks the Devil; and the Crocodile who devours him admits that he ‘might let him out for the very next show.’ In other words, Punch gets away with it all” (22). While the gleeful destruction and the lack of retribution are obvious commonalities, one particular difference also seems worth noting: Punch functions in an entirely domestic environment, but Ubu operates in an overtly political one.

<sup>221</sup> Lugué-Poe, 160. Corollary to this, we learn from Jarry that the director initially planned to rehearse the play as a tragedy, in a very dignified and stately manner (see OCG1, 416). He eventually changed his mind, of course.

instance, Francisque Sarcey is aghast at the “incredible fanfare of publicity” that heralded the show.<sup>222</sup> In *La Paix*, Georges Vanor notes that many “critics had already written about this play in advance.”<sup>223</sup> Camille Mauclair, one of the co-founders of the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre (though no longer active in its productions in 1896), is impressed with the remarkable “buzz in advance of *Ubu Roi*” in his own appraisal of the performance.<sup>224</sup> And one easily senses the media over-saturation in the review printed in *La Patrie*, where Henry de Gorsse writes: “Finally, last night, *Ubu Roi* was performed — and this is wonderful because now [. . .] we will no longer have to hear about this puppet-inspired comedy which, for more than two months, has been talked about incessantly.”<sup>225</sup>

The intensive fifteen-week publicity campaign that preceded the production of *Ubu Roi* has previously been studied in an excellent 1951 article by P. Lie titled “Comment Jarry et Lugné-Poe glorifièrent *Ubu* à l’Oeuvre.”<sup>226</sup> Obviously, that article is written in French. Equally obviously, it was written over sixty years ago. Yet despite the large number of English language studies that have been made of Jarry and of his play during those six decades — and despite the many additional marketing details relevant to the production that have come to light during that interval — there is still no study

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<sup>222</sup> Francisque Sarcey, review of *Ubu Roi*, *Le Temps*, 14 Dec. 1896, rpt. in Robillot, “La Presse d’*Ubu Roi*,” *Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique* 3-4 (1951), 75.

<sup>223</sup> Georges Vanor, review of *Ubu Roi*, *La Paix*, 11 Dec. 1896, rpt. in Robillot, 76.

<sup>224</sup> Camille Mauclair, review of *Ubu Roi*, *Revue Encyclopédique* 172.6, rpd. in Robillot, 80.

<sup>225</sup> Henry de Gorsse, review of *Ubu Roi*, *La Patrie*, 11 Dec. 1896, rpd. in Robillot, 82.

<sup>226</sup> “How Jarry and Lugne-Poe glorified *Ubu* at the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre.” Cited earlier, see note 123.

available in English that might be compared to Lie's. With that being the case, the following paragraphs of this section of my chapter will outline the major elements of that publicity campaign. Moreover, in addition to presenting this difficult-to-access information in English, my summary of Jarry's publicity campaign also represents the final phase of his shepherding of Ubu onto the real live Parisian stage.

The campaign was formally launched in August with the advertisements for the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre's new 1896-1897 season. These appeared in several newspapers and literary journals. They consisted of an image of the theatre's logo (figure 1.5, next page), the prices for subscription, and the statement that the performances would all be given at the Nouveau Theatre (a comfortable and attractive venue on the slope of Montmartre, presumably a selling point).<sup>227</sup> However, the full menu of plays for the new (upcoming) season had not yet been finalized when the time came for the first of the publicity to be published. Consequently, Jarry used the opportunity to specially promote the production of his own play. In the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre's notice in the 1 August 1896 *Mercure de France*, for instance, one reads: "Monsieur Lugné-Poe announces that one of the performances of the upcoming season will be composed of *Ubu Roi* by Monsieur Alfred Jarry."<sup>228</sup> Slightly later, in the 15 August issue of the *Revue Blanche*, Jarry appended a bonus illustration to the promotion: "a portrait of Monsieur Ubu made by his playwright." It was, in fact, a reprint of the (now famous) woodcut from the *Livre d'Art*

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<sup>227</sup> See *L'Étoile Absinthe* 4(1979): 15. The advertisement is reproduced here.

<sup>228</sup> *Mercure de France* (1 Aug. 1896), 384.



Figure 1.5: The logo for the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, designed in 1893 by Lugné-Poe's friend Pierre Bonnard, a symbolist painter. It depicts a workman with a pickaxe, pushing up his sleeves, preparing to chip away at . . . an exquisite piece of dramatic art? This image was published ubiquitously with all of the theatre's advertisements during the 1890s.

(figure 1.3, earlier). Six weeks further on, he again supplemented the Oeuvre's announcement in this magazine with his "other portrait of Monsieur Ubu" (figure 1.6, next page). Throughout the fall the advertisements continued to appear in *Le Mercure*, *La Critique*, *La Plume*, *La Revue Blanche*, *Le Journal des Artistes Français*, and other publications read by the theatre's potential customers. The later ads, of course, gave a more complete list of the plays to be included in the season, but they never failed to mention *Ubu*.

Such "ordinary" advertisements may be thought of as the first tier of Jarry's publicity pyramid. To craft the next layer, the young author contacted a number of his friends and acquaintances — all those who happened to be leading theatre reviewers for the daily press — and asked them to write about *Ubu Roi* in their various columns. These

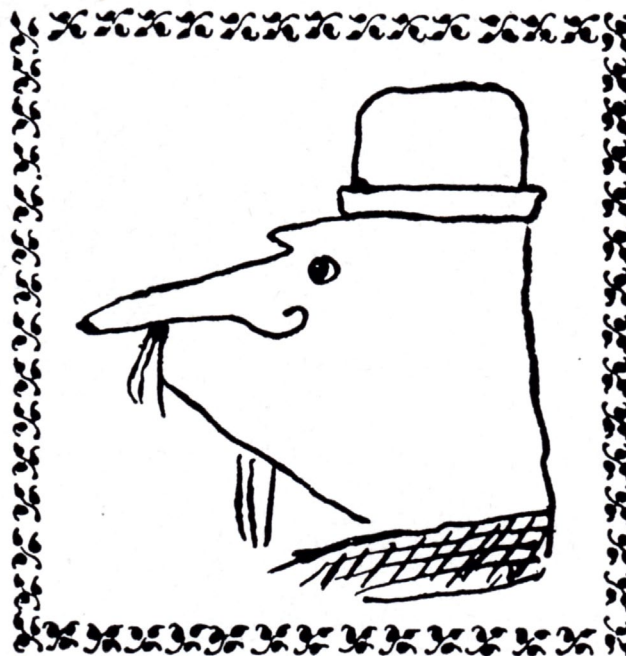


Figure 1.6: Alfred Jarry's "Autre portrait de Monsieur Ubu." This drawing was published in *La Revue Blanche* (1 October 1896) as an illustration to accompany the advertisement that appeared in that issue of the magazine offering subscriptions to the 1896-1897 season of the Theatre de l'Oeuvre, for which season *Ubu Roi* would be the second show. The drawing had, incidentally, previously appeared in the *Mercure de France* edition of *Ubu Roi* on page 9.

included, among others, Armand Silvestre, Aurélien Scholl, Jean Lorrain, and the "big guns" Catulle Mendès and Henry Bauër.<sup>229</sup> In September, Silvestre and Scholl obligingly wrote articles expressing their delight at the announcement that Jarry's play would be produced by the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre. "My god! I am so excited for this performance!" enthused Silvestre in the opening paragraph of his column in *Le Journal*.<sup>230</sup> He then

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<sup>229</sup> Lie, 47.

<sup>230</sup> Armand Silvestre, "Critique Littéraire," *Le Journal* 7 Sept. 1896. Reprinted in: Julien Schuh (ed.), "Articles non répertoriés sur les premières représentations d'*Ubu Roi*." *L'Étoile-Absinthe* 119-120 (2007), 101.

describes the play and speculates on which notable Parisian actors might represent the main characters. And in that same paper, in an ongoing follow-up to Silvestre's piece that lasted throughout the fall, the gossip columnist Jean Lorrain regularly included bits of scuttlebutt relevant to the upcoming production in his weekly feature "Pall Mall Semaine."<sup>231</sup> Other plugs appeared in other papers, but probably the single most potent piece of preview publicity was a long article presented on the front page of the *Écho de Paris*, an important and widely circulated newspaper of the era, by the highly influential critic Henry Bauër.<sup>232</sup> On 23 November, just after the Oeuvre's season opener of *Peer Gynt*, this critic wrote of the impending presentation *Ubu Roi* in a manner that significantly stoked the fire of anticipation that had already been built up around the piece:

This work is an extraordinary joke, made of monstrously rude and excessive language, of the most colorful imagination disguising a scathing and aggressive wit, overflowing with the haughty contempt of men and things. It is a politico-philosophic satire whose big mouth spits impudently into the face of the illusion of tradition and of the old masters who were created by people's adoration.<sup>233</sup>

Like Silvestre had done earlier, Bauër also summarizes the play's story and speculates as to which actors might portray the central characters. He closes the piece with his own

<sup>231</sup> See, for instance, Jean Lorrain, "Pall-Mall Semaine," *Le Journal* 19 Nov. 1896. Rpd. in Schuh, 103. And also "Pall-Mall Semaine," *Le Journal* 5 Dec. 1896. Rpd. in Robillot, 85.

<sup>232</sup> Bauër himself is the main subject of the final chapter of this dissertation, where his agenda in relation to avant-garde theater is explored in detail.

<sup>233</sup> Henry Bauër, "Chronique: *Ubu Roi*," *Écho de Paris* 23 Nov. 1896, 1.

forecast for the performance: “Ah! The evening of raw hilarity! The bizarre and astonishing bonfire that will, by Ubu’s green candle, blaze for our entertainment!”<sup>234</sup>

These articles by several Parisian journalists are an essential component of Jarry’s publicity effort. Still, for Ubu’s author it would simply not do to leave the boosting of his play entirely in the hands of others. Therefore, for the next wave of publicity, he, and even Lugné-Poe, both took up their pens to craft explanatory and theoretical essays that would illuminate some of the new production ideas planned for the Oeuvre’s new season in general, and for *Ubu Roi* in particular. Jarry had obviously already confided to some of his Mercurist friends that he planned to write an article explaining his own particular theory of theatre. This is evident from some passages in the review of *Ubu Roi* (the book) which was written by the Swiss author, poet, and playwright Louis Dumur, and which was printed in the September 1896 issue of the *Mercur*. As Dumur speculates:

An interesting essay could be written concerning how the author of *Ubu Roi* envisions the theatre — especially the puppet-theatre — for it is from this latter that his dramatic conceptions seem to derive. I hope that Monsieur Jarry will, one day, outline for us some of his ideas on this subject.<sup>235</sup>

As it happened, it was in that very same issue of the *Mercur* that the wished-for essay “by the author of *Ubu Roi*” appeared. Its title was “On the Pointlessness of the Theatrical in the Theater.”<sup>236</sup> In it Jarry argues for a theatre where the “pointless”

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<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>235</sup> Louis Dumur, “Revue du Mois,” *Mercur de France* (1 Sept. 1896), 545.

<sup>236</sup> Alfred Jarry, “De l’Inutilité du Théâtre au Théâtre,” *Mercur de France* (1 Sept. 1896): 467-473. Reprinted in *OCG1*, 405-410. Translated into English in *Selected Works*, 69-75.

conventions that are used create a literal visual resemblance to daily life are eradicated. The first of his two main reforms is the elimination of scenery — by which he means “realistic” scenery. Jarry insists that a primitive and childlike “decor by someone who cannot paint” should be substituted, as this will convey only the essential *idea* of a setting, one that can be enhanced, as needed, by the addition of printed “placards” that can be brought in to announce changes of locale.<sup>237</sup> The essay’s second proposed reform is the elimination of the actors. Jarry does not actually suggest that the performers should be done away with entirely, but rather that they should be made into “impersonal” non-people by putting them in masks (as in the Greek theatre), so that the CHARACTER (Jarry’s capitalization) will predominate over the actor, and not the other way around.<sup>238</sup> In this way, Dumur’s wish was granted, and the public was further prepared for two of the main innovations that would be implemented at the upcoming production of *Ubu Roi*.

The following month the *Mercure* published another theatre-theoretical essay — one which again promised that the upcoming production of *Ubu Roi* would provide a practical demonstration of its key ideas. This time the essay was by Lugné-Poe. It bore the significantly derivative title “In Regard to ‘The Pointlessness of the Theatrical in the Theater.’” Like Jarry’s article before it, this one also decried “the stupidity of our modern

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<sup>237</sup> Jarry, OCG1, 406-407.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid*, 407

theatre's obsession with verisimilitude."<sup>239</sup> It began by noting "some curious analogies" between the views expressed in "the brief and luminous article by Monsieur Jarry" and certain details that Lugné-Poe himself had recently learned concerning the staging conditions experienced by Shakespeare in Elizabethan London.<sup>240</sup> (The historical staging practices of Elizabethan England were a subject of particular professional and personal interest for Lugné-Poe). The director saw two main connections between Shakespeare's historical practice and Jarry's new theories. These concerned, on the one hand, the "naive" simplicity of both Elizabethan and Jarry-esque scenery, and, on the other, the easy acceptance by sixteenth-century audiences of the sorts of non-realistic acting conventions that Jarry advocates. Inspired by these connections, Lugné-Poe throws his wholehearted support behind the "reforms" for modern theatre that Jarry had proposed the previous month:

To return to the art of an earlier era, to the insights of its naive simplicity — this seems to me to be the secret of the new art for which Monsieur Jarry argues, an art that I would like to champion with all the strength of every means at my disposal.<sup>241</sup>

The following month, November, would bring the first production of the new 1896-1897 season: a staging of Henrik Ibsen's "unstageable" epic based on the Norwegian folktale *Peer Gynt*. This season opener was heralded by the appearance (in

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<sup>239</sup> Aurélien Lugné-Poe, "À propos de l'Inutilité du Théâtre au Théâtre," *Mercure de France* (1 Oct. 1896), 90.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid*, 90.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid*, 93.

multiple newspapers and revues) of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre's iconoclastic new manifesto, co-authored by Lugné-Poe and Jarry, which proclaimed a revamped and utterly anti-Naturalist production philosophy. "If our vocabulary contained some word other than theatre," they wrote in explanation of their plans for the season's *mises-en-scène*, "we would use that word instead."<sup>242</sup> This new season of the Oeuvre, they claimed, would bring a revolution in theatrical technique, one that would allow the essential *idea* of a play to dominate the verisimilitude of its representation.<sup>243</sup> The tract concluded with a statement carefully balanced to describe both *Peer Gynt* and *Ubu Roi*:

If a work were sent to us from afar, a work that is coarse and unrefined, one that is written with no regard for the rules of theatre, with total ignorance of what is called dramatic art, if this work discusses or resolves some grave social problem, if it enlightens us by its clumsiness, or despite its failings, if it gives us a new interpretation of a philosophic question, then we will present this work with joy.<sup>244</sup>

In addition to the many advertisements and articles, a few of which are identified above, there were also some elements of Jarry's publicity campaign that did not leave easily citable records. The numerous personal appearances that he made at social events in the autumn of 1896 are one example of this. In his 2011 biography of Jarry, Alastair Brotchie notes the considerable celebrity that had accrued to Jarry ever since the June

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<sup>242</sup> Lugné-Poe, *Acrobaties*, 170. The new "Manifesto of the Theatre de l'Oeuvre" for 1896-1897 appeared in: *Le Journal* 10 November 1896; *L'Eclair* 17 November 1896; and a few other periodicals. It is also reproduced on pages 170-171 in *Acrobaties*, the second volume of Lugné-Poe's three-part autobiography.

<sup>243</sup> This would be achieved, of course, by the means that had been explained in the recent *Mercur de France* articles by Jarry and Lugné-Poe.

<sup>244</sup> Lugné-Poe, *Acrobaties*, 170-171.

1896 publication of *Ubu Roi*. Indeed, during the interval between the publication of the Mercure de France edition of his play, and its actual production by the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre a few months later, Jarry was often sought out by social salons as a guest. Brotchie identifies several occasions during this period when Jarry accepted the invitations, attended the soirées, behaved in a manner that was both charming and bohemian, was a huge social success, and proceeded to promote his play, production ideas, and the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre to new audiences.<sup>245</sup> It is certain that this aspect of Jarry's promotional program significantly enhanced his witnesses' knowledge about Ubu — but, at the same time, this part of the campaign, since it is difficult to catalog, does not lend itself to easy inclusion in the sort of survey of documentary publicity that is presently in hand.

Another example of a difficult-to-quantify publicity element is the lithographic advertising poster itself (figure 1.4, earlier). It obviously existed as there are examples of it in assorted private collections. It measured 24 by 32 centimeters (roughly 9.5 x 12.5 inches) and included four colors of ink (red, green, purple, and gold). But no known record reveals how many were printed or how/where these lithographs may have been distributed and displayed. The poster is an admirable representation both of a key moment in the play and of the production's aesthetic in general. It undoubtedly played a

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<sup>245</sup> Brotchie, 144-146.

part in the “incredible fanfare of publicity” of which Sarcey complained, but it is not possible to say just how significant a part that was.<sup>246</sup>

And on top of all of the foregoing, there were still other elements — elements that were not intentionally orchestrated by Jarry — that also contributed to the “buzz” around the production of *Ubu Roi*. The brief literary craze for “Ubu-speak” [*le parler Ubu*], the whimsical linguistic style of the play, is one example. Ubu-speak’s mix of crass, grandiose, and childish language was both catchy and catching. It was apparently novel and delightful for many who encountered it and who functioned within a certain subset of the Parisian intelligentsia. Gide said as much when he noted that, in this era, everyone who was in fashion attempted to imitate Jarry’s humor.<sup>247</sup> The trend manifests in a number of Parisian literary reviews from autumn of 1896.<sup>248</sup> One especially noteworthy example is a book review by Émile Strauss, which was written in dialogue form in the journal *La Critique*, and which was “voiced” by the fictional literary reviewers “Martine and Papyrus”:

**MARTINE:** Crapp-*re* !

**PAPYRUS:** Oh, Martine, is that any way to talk, my sweet?

**MARTINE:** By my pink taper, I just don’t get it!

**PAPYRUS:** How’s that? You don’t understand *Ubu Roi*? Silly goose!

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<sup>246</sup> It is perhaps worth noting that this four-color poster would have remained a puzzle to anyone in 1896 Paris who did not already know what it represented. It conspicuously does not give the title of the play, nor does it say anything about the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre, nor does it even mention Jarry. Nonetheless, it existed and was certainly on display at various sites in Paris in the weeks before the performance.

<sup>247</sup> Gide, 168.

<sup>248</sup> In addition to the dialogue by Strauss (see next footnote), another good example of the fashion is the piece “Les Marionnettes” by the Belgian poet Émile Verhaeren, which appeared in the Parisian journal *L’Art moderne* on 19 July 1896.

**MARTINE:** Yep, that's me.

**PAPYRUS:** Report on it right now or you'll be in the stew!

**MARTINE:** Alas, good sir, but if I am in the stew who will darn your literary socks?<sup>249</sup>

The piece continues for several paragraphs in this homage to the style of *Ubu Roi*.<sup>250</sup> It does not seem possible that such mimicry could have been a pre-planned part of Jarry's publicity efforts — nonetheless, imitations and playful appropriations of this sort kept the linguistic spirit of *Ubu* very much on display during this liminal period of the play's pre-production, and surely helped in some way to stimulate interest in the upcoming performance.

The ultimate capstone for the publicity build-up that preceded the production of *Ubu Roi* was, however, most definitely presided over by Jarry. This took the form of another essay written by the young author expressly for the purpose. The piece appeared at the last minute, barely a week before the show. It offered no new theories of performance, nor details about the plot, nor about the cast. Rather, it was a sort of exposé, filled with fanciful information concerning the history of the Ubu character. The

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<sup>249</sup> Émile Strauss, "Review of *Ubu Roi* (selon Martine et Papyrus)," *La Critique* (5 Sept. 1896), 133. My translation takes a bit of license. The French is idiomatic:

**MARTINE:** Crottre!

**PAPYRUS:** O que voilà de joli, ma mie Martine.

**MARTINE:** Par ma bougie rose, je ne saisis pas!

**PAPYRUS:** Comment tu ne comprends pas *Ubu Roi*. Eh l'oie qui cosse!

**MARTINE:** Présente.

**PAPYRUS:** Vite comperendre ou passer par la casserole verte!

**MARTINE:** Hélas, mon bon monsieur, si je passe par la casserole verte qui ravaudera vos chausses littéraires?

<sup>250</sup> Interestingly, this particular review was reproduced in its entirety in the printed program that was distributed at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre's December performance of the play.

essay was called “The Paralipomena of Ubu” and was printed in the 1 December issue of the *Revue Blanche*. “Soon Ubu will be demonstrated for the crowd,” it began, “it may therefore be useful [. . .] to explain something of Monsieur Ubu’s past in order to liquidate this fellow entirely.”<sup>251</sup> The reader is then given a number of seemingly speculative details concerning the character’s mysterious background — and is also given some previously unpublished scenes of the fat fellow’s past adventures that would later be incorporated into the play *Ubu Cocu* [*Ubu the Cuckold*]. But whatever its specific content may have been, “The Paralipomena” was clearly a final effort to heighten curiosity about the play among the literary public.

After that ultimate “liquidation” of Ubu’s assets, it remained only for the play to be performed. But given all of the advertising, the anticipatory articles by sympathetic journalists, the (new) theories of theatrical performance proclaimed in essays by Jarry and Lugné-Poe, the public appearances by the author of *Ubu Roi*, the widespread circulation of the character’s image, the fashion for Ubu-speak, and the testimony of several contemporary reviewers on the pervasiveness of *Ubu*’s publicity — given all of this, it becomes quite difficult to imagine that any of the spectators who witnessed Ubu strutting and fretting his début upon the (tickets-by-subscription-only) stage of the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre had lacked foreknowledge either of the play itself or of the style in which it was going to be presented. Indeed, the evidence surveyed in this latest segment

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<sup>251</sup> Alfred Jarry, “Les paralipomènes d’Ubu,” *La Revue Blanche* (1 Dec. 1896), 489. The term “paralipomena” derives from Greek roots and refers to things which have been left out.

of this study of Ubu's (eight-year-long) evolution indicates that Jarry very carefully, effectively, intelligently, and conscientiously prepared his audience for precisely what they should expect to see enacted at the impending performance of the play.

### **A Triumph of Tenacity**

When Wednesday, 9 December, 1896 arrived, the performance of *Ubu Roi* finally happened. It also happened again on the following night. These performances mark the end of the narrative of this dissertation chapter. Their arrival, however, does not mark the end of Ubu's progress.<sup>252</sup> For him they were only another waypoint on a longer journey. After the hullabaloo surrounding the 1896 production died down, Jarry, within a year, again took to revising and re-adapting the character's dramatic adventure in Poland for other new performances that would be given in other new theatrical contexts. Later variants of the play would be produced in Paris in 1898 and in 1901, with Jarry actively participating in both.<sup>253</sup> But those occasions are beyond the scope of this project.

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<sup>252</sup> As the Introduction to this dissertation makes clear, these performances really did inspire a certain amount of tumult among the spectators. That disturbance, however, is of no concern to this particular chapter. The true nature of the so-called *Ubu* riot will be discussed in a later chapter of this study.

<sup>253</sup> I should clarify that both of these post 1896 productions were given by puppet theaters: the *Théâtre du Pantins* (The Jumping Jack Theater) in 1898 and the *Guignol des Quat'z'Arts* (The Puppet Theater of the Four-Arts Cabaret) in 1901. Both versions were popular and financially successful. See Brotchie 197-205 and 278-280, respectively, for further details. For the 1901 version, the play had yet another new title: *Ubu sur la Butte* (*Ubu on the Mount*). Indeed, it is worth reiterating that *Les Polonais*, the "terrestrial Act" of *Caesar-Antichrist*, *Ubu Roi*, and *Ubu sur la Butte* are all the same basic story, but with the components modified, rearranged, expanded, or condensed for each new context. This evolution might be likened to meeting the same person at several different times during the course of a life: each time it is the same person, and yet each time the person is different due to the changes wrought by time and experience.

What is entirely central to my study, though, is the opening of new perspectives on the oft-misrepresented 1896 production of *Ubu Roi*. That has been the specific task of this particular chapter, and it will also be the specific task of every other chapter of this monograph. In this one — by showcasing Jarry’s discovery of Ubu, his belief in the literary potential of the character, his devotion to making significant art out of the figure, and his doggedness in promoting the resulting creations — the narrative delivers a story about persistence and determination. Even in the (outrageous) avant-garde art world of late nineteenth-century France, these virtues were the keys to success. For anyone who has followed the tale of Jarry and Ubu’s symbiosis so far, it should now no longer be possible to think of the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre premiere of *Ubu Roi* as a casual joke perpetrated against the theatre’s audience, or produced on a lark. Rather, it will be recognized that the soon-to-be-historic performances resulted from careful preparation and years of tenacity; from the sum total of Jarry’s small daily efforts to “advance Ubu’s pawn” that were undertaken indefatigably for nearly a decade. And when, in the last analysis, the famous Parisian production is considered from this vantage point, it takes on a new (or, at least, a long-neglected) meaning: its existence is the ultimate reward for Jarry’s dedication.

**Chapter 2:**  
**André Antoine's Adventure**  
**at the *Répetition Générale* of *Ubu Roi***

This study's second resurrected history of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* concerns the behavior of the audience who were present at the Nouveau Théâtre, 15 rue Blanche, Montmartre, on Wednesday, 9 December 1896, for the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre's début performance of this play. What is commonly known about the behavior of that crowd is that it was unruly, disruptive, and borderline riotous.

That conception is essentially correct. In most accounts, though, the basic truth of the idea is then stretched by some distortion, exaggeration, or erroneous reason for the behavior. Part of the purpose of the present dissertation chapter is to correct a general misunderstanding of this famous "riot" by examining the specific identities of *Ubu's* first audience members, the expectations they had for the performance of Jarry's play, the specific nature of their disruptive behavior, and the most likely reasons for it. It is also worth noting in advance that, from the point of view of an 1890s Parisian who was familiar with the customs of theatre-going in that city, the brouhaha at the first

showing of *Ubu Roi* was not surprising in the least. On the contrary, some sort of “riot” was, for them, an expected part of the entertainment.

To tell the story of this occasion accurately, it will be useful to begin with a few eyewitness impressions of the situation among the spectators during the show. Since a plethora of journalists were there, many published descriptions are available. First, an excerpt from a review by Robert Vallier that appeared in the December 12 edition of the daily newspaper *La République Française*, attesting to the continuous nature of the crowd’s intrusions during the play (and to the wide variety of inventive vocal sounds they deployed):

From all parts of the audience arose a flood of protests, a tumult which consisted of shouting, whistling, yowling, howling, and barking, and which found endless pretext to renew itself.<sup>254</sup>

Contrastingly, here is another account with a more favorable regard, by Romain Coolus (pseudonym for René Max Weill), published shortly after the performance in the literary journal *La Revue Blanche*:

Ah! The première of *Ubu Roi*, now that was an excellent night out — and historic! [. . .] At the theatre that night it was raining formidable Paris bigshots, determined to crush the Infamous. And the Infamous, for their part, thrashed about like demons in a fountain of holy water — but what a fountain! This was an incomparable hour, whose like we won't know again any time soon.<sup>255</sup>

And a third, in which the critic’s attitude registers mid-way between the previous examples, capturing the mixed responses of the crowd. This one comes from the

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<sup>254</sup> Robert Vallier, review of *Ubu Roi*, *La République Française* 12 Dec. 1896, rpt. in Henri Robillot, “La Presse d’*Ubu Roi*,” *Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique* 3-4 (1951), 76.

<sup>255</sup> Romain Coolus, Review of *Ubu Roi*, *La Revue Blanche* (1 Jan. 1897), 38.

newspaper *La Patrie*, by a reviewer who used the pen name “*Coquerico*” [“cock-a-doodle-do”]:

The audience applauds, hisses, laughs. They call out to the artists: Bravo! This is shameful! Superb! Idiot! You would not understand Shakespeare either! *etc . . .* And *Ubu Roi*, in the midst of this general racket, manages, with numerous interruptions, to be performed.<sup>256</sup>

Dozens more accounts attest the climate of continually renewed disruption and carnival misrule among *Ubu*'s spectators, with the various critics all existing on a sliding scale from contempt for this atmosphere to ecstatic delight over it. Among those other reviews, though, the one by Catulle Mendès, which appeared in the daily paper *Le Journal*, a large-circulation newspaper of the first order, deserves special consideration:

Whistling and hissing? Yes. Shouts of rage and groans of laughter? Yes. Benches ready to fly onto the set? Yes. The boxes screaming and shaking their fists? Yes. And, in a word, the whole furious crowd leaping to its feet and surging toward the stage [. . .] Yes. And allusions to the eternal imbecility of humanity, eternal lust, eternal gluttony, all misunderstood? Yes, yes, yes, I tell you.<sup>257</sup>

While notable for its vivid details — the shaking fists, the benches ready to be thrown, the rage and laughter combined — what is truly amazing about Mendès's reflection on the show is the fact that he had actually written this review before the performance of *Ubu Roi* even took place.

That detail is known from Rachilde's 1928 biography of Jarry. She relates that, as she and Jarry exited the theatre together, she reproached him for failing to make a

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<sup>256</sup> Coquerico, review of *Ubu Roi*, *La Patrie* 11 Dec. 1896, rpt. in Robillot, 82.

<sup>257</sup> Catulle Mendès, “Premières Représentations,” *Le Journal* 11 Dec. 1896, 2. Regarding the critic's clairvoyance, it is also possible that Mendès was in on Jarry's plans for the clagues in the audience, and therefore knew quite reliably how the audience was going to behave. See note 8, below.

personal gesture of gratitude to Mendès for having sent Jarry advance proofs of the review that he would be publishing.<sup>258</sup> Mendès was a close friend of Rachilde's. Although Jarry had indeed thanked the critic in passing (for an unspecified reason) as part of his pre-show speech, Mendès made it clear to Rachilde during the show that he expected some more significant acknowledgement from the young writer. Rachilde saw to it and shortly thereafter Jarry sent the journalist a sincere letter of thanks.<sup>259</sup> So a disaster was averted for Jarry . . . yet the twenty-first century scholar is left with something of a puzzle: how had Mendès been able to foresee the whistles, the shaking fists, the torn-up benches, the shouting, and, in a word, the whole "riot"?

The answer encompassed by this chapter is simply this: Mendès was intimately familiar with the customs of *fin-de-siècle* Parisian audiences. For him, their behaviors were predictable. Nowhere more so than at the début of an experimental piece given by one of Paris's small avant-garde theatres. The critic did not need to experience the performance of Jarry's play to know how the spectators were going to react because their unruly reaction was normal and expected. No clairvoyance needed: he was merely fluent in the contemporary culture. And, if for some reason the crowd in the theatre behaved differently than anticipated, he could always make some edits to his review before sending it to press.

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<sup>258</sup> Rachilde, *Alfred Jarry, ou Le Surmâle de lettres*. (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1928), 87.

<sup>259</sup> Jarry's letter of thanks to Mendès is published in *OCG1*, 1060.

Indeed, the main subject of this dissertation chapter are certain cultural norms of theatre-going in 1890s Paris that happened to intersect the début performance of Jarry's *Ubu Roi*. Mendès's role in the story is now discharged, though. Hereafter, when a more personal focus is needed, the celebrated André Antoine will come into the limelight, there to serve as a "typical" audience member, or, at least, as a representative audience member of a particular "type."

Since he has been invoked, it will be helpful to say a few words about Antoine at this point. He can be viewed one of the "formidable Paris bigshots" present in the audience at *Ubu Roi*'s first performance. Antoine was the founder and director of the recently-defunct Théâtre Libre, and also a former mentor to Aurélien Lugné-Poe, the director of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre. But well before 1896 he had transformed into a dedicated enemy to his one-time mentee. In later life Antoine gave a newspaper interview which included comments about his own behavior at the historic first performance of Jarry's play: "O, I hissed it with all my might," he explained, "mainly because it was at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre and I made it a point to disrupt all of the plays performed there."<sup>260</sup>

This testimony makes it clear that Antoine had gone into the performance of *Ubu Roi* already planning to behave in an intrusive and unruly manner. Perhaps his antagonistic relationship with Lugné-Poe gave him a special reason for this behavior —

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<sup>260</sup> André Antoine, "Les Theatres: On raconte que . . .," *Le Galois* 4 Jan. 1922, 4. This short interview with André Antoine is from the time of the "Chassé Affair," a mini-scandal in 1922 concerning the authorship and sources of *Ubu Roi*. When asked to comment on the current debate, Antoine shared some recollections of the 1896 premiere. For more on the Chassé Affair see Appendix D.

but special reason or not, such intrusively disruptive behavior at a Parisian play during the 1890s was not particularly exceptional. It was it a culturally established and acceptable way to act. Not only that, but for many spectators who attended the city's small avant-garde theatres during this era, the opportunity to behave disruptively during a performance was a significant part of the pleasure of the occasion.

Embracing that basic orientation, this dissertation chapter argues that the quality which made the first Théâtre de l'Oeuvre performance of *Ubu Roi* so exceptional — and therefore worthy of memorialization — was its “perfection” of the practice of participatory carnivalesque engagement between audience and production. To create an evening in the theatre where the maximum possible disruption would take place, *Ubu*'s author encouraged an established cultural tendency toward the sort of intrusive spectatorship that Mendès foresaw in his pre-written review. Antoine's own pre-inclination to make a scene, for example, was helped along by “spontaneous” shouts of rage or wisecracks made by Jarry's skills planted in the audience.<sup>261</sup> This encouragement was successful, and the audience's own inclinations took over, achieving something well beyond the ordinary disruption that was customary for an avant-garde début, and making the occasion a landmark in the performance history of its era. The end result, as one

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<sup>261</sup> The degree to which the audience's intrusiveness was engineered by Jarry is worth noting. In a memoir, one of the accomplices that Jarry had placed in the audience explained that the playwright had instructed he and his fellows to heckle the show in the extreme: “The scandal has to exceed that of *Phèdre* or *Hernani*,” Jarry told them, “the play must not be allowed to finish.” This is reported by Georges Rémond in his article “Souvenirs sur Jarry et autres,” *Mercure de France* (1 Avril 1955), 664.

reviewer put it, was that the show “offered a framework where everyone could embroider his own pleasure and collaborate in craziness.”<sup>262</sup>

To explicate and support that view of the production, this chapter is divided into seven main parts. (1) To begin, it examines the significant cultural difference between the two separate opening nights undergone by any Parisian theatre production of this era; the first of these being the show’s *répétition générale* and the second the actual *première*. (2) Next for discussion is the demographic composition of the audience who attended *Ubu Roi*, whose two largest groups were already invoked by the excerpt from Coolus’s review: the “notable Paris bigshots” on one hand, and “the Infamous” on the other. (3) Third is an exploration of the expectations of this collection of individuals regarding the show they were attending — their “pre-understanding” of the play, of its genre, and of the socio-cultural conventions associated with witnessing its performance. (4) That exploration is followed by a scrutiny of the rather unusual theatre in which the play was enacted and of the behaviors that this architectural entity may have induced or amplified. (5) Fifth is a careful reconstruction — based on concrete details culled from the many reviewers’ descriptions — of the progression of the evening from the start of the play up until the crowd’s final applauding of the actors. (6) Next comes a survey of several different scholars’ mutually-exclusive explanations for why *Ubu*’s audience behaved in the unruly manner in which they did. (7) And finally, one additional explanation for that unruly audience behavior is proposed for the first time by this study. It derives from the

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<sup>262</sup> Henry Bauër, “Les Première Représentations: *Ubu Roi*,” *Écho de Paris* 12 Dec. 1896, 3.

specific circumstances of – and actions taken by – the featured audience member of this chapter, André Antoine, giving the chapter its title: André Antoine’s Adventure at the *Répétition Générale* of *Ubu Roi*.

### What is a *Répétition Générale*?

A certain cultural distinction, well known to any playgoer in 1890s Paris, is somewhat mystifying to theatre scholars of today. It is the difference between the two completely separate “first performances” that were given for every new dramatic work presented on any of Paris’s stages during the final decades of the nineteenth century. Of these two separate “first performances” experienced by any play, the earlier one would be its *répétition générale* — usually referred to by the second term *générale* on its own. This was, technically, a play’s final dress rehearsal before its opening night, when the work would be acted (free of charge) for an audience consisting solely of theatre critics and invited guests of the artists. On the following day the same play would hold its official *première*, the first performance given for paying customers.

When memoirists and diarists of this period, in their memoirs and diaries, refer to events that took place on the “first night” of this or that play, it is often difficult to know if it is a play’s *générale* or its *première* that is being invoked. Either occasion can reasonably be called the first performance. The archival ambiguity is not even limited to one type of production. Indeed, the tradition of holding two separate first nights applied equally to all Parisian theatre of the *fin de siècle*, regardless of whether a work was given at

a state sponsored theatre such as the Odéon, a commercial venue such as Sarah Bernhard's Théâtre de la Renaissance, or at one of the avant-garde *théâtres à côté* (fringe theatres), such as the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre. In some instances, the custom has left behind significant historiographic challenges. Such is the case with the famous "first night" of *Ubu Roi*.

No scholar who has studied the 1896 Parisian début of Jarry's play would dispute the proposition that a prolonged and consequential disturbance among the audience took place in the theatre during its first performance.<sup>263</sup> However, whether that troubled performance was *Ubu Roi's* *générale* or its *première* is a matter that is still debated by researchers today. Thomas Postlewait, in his 2009 *Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography*, argues that Jarry "succeeded in making a controversy at the *répétition générale*," but that he "failed to do so at the *première*." His judgment agrees with Frantisek Deak's, who, in *Symbolist Theatre: The Formation of an Avant-Garde*, asserted that the *générale* involved ritualistic uproar, while "the opening night (*première*) on December 10 was uneventful." Yet both historians are contradicted by two of Jarry's most recent and most reliable critical biographers, Kieth Beaumont and Alistair Brotchie. For Beaumont, writing in *Jarry: Ubu Roi*, "the play was well-received at the dress rehearsal," but he insists that "at the *première* audience hostility was manifested and interruptions occurred right

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<sup>263</sup> This disturbance is often, but quite misleadingly, referred to as a "riot" in several theatre historical accounts – such as those that were discussed in the Introduction to this dissertation.

from the very beginning of the performance.” This view appears again, even more recently, in Brotchie’s excellent 2011 biography *Alfred Jarry: A Pataphysical Life*.<sup>264</sup>

Why is it that *Ubu* scholars should even care about this particular detail? Does it really make any difference to us today which of the play’s two “first nights” was disrupted by the audience?

In fact, yes, it does make a difference.

I would argue that the matter continues to be an academic controversy today because the meaning of the spectators’ riotous behavior — its essential substance and cultural implication — changes profoundly according to whether the famous disturbance took place on the press night or on the subscribers’ night. (And this shift in cultural meaning, in turn, transforms the crucial role played by *Ubu Roi* in our histories of modernist theatre). More will be said on this point in a short while. But first, to illuminate exactly how the play’s cultural meaning changes, and why the two “first performances” of *Ubu Roi* affected theatregoers differently on different nights, it will be worth taking a moment to examine how the practice of holding multiple first nights came to exist in the first place.

Given the rapid social and economic transformations of nineteenth-century Europe, it will not be surprising to read that a new industrial technology is the root cause

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<sup>264</sup> Thomas Postlewait, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 73; Frantisek Deak, *Symbolist Theatre: The Formation of an Avant-Garde* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 236; Keith Beaumont, *Jarry: Ubu Roi* (London: Grant & Cutler Ltd., 1987), 60; Alastair Brotchie, *Alfred Jarry: A Pataphysical Life* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 159-160.

of the development of the two separate “first nights” on the late nineteenth-century Parisian stage. In this case, the new technology in question consists of advances in mechanical typesetting and printing that allowed for the creation of daily newspapers.

During the early 1800s, Parisian print news had been a weekly phenomenon at best — but by the 1880s, thanks to improved mechanical technologies, newfangled daily newspapers had come into being. The existence of such papers then created the need for new “news” every day with which to fill them. The end-of-the-century public had now developed a need to be informed as promptly as possible about any current events that might be of significance . . . and included among these was their need to know whether a newly opened Parisian play was worth seeing. Demand for instant information on this topic led, in turn, to the city’s theatre critics being invited — not a play’s opening night (which was traditional) — but to the *répétition générale* the day before.<sup>265</sup> Previously that dress rehearsal had been held in relative privacy, but such was no longer the case. With this new practice, in order to situate the critics among a crowded and enthusiastic house, friends of the artists and celebrities were also invited to attend the occasion (free of charge, of course), with the unspoken understanding that these guests would effusively

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<sup>265</sup> F. W. J. Hemmings, *The Theatre Industry in Nineteenth-Century France* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 72-76. Although Parisian theatre critics in the Third Republic attended the *générale* of a play, their actual reviews would not be published until the day after the play’s official *première*. That is: the reviews would be held for twenty-four hours. This was more of a practical necessity than a courtesy. Typical theatrical performances in Paris began at 8:30 p.m. during this era, and they tended to finish at around midnight. The presses for the morning editions of the daily papers began rolling at 1:00 a.m. The one-hour interval between the final curtain and press time was not sufficient for a critic to travel across Paris, write a review, and get it typeset for the morning print run. By holding the review for a day, the critic gained sufficient time to craft a commentary on the performance and deliver it to the compositor in time for it to be incorporated into the edition of the paper that would follow a play’s official *première*. Although what was then published purported to be a review of the *première*, it was really a review of the *générale*.

demonstrate their enjoyment of the play. A snowball effect soon turned these rehearsals into major social occasions. Invited audiences grew to include gossip columnists, sketch artists, men-about-town, and other socialites. Attendance at a *générale* became a full-blown status symbol, and pressure for invitations to them was enormous. To comment on this or that *générale* in public was proof that one was a part of the “in-crowd,” for admission was (theoretically at least) by invitation only. By contrast, anyone at all could buy a ticket for the *première*.

At Paris’s numerous boulevard theatres, and at the city’s state-sponsored venues, productions would go on to have long runs after these two first nights.<sup>266</sup> The situation was different for the avant-garde companies, though. The *fin-de-siècle* Parisian audience for their new and anti-conventional theatre experiments was vigorous, intellectual, and artistic . . . but it was not especially large.<sup>267</sup> After only two showings (which were,

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<sup>266</sup> “Boulevard theatre” in Paris roughly equates to the idea of “West End theatre” in London or “Broadway theatre” in New York. Specifically, the name refers to commercial theatres that, prior to the 1860s, had been concentrated together on Paris’s *boulevard du Temple*. During the nineteenth century the many theatres on this street played mainly comedies, murder mysteries, or melodramas — fare designed to be unchallenging, easily understandable, light entertainment for the city’s bourgeois class. Boulevard theatre upholds established cultural norms and avoids controversial topics (such as politics or religion). During the Haussmannian demolition and reconstruction of the French capital (throughout the 1860s) many of the theatres on the actual *boulevard du Temple* were destroyed, yet the old name “boulevard theatre” continued to be used throughout the 1890s — indeed, it is still used today — to refer to the type of show that is performed in Paris’s many commercially-oriented theatres. “State-sponsored theatres” in 1890s Paris means the Comédie-Française and the Odéon.

<sup>267</sup> For a glimpse into the size and character of the Parisian avant-garde audience, it is helpful to turn to some of Jarry’s own critical writings on 1890s theatre. In them Jarry discusses the role played in society by the fringe theatre companies. He notes that these elite ventures are not intended for popular audiences, but have nonetheless become “the regular theatres for a small number” of Parisians (Jarry, *OCG1*, 414). He also refers to this minority audience as the “five hundred healthy minds” who, in all France, are the only ones who have the mental capacity to participate in the “active pleasure” of experimental theatre (*OCG1*, 406). My point here is only that the Parisian avant-garde audience is a small, but very real, demographic of contemporary society.

necessarily, the *générale* and the *première*) any programs presented by the Théâtres Libre, d'Art, or de l'Oeuvre, would already have been seen by their entire potential market.<sup>268</sup>

For this reason, only two performances (per play) were ever offered by these companies.<sup>269</sup> And of those two performances, the invited *générale* was still held to be far more prestigious from the audience's perspective, for exactly the same reasons as in the commercial theatres.

In a contemporary article about the Parisian fringe theatres of the 1890s, one avant-garde theatre insider explained, wryly, that “men of wealth often devote entire days to securing an invitation to one of these free performances, when, otherwise, in a very few minutes and at a very moderate price, they could secure excellent seats.”<sup>270</sup> But those purchased seats would, of course, have to be for the official ticketed *première*: an occasion which, as F. W. J. Hemmings notes in his 1993 study *The Theatre Industry in Nineteenth Century France*, held (for the Parisian smart set) all of the cultural excitement of re-

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<sup>268</sup> For more detail on this topic see the discussion of Andre Antoine's business model for the Théâtre Libre in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, pages 103-105.

<sup>269</sup> In the specific case of the premiere of *Ubu Roi*, the two-performances-only detail is emphasized in the curtain speech made by Jarry at the *générale*, in which he explains that Firmin Gémier, the actor playing the principal role in the play, is available to perform as Ubu for these two nights only. For more details of Jarry's curtain speech, see *Selected Works of Alfred Jarry* (New York: Grove Press.,1965), 76-78.

<sup>270</sup> A. Ferdinand Herold, “M. Antoine and the Théâtre Libre,” *The International Monthly: A Magazine of Contemporary Thought* (May 1901): 515. As it happens, the author of this article, A.-Ferdinand Herold, was a close friend of Jarry. In fact, Herold participated in the 1896 production of *Ubu Roi* as a stage hand. He operated the lighting for the theatre, the trap door for the play, and did a few other backstage odd-jobs during the show.

warmed “left-overs from last night’s banquet.”<sup>271</sup> Anyone who “mattered” simply had to be at the *générale*.

So the point at hand here is essentially this: according to the cultural logic of the era, whenever one is considering exciting developments that occurred primarily among an audience who are attending the “first night” of a *fin-de-siècle* fringe theatre production in Paris, it stands to reason that the “first night” in question is most likely to have been the play’s *générale* and not its *première*, for it was really only the *générale* which held the crackle of adventure for theatregoers of this era. Moreover, it is worth underscoring that it was only the *générale* which was going to be reported-on in the newspapers. Thus, if newspaper reviews of a play discuss any shenanigans undertaken by an audience, these must necessarily have occurred on that occasion, since the gentlemen of the press would not have been present to witness the behavior of the crowd at the *première*.

Some scholars who have written about the 1896 Théâtre de l’Oeuvre début of *Ubu Roi* mistakenly assume that the play was closed by its producers after the second performance.<sup>272</sup> In this erroneous version of the play’s history the piece is supposedly withdrawn from the stage when the producers suddenly discover that the work is objectionable to audiences. As evidence to support this narrative, the spurious tale of a first-word “*merdre*” riot is usually deployed and elaborated in some way. While this construction of events is misleading and inaccurate, it is nonetheless based on two key

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<sup>271</sup> Hemmings, 73.

<sup>272</sup> Such is the position of many of the authors cited in the Introduction to this dissertation. Please refer to its first five pages for details.

details that are true. Namely: only two performances of *Ubu Roi* were ever given in 1896 by the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre; and one of those performances was significantly disrupted by the intrusive behavior of the audience.

Happily, the widespread misunderstanding of the play's short run has been redressed by more recent, more careful scholarship. (The play was not cancelled after the second showing; rather, the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre only ever intended to give two performances of it). Yet even among the corrective studies — as noted earlier — debate persists over whether it was the *générale* or the *première* that was the troubled performance. Personally, I find it difficult to see why any scholarly disagreement on this point should exist. The only way I have been able to make sense of the controversy is to consider: (1) the different agendas that various scholars have had when writing about the play; in conjunction with (2) the way in which the overall cultural meaning of the disrupted performance changes according to whether the famous “riot” was enacted by the publicity-conscious glitterati (attendees of the *générale*) or by the theatre company's more austere subscribers (patrons of the *première*).

In one case, if the tumult among the audience took place at *Ubu Roi*'s invited dress rehearsal, when dozens of journalists were present, then there is the strong possibility that the fashionable crowd's unruly behavior was enacted mainly for the sake of the press coverage it would create.<sup>273</sup> But in the other case, if the brouhaha occurred the following evening, when a more conservative audience was in attendance, but the

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<sup>273</sup> This is the interpretation favored by Postlewait and Deak.

press was absent, then it suggests that the spectators may have been genuinely offended by what occurred on stage.<sup>274</sup>

If evidence were truly weighted equally between these two possibilities, then the memory of the occasion would be a matter of which story a particular scholar prefers to tell. But this is not the case, for the evidence does not weigh equally. When the data is evaluated objectively, it becomes clear that the disrupted performance had to have been the *générale* and not the *première*. This conclusion is supported both by the cultural logic of the time (i.e., the vainglorious publicity-seeking crowd of a *générale* was much more likely to have behaved extravagantly than the more modest crowd of a *première*), and by the very fact that the tumult is described in many newspaper reviews of the play (i.e., since the critics witnessed it, it had to have been at the performance they attended). More persuasive than both of these factors, though, is the direct testimony of Firmin Gémier, the actor who played the title role of Ubu for the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in 1896.

Several years after the production, Gémier gave an interview on the subject of the audience's differing behavior at the two performances. The title of that published interview is, in fact, "Firmin Gémier Tells Us What Happened at the *Répétition Générale* and the *Première* of *Ubu Roi*."<sup>275</sup> The interview is well-known to any *Ubu* scholar; and

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<sup>274</sup> This is the interpretation favored by Beaumont and Brotchie.

<sup>275</sup> Valbelle, Roger. "M. Firmin Gémier nous dit ce que furent la répétition générale et la première d'*Ubu Roi*." *Excelsior* (4 November 1921):4. See "Appendix D" of this dissertation for a translation of the complete transcript of the interview with Gémier.

there is no evidence of any sort which contradicts it.<sup>276</sup> In the interview, the actor has just finished discussing the raucous behavior of the invited celebrity audience at the first “first night,” and then he goes on to tell of his own preparations for the following evening:

After that *générale* we expected that the opening night audience could do any crazy thing at all. I armed myself with a tramway horn, a resounding instrument that is no longer used today, and I said to myself: ‘If things get heated up, I’ll blow on this like Roland at Roncevaux.’<sup>277</sup>

But as Gémier continues his story, it turns out that he did not need to make use of the horn at the play’s official *première*. His explanation: “as is always the case, the audience on the opening night was less impassioned than the audience at the *générale*.”

### **On the Composition of the First Audience of *Ubu Roi*: Who Were They?**

In the previous chapter of this study there was an examination of the extensive publicity campaign that was run by Jarry immediately prior to *Ubu Roi*’s 1896 début at the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre. As a result of it, practically the whole of literary and artistic

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<sup>276</sup> Beaumont denies this. He wishes to perpetuate the belief that the bourgeois attendees of the *première* behaved in the outraged manner that has been traditionally assigned to them by avant-garde theory. He therefore asserts that Gémier is “misremembering” the events at *Ubu Roi*, and he claims also that the actor’s testimony is “contradicted by other eye-witnesses” (60). Yet Beaumont never states who these other witnesses are, nor does he quote them. In my own careful search of the archive, I have found nothing at all to contradict Gémier, and much circumstantial evidence that supports his account.

<sup>277</sup> “Roland at Roncevaux”: in *The Song of Roland (La Chanson de Roland)*, a Medieval epic poem dating from the twelfth century (also the oldest surviving major work of French literature) the hero, Roland, sounds his elephant tusk horn to alert the Emperor Charlemagne to the ambush and destruction of the rear guard of his army in a mountain pass through Spain. Roland, already dying at the time of the sounding of his horn, blows the horn so hard that his head explodes. The name of the mountain pass where the ambush occurs is Roncevaux.

Paris became eager to see his much-talked-about new play. The demand received by the company for invitations to the *générale*, and for complimentary seats at the *première*, was much greater than usual. One surviving testament to the cultural importance of being present at the occasion is the case of the up-and-coming *fin-de-siècle* writer Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette. Jarry, personally, had “formally and more than once” promised Colette tickets to the performance, but had forgotten to post them. In last minute desperation, she sent a day-of-*générale* telegram to the editors of the symbolist-inclined literary journal the *Mercur de France* imploring their assistance: “I beg you to give me some way of getting in this evening, even if it has to be in the gods.”<sup>278</sup>

The editors did get Colette in that night, and thanks to their literary exchange the episode stands now as a signal example of *Ubu Roi*'s cultural magnetism. But Colette is just one person. “The whole of literary and artistic Paris” is many people, and encompasses people of different sorts. It will be helpful to understand exactly who they were, these literary and artistic people who became the play's first and most mythologized spectators. For this reason, the immediate focus of this chapter is not on the excited anticipation and expectations of the audience — that topic is addressed in the chapter's next segment — but on the identity of audience itself.

At the broadest level, those who came to the first production of *Ubu Roi* can be sorted into two main divisions. On one hand, the crowd involved quite a large number

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<sup>278</sup> Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette, “Carte-Telegramme de Colette Willy à ‘Monsieur Alfred Valette (ou Madame),” reproduced in *Cahiers du College de Pataphysique* 10(1953): 85. The telegram is dated 9 December 1896. Here is a larger example of the untranslated text: “C'est ce soir qu'on joue *Ubu roi*. Jarry m'a promis plus d'une fois et formellement des places pour sa répétition. Il m'oublie à présent [ . . . ] Je vous supplie de me donner un moyen quelconque d'entrer ce soir, fût-ce au Paradis.”

of *fin-de-siècle* Parisian celebrities (such as Colette and the editors of the *Mercur*). On the other hand, the audience simultaneously included an even larger number of notoriously un-celebrated new-wave bohemians. Both of these audience categories are further characterized and populated below.

The first of the two groups — the rich and famous of Parisian arts and letters — accounted for approximately thirty percent of the spectators who attended the show. These were successful authors, well-known painters, newspaper critics, art collectors, publishers, editors of literary journals, composers, even members of the *Académie française* . . . all of them together with their individual companions and entourages. Collectively they were distinguished luminaries from a variety of fields. But most significantly: because they were all notables, they were, in fact, noted. Their behaviors at the play were written about in reviews, in articles, in diaries, and in memoirs penned by themselves and by others who were present. By cross-referencing several accounts and commentaries, it is possible to identify dozens of specific celebrities who were definitely present at this occasion. Here is a sampling:

Important Critics:

**Francisque Sarcey** (1827-1899, **age 69**), critic for *Le Temps*, chief dictator of dramatic criticism for Parisian theatre during this era.

**Jules Lemaître** (1853-1914, **age 43**), drama critic for the *Journal des Debats*, member of the *Académie Française*.

**Henry Bauer** (1851-1915, **age 45**), drama critic for the *Echo de Paris*, very sympathetic to the avant-garde, known as a sort of avant-garde king maker, he was the love child of Alexandre Dumas. (That would be Alexandre Dumas *père*, of course).

**Henry Fouquier** (1838-1901, **age 58**), drama critic for *Le Figaro*, former Minister of the Interior, also former Official Censor of the Parisian Press.

**Henry Cèard** (1851-1924, **age 45**), drama critic for *Le Matin*, and novelist in the school of Naturalism.

**Catulle Mendès** (1841-1909, **age 55**), drama critic for *Le Journal*, one of the chief supporters of *Ubu*, but ultimately ended up fighting a duel with Lugné-Poe over complications arising from this evening.

#### Major Celebrities:

**Andre Antoine** (1858-1943, **age 38**), inventor of private theatre clubs such as the *Théâtre de l'Oeuvre*, former director of the *Théâtre Libre* (which had gone bankrupt two years previously).

**Victorien Sardou** (1831-1908, **age 65**), author of several very successful boulevard dramas, many written specifically for Sarah Bernhardt, and member of the *Académie Française*.

**Edmond Rostand** (1868-1918, **age 28**), successful boulevard playwright, like Sardou, but much younger and more neo-Romantic, famed particularly for his play *Cyrano de Bergerac*.

**Émile Zola** (1840-1902, **age 56**), foundational Naturalist author, crusading champion of Alfred Dreyfus and precipitator of the decade long and highly divisive Dreyfus Affair.

**Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette**, known simply as **Colette** (1873-1954, **age 23**), soon to be a famously scandalous bi-sexual, author of the semi-pornographic *Claudine* novels which were published under the name of her then (in 1896) husband, Henri Gauthier-Villar, who was known simply as “Willy”

**Willy** (1859-1931, **age 37**), famously extravagant and bisexual first husband of Colette, a literary charlatan, music critic, and well-known man-about-town.

#### Well-Known Painters:

**Henry de Toulouse Lautrec** (1864-1901, **age 32**)

**Paul Serusier** (1864-1929, **age 32**)

**Pierre Bonnard** (1867-1947, **age 29**)

together with Jarry these three had finished painting the scenery only a few hours before the show.

**Paul Gauguin** (1848-1903, **age 48**), between trips to Tahiti he found time to attend *Ubu*, he even wrote a review of it. He was a particular friend of Jarry.

Prominent Anglophones:

**Arthur Symons** (1865-1945, **age 31**), art, literature, music and drama critic, Symbolist poet, close friend of . . .

**William Butler Yeats** (1865-1939, **age 31**), who was there even though he did not understand a word of French.

**Lord Alfred Douglas** (1870-1945, **age 26**), nicknamed “Bosie,” paramour of Oscar Wilde (who was currently incarcerated in Reading). Throughout the rehearsal period of *Ubu* he and Jarry are reported to have been running around Paris together.

This list could be extended to several times its present length without encountering a shortage of smart-set personalities to add to it. But the point of iterating all these names of celebrities who were in attendance lies in the simple facts that they were celebrities, their lives were well-documented, and they are therefore reasonably easy to research.

The second main category of spectators who were present for *Ubu*'s debut were the ubiquitously un-celebrated new-wave bohemians. These outnumbered those in the previous category by two to one. This less luminous group consisted of all the proletarians and fellow travelers of Parisian arts and letters who filled approximately sixty percent of the seats at any Théâtre de l'Oeuvre performance. Included here are: starving poets, aspiring *montmartrois* art students, artistically-inclined political adventurers (i.e.,

dilettante anarchists), venders of supplies used by the theatre company, friends and girlfriends and drinking comrades of the (mostly amateur) performers in the show, as well as the companions of all these individuals. Though the celebrities did not care for their presence, the theatre company did, for this crowd tended to be enthusiastic supporters of their offerings. Collectively these bohemian spectators were earnest, energetic, noisy, culturally-experimental, and, on average, significantly younger than those in the first category.<sup>279</sup> On their own they constituted an openly anti-conventional majority at any Théâtre de l’Oeuvre production.

The Theatre de l’Oeuvre was especially well known to average 1890s Parisians — even to those who would never even consider attending one of its productions — for its practice of welcoming this “alternative” audience. Such notoriety for the theatre resulted from the fact that this large subset of the company’s clientele was often elaborately disdained by the mainstream conservative press, who did regularly review the company’s experimental productions. Sarcey of *Le Temps*, for instance, sneers at (what he regards as) the antisocial mores of the “very special audience one finds at performances by the l’Oeuvre.”<sup>280</sup> Many other critics follow Sarcey in disparaging the theatre’s regular customers, with one notable exception being the progressive critic Henry Bauër of

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<sup>279</sup> Individuals belonging to this segment of the audience were mostly — though not exclusively — in their twenties. The youth of this group makes good historical sense. Presumably they felt a kinship with the theatre’s young bohemian managers: director, Aurélien Lugné-Poe, was twenty-six years old at the time of *Ubu Roi*; author Jarry was twenty-three. Both movers and shakers of alternative culture of 1890s Paris.

<sup>280</sup> Francisque Sarcey, review of *Ubu Roi*, *Le Temps* 14 Dec. 1896, rpt. in Robillot, “La Press,” 75.

*L'Écho de Paris*. Bauër portrayed the company's young patrons in more favorable terms: "a crowd different from all other crowds in their cerebral capacity, in the shape of their beards, the styling of their hair, and the cut of their clothes."<sup>281</sup> He especially appreciates their sartorial flair: "Who can fail to take note of the long frock coats with velvet collars, the enormous capes with silver clasps?"<sup>282</sup> Other critics' reviews make one aware of the bohemians' lace cuffs, ornately sculpted mustaches, overly elaborate cravats, beribboned monocles, hussar-style riding breeches, and various types of headgear from bygone eras.<sup>283</sup>

The members of the "special audience" clearly went to great lengths with their attire. Their practice of dressing-up for performances by the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre undoubtedly elevated their sense of occasion and of participation in the production, helping them become even more a part of the show. Perhaps the eccentric costumes also derived from a desire to bemuse or perturb the audience's other factions. (To rile staid and perpetually disapproving critics such as Sarcey, for instance). For this bohemian subset of the congregation, enjoying an evening at Lugué-Poe's theatre did not depend

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<sup>281</sup> Henry Bauër, "Les Premières Représentations," *L'Écho de Paris* 24 Jan. 1895, 3.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>283</sup> For a more detailed description of the bohemian costumes in the audience see Francis Jourdain's memoir, *Né en 76* (Paris: Éditions du Pavillon, 1951), 207-208. I focused on details of the men's attire, but the bohemian women of the l'Oeuvre were equally flamboyant. They were especially noted for their loose and colorful velvet gowns "*à la* Botticelli" and a particular medieval-inspired hairstyle that involved parting the hair in the center, braiding it into a right plait and a left plait, then coiling the braids and holding them in place over the ears with a headband. This apparently made them look as though they had no ears. Critics refer to them as "petites botticelliennes," "headbanded girls," or "girls with no ears" in their various reviews.

solely (nor even primarily) on their liking the piece that was presented on stage. The “special audience” was there for larger social and (sub)cultural reasons: they were young people consuming fashionable and experimental culture that was created by and intended for young people. Of course, they — like the celebrities mentioned earlier — had also come specifically to see *Ubu Roi*, but if the play being performed by the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre on 9 December 1896 had been something else, they would have been there anyway. They would have been just as elaborately dressed, and just as prepared to play their highly participatory role in support of a vigorous young theatre at a recurring occasion.<sup>284</sup>

According to foundational data compiled by Noël Arnaud for his 1974 biography of Jarry, there were a total of one thousand spectators present at the original Théâtre de l’Oeuvre performance of *Ubu Roi*.<sup>285</sup> It was Arnaud who first explained that ninety percent of this crowd could be easily sorted into the two broad denominations described above: the celebrities on the one hand (including their entourages), the young bohemians

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<sup>284</sup> The “recurring occasion” in this case refers to the first public showing of a Théâtre de l’Oeuvre production. Each production by the company obviously had its very own *début* performance, yet each one of these was surrounded by identical customs (one might even say “rituals”) undertaken by the company’s mixed audience. As discussed earlier, the customs were different at the *générale* than they were at the *première*.

<sup>285</sup> Noël Arnaud, *Alfred Jarry: d’Ubu Roi au Docteur Faustroll* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1974), 321-322. For an assessment of Arnaud’s impressive archive of primary data pertaining to the production of *Ubu Roi*, see Chapter 1, note 85. As for the “one thousand spectators” that he mentions, this is very close to the 1,098-seats that exist this same theatre’s seating plan today, in the twenty-first century. It is still an active performance venue, though the name of the theatre has changed since 1896. It is now called the Théâtre de Paris. For more information visit [www.theatredeparis.com](http://www.theatredeparis.com). A detailed description of the theatre as it existed in 1896 is included in a later segment of this chapter.

on the other.<sup>286</sup> Approximately three hundred members of the début audience belonged to the first group, and approximately six hundred belonged to the second.<sup>287</sup> Arnaud made a point of emphasizing that this proportioning of the audience was true “not only for *Ubu Roi*, but for all the performances of the l’Oeuvre.”<sup>288</sup> The consistent result was a joyously volatile, ticklish, playfully antagonistic, and temperamental blend of multiple social classes and age groups. It is also worth remembering here that all of these spectators were non-paying invited guests of the company. Practically none of them ever purchased a seat in the theatre.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> This leaves only ten percent of the audience who might be considered “ordinary” theatre goers (neither celebrated nor bohemian). Since it was only possible to attend a show at the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre either by invitation (that is: for free) or by purchasing a subscription for the full season, this minority group most likely consisted of bourgeois Parisians who were actively interested in experimental culture. Such is clearly the social class of the theatre’s paying customers. Their subscription tickets, however, would have been for the *première* (10 Dec.) and not for the *générale* (9 Dec), which, as we know, was the more energetically received of the two performances of *Ubu Roi*. With this being the case, is difficult to say what sort of people might have constituted the “unaligned” ten percent of the audience for the *générale*. Perhaps this group was even smaller than Arnaud suggests.

<sup>287</sup> Here is Arnaud’s quantification of the young bohemians: “there were six hundred spectators in the upper galleries: friends of the author and the set painters and the stagehands and the caretaker, students, painters, anarchist fellow travelers, suppliers who were being compensated in this way for unpaid debts, as well as the girlfriends and the friends and the girlfriends of the friends of all these people” (321). He goes on to describe their costumes and their generally antagonistic disposition to the newspaper critics and other representatives of official culture. He also makes a particular point of noting that neither the bohemians nor the celebrities had purchased tickets for the performance – they were all invited (non-paying) guests.

<sup>288</sup> Arnaud, 321.

<sup>289</sup> The Théâtre de l’Oeuvre was a subscription-based members-only theatre club. The company had about two hundred subscribers (who attended the *première* – the second night). This exclusivity allowed the company to circumvent censorship regulations of the era. Any interested theatergoer could join the club by purchasing a subscription for the company’s entire season, but it was not legally possible to buy a ticket for just one show. For more on this topic see Robert Justin Goldstein’s chapter on “France” in *The Frightful Stage: Political Censorship of the Theater in Nineteenth Century Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 116. See also Chapter 1 of this study, footnote 177.

One key observation can be added to Arnaud's findings, though. Namely: for both of these main groupings within the auditorium, the world of avant-garde theatre and the world of public life were quite deeply intertwined. All of the witnesses who came to see Jarry's play knew that their behavior while at the performance was noteworthy public behavior. It was on display; was being observed; and would generate an immediate response from others who were also present in the theatre. This condition of performative self-awareness was experienced just as much by the celebrities and critics as it was by the costumed young bohemians. They all came to the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre not only as spectators, but as performers; there to display allegiances and opinions; there to perform their audience-ness. In other words, they were all at the theatre as much to be a part of the show as to see it.

### **The Parisian Audience and Its Horizon of Expectations**

A special "buzz" had developed in the Parisian avant-garde community in anticipation of the performance of Jarry's play.<sup>290</sup> The l'Oeuvre's audience were eagerly awaiting Ubu's arrival on the boards, and they definitely knew what his first word was going to be. One spectator characterized the mood and energy of the assembled crowd just before the show began as follows: "The audience was well informed and well

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<sup>290</sup> For quotations from 1896 Parisian newspapers attesting to this fact, see Chapter 1, footnotes 222-226.

disposed. They expected enormities and desired them. Even the ladies were determined not to take offense.”<sup>291</sup>

Some of what is included in the audience’s expectation and desire for “enormities” is clear and on the surface of that observation. The advertising had promised a revolutionary *mise-en-scène* involving masks, puppet-like performances, and a new type of anti-realistic scenery. Also there was real interest in and excitement about the script’s gratuitous use of taboo utterances such as “shit-*re*” and “open up in the name of my shit-*re*,” its use of endearments such as “madame of my shit-*re*” and “son of my shit-*re*,” and its inclusion of such food items as “cauliflower stewed in shit-*re*” in the banquet scene.<sup>292</sup> These things were, of course, outrageous and were titillating for the spectators. Yet there is a deeper dimension to the original audience’s desire for “enormities” that is not immediately apparent to non-*fin-de-siècle* non-Parisians. What remains hidden is the fact that many of the longed-for enormities were expected to be supplied by the audience itself.

To make meaningful sense of this, it will be helpful to survey a few of the (outrageous) behavioral conventions of Parisian theatergoing that were common in the historical moment of *Ubu*’s début. Many individuals who came to *Ubu Roi* had

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<sup>291</sup> Quoted in René Druart, “Un témoignage sur la générale d’*Ubu Roi*,” *Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique* 20 (1955): 53.

<sup>292</sup> The word *merdre* (shit-*re*) appears in the script of *Ubu Roi* thirty-two times. Often it is pronounced on its own, but just as often it appears in compound forms. Those quoted here can be found, respectively, in: act 3, scene 3 (“Ouvrez, de par ma merdre”); act 3, scene 7 (“Madame de ma merdre”); act 4, scene 3 (“Garçon de ma merdre”); act 1, scene 3 (“Choux-fleurs à la merdre”).

foreknowledge of the play's script, thanks to Jarry's publicity blitz. An even greater number of them had specific foreknowledge of the style of production that was usually presented by the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre. But every single one of the spectators had a cultural familiarity with the particular range of participatory behaviors that were available to them when attending a theatre performance in this environment. When combined together, these three elements — the attendee's foreknowledge of the script, of the l'Oeuvre's style of presentation, and of contemporary behavioral norms — formed the audience's Horizon of Expectations for the event that they would attend. In the case of the premiere of *Ubu Roi*, each of these elements involved "enormities."

The term "Horizon of Expectations" is being borrowed here from the Reception Theory originally articulated in 1982 by the German literary scholar Hans Robert Jauss. Jauss urged that any critic who assesses the historical impact of a literary work should first establish the historical audience's "pre-understanding" of the work in question.<sup>293</sup> This amounts to asking what ideas the audience may have had about the work prior to it being available for their consumption. These ideas form the *expectations* of the historical reader, and they are determined by a number of factors: the reader's prior knowledge of a work's author, the work's genre, other pieces of its type, contemporary socio-cultural conventions with which it engages, and the overall "objectifiable system of expectations that arises for each work in the historical moment of its appearance."<sup>294</sup> Jauss's reason

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<sup>293</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 22.

<sup>294</sup> Jauss, 22.

for laying this foundation of an audience's "pre-understanding" is so that later critical evaluation of a work's impact may examine to what extent it fulfilled (or failed to fulfill) the expectations of its consumers.<sup>295</sup> Since a portrait of the historical premiere of *Ubu Roi* that is drawn from this anticipatory perspective will be helpful for this chapter's argument, some behavioral norms and expectations involved with attending theatre in *fin-de-siècle* Paris will now be characterized.

Speaking broadly, the ritual of attending theatre in nineteenth-century Paris was a highly participatory practice. Individuals did not go passively to this city's performance halls to receive entertainment. Rather, they went to take up an energetic role at a public occasion. Even as late as the 1890s, when a boulevard play began to displease a working class Parisian audience it was common for the crowd to "shower the stage and the auditorium with the leftovers from their meager supper."<sup>296</sup> The custom is noted in travelogues of many foreign visitors. Meanwhile at the high-class state-run Odéon, whose audience had a significant portion of students due to its location in the Latin Quarter, every night the crowd would compete to fill the house with imitations of the cries of wild animals, turning the theatre into a veritable jungle when lulls in the

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<sup>295</sup> The case for the usefulness of Jauss's literary Reception Theory to the field of theatre studies was previously made by in 1989 by Marvin Carlson in his essay "Theatre Audiences and the Reading of Performance" in *Interpreting the Theatrical Past* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), 82-83.

<sup>296</sup> F. W. J. Hemmings, *The Theatre Industry in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 13. Hemmings is quoting an Italian tourist.

performance occurred.<sup>297</sup> At the city's *cafés-concerts*, it was not at all uncommon to witness a scene such as this:<sup>298</sup> a *chanteuse* comes to the stage to begin her number; her spurned lover rises in the audience and proceeds to insult, heckle, and provoke her for as long as the performance lasts; onlookers join the effort to hound her from the stage.<sup>299</sup>

Examples of aggressive intrusiveness from Parisian spectators throughout the 1890s can be multiplied extensively, but the above suffice to establish a cultural tone of fairly uninhibited audience behavior. In addition to these “spontaneous” forms of participation, it is worth noting also that the employment of a *claque* — an organized group who were paid to enthusiastically applaud a play (or sometimes to shout it down) — was standard practice for nearly all Parisian theatre managers of this era.<sup>300</sup> The overarching theme here is that *fin-de-siècle* French audiences were ready and willing to take an active and participatory part, even an interfering and meddling one, when they visited the theatre. Moreover, such participation was a normal cultural expectation of the era.

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<sup>297</sup> Hemmings, 58. Recall also the review of *Ubu Roi* by Robert Vallier quoted at the start of this chapter which described the audience reaction in terms of animal noises: “hooting, yowling, howling, and barking.”

<sup>298</sup> *Cafés-concerts* (more commonly: *caf'concs*) were a type of musical restaurant that became particularly fashionable in Paris during the Third Republic. Individual singers or small ensembles performed popular music, by day and by night, on their stages. The songs were generally lighthearted, risqué, or bawdy, but rarely overtly political. (Political songs were the fare of *cabarets*, which were not the same thing as *caf'concs*).

<sup>299</sup> See, for example, the accounts given by Richard Harding Davis in his journalistic memoir/guidebook *About Paris* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1895), pages 82-87. In Davis's examples, the café's onlookers regard such episodes as a rightful part of their entertainment.

<sup>300</sup> Thomas Postlewait, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 73. But for a truly thorough discussion of the evolution and working of the *claque* in French theatre from the eighteenth century to World War I, see F. J. W. Hemmings, “La Claque: une institution contestée,” *Revue d'Histoire du Théâtre* 34.3 (1987), 293-309.

Turning, now, to Paris's recently invented avant-garde theatres — the Théâtre Libre, Théâtre d'Art, and Théâtre de l'Oeuvre — one finds that the audience's impulse toward intrusive participation is even more acute here than in the conventional venues.<sup>301</sup> In the regular theatres outbursts such as those described above were normal, but not obligatory. In the avant-garde houses, though, they took place at practically every performance. As Frantisek Deak put it, they happened “with the predictability of a ritual and the playfulness of a game.”<sup>302</sup> This is not merely because of the established cultural norm for unrestrained audience-ing. That tradition was a contributing factor, but the behavioral intensification at the avant-garde theatres was driven more by the fact that the coterie who attended these theatre clubs regarded the productions as open forums on contemporary dramatic art.<sup>303</sup> They were opportunities not only for entertainment, but for a type of energetic theatrical “debate.”

Each avant-garde soirée, as this audience saw it, showcased a particular innovative, conceptual, or experimental position on theatre. As the elite spectators witnessed whatever new theatrical idea the artists offered on the stage, they simultaneously and emphatically performed their acceptance or rejection of that avant-garde proposition. (Which they did through the culturally sanctioned means of heckling,

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<sup>301</sup> The Théâtre Libre was founded by Andre Antoine in 1887 and lasted until 1894. The Théâtre d'Art was founded by Paul Fort in 1891 and lasted until 1893. The Théâtre de l'Oeuvre was founded by Aurélien Lugné-Poe and Camille Mauclair in 1893 and lasted until 1899. Lugné-Poe later revived the company in 1912. It has continued until the present day.

<sup>302</sup> Deak, 181.

<sup>303</sup> Hemmings, 99-100; Deak, 181-183.

cheering, booing, making jokes, shouting, arguing loudly among themselves, and other actions of this sort.) In other words: they seized the opportunity to act out their cultural opinions in a lively and embodied discourse on contemporary drama that was otherwise conducted in newspapers, reviews, and literary salons. And this activity was, for them, an important, public-opinion-making, social ritual. It was more deeply informed, more purposeful, more intellectually derived, and more rigorously engaged than the commotions of the ordinary theatres. It was also customary and expected.

It should be recognized, however, that the avant-garde audience's reactions in the theatre were not necessarily spontaneous. The elite spectators who came to the fringe theatres were always quite well informed about new developments in art, literature, and drama. Many of them took the opportunity to choose their behaviors in advance.<sup>304</sup> In the end, then, it was due to the synergy of all of the factors mentioned here — the established *fin-de-siècle* culture of uninhibited audience behavior, the desirability of avant-garde artistic discourse, the quasi-ritual nature of that performed discourse, and advance planning by individuals — that outbursts, interruptions, and scandals (which were common enough in the regular theatres of *fin-de-siècle* Paris) accompanied the vast majority of offerings by the Théâtre Libre, Théâtre d'Art, or Théâtre de l'Oeuvre.<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> Just as the animal impersonators at the Odéon or the vengeful ex-lover at the *café-concert* (mentioned in the previous paragraph) had self-evidently decided in advance how they were going to behave when they arrived at the theatres.

<sup>305</sup> Several examples for each of these theatres can be cited, ranging from ridiculous to sublime to angry. One from the Théâtre Libre is the continual quacking of the audience throughout that company's April 1891 production of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*. One from the Théâtre d'Art is the running argument among the spectators during the December 1891 performance of the *Song of Songs* — an event at which color-coded scenes were synaesthetically enhanced with fragrances sprayed about the auditorium by

As for *Ubu Roi* in particular, archival evidence confirms that many of the spectators who came to the first showing of this play arrived at the event already intending either to interject themselves into the show, or to cause a disruption. For instance: two weeks before the performance, Lugné-Poe, director of the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre company, received an important letter from his supporters at the literary journal, the *Mercure de France*. It assured him that “all our band of young folks will wholeheartedly support the comrade in question” — the reference is to Jarry and the upcoming performance — and goes on to say that “Armand Silvestre [a notable literary figure] is thrilled to assume the leadership of the claque in the audience.”<sup>306</sup> Here we have one group of approximately thirty of Jarry’s peers — mostly men in their twenties — coming solely to cheer loudly for the show, regardless of whether it was any good. But at the same time, entirely unknown to Lugné-Poe (or anyone else involved in preparing the production), Jarry had also recruited a completely separate second claque from among the customers at a cheap café near his apartment where he often took his

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stagehands. A disruptive quarrel paralleled this show, fought between those who amused themselves by mocking the performance as it unfolded and those who found it to be a magnificent innovation. An example from the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre is the overtly political shouting match between opposing camps at Lugné-Poe’s November 1893 pro-anarchist staging of Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* which led to police intervention. For details on specific audience behavior at each of these occasions see: Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 248-250; Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, “Mise en Scent: The Théâtre d’Art’s *Cantique des cantiques* and the Use of Smell as a Theatrical Device,” *Theatre Research International* 24.2 (1999), 155-156; Frantisek Deak, *Symbolist Theatre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 199-203. See also Neil Blackadder’s *Performing Opposition* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 42-43, for general commentary on the subject of avant-garde audiences.

<sup>306</sup> “Dossier: Jarry à L’Oeuvre,” collected and presented by Henri Bourdillon, *L’Étoile-Absinthe* 4 (Dec. 1979): 12. Armand Silvestre was also mentioned and quoted in the previous chapter of this dissertation. He is one of the journalists who wrote a preview article about the upcoming production of *Ubu Roi* that was published in the daily newspaper *Le Journal* in September 1896.

meals. Again this was a group numbering around thirty, some of whom, such as Georges Rémond, later published memoirs. Rémond recounted Jarry's instructions: "we were to provoke uproar by uttering cries of rage if there was applause [. . .] or cries of admiration and ecstasy if there was booing."<sup>307</sup> So, no matter what anyone really thought of the play, the hiring of two diametrically opposed clagues guaranteed in advance that there would be spirited controversy, disruption, and "debate" among the audience.

These were merely two of the clagues who are known to have been present on the occasion of *Ubu Roi's* first showing. Others were there, each with its own specific agenda.<sup>308</sup> But planned disruptions of Parisian theatre productions also occurred on an individual level. Throughout the nineteenth century individual and personalized assaults on performances were a fairly regular phenomenon. There is the ready example of the spurned lover at the *café-concert*, already mentioned above. And Thomas Postlewait iterates several occasions of French artists attending productions of the works of other artists solely for the purpose of causing a disturbance.<sup>309</sup> So it is hardly surprising to find evidence that this also occurred at *Ubu Roi*. The present chapter, in fact, began with an

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<sup>307</sup> Georges Rémond, "Souvenirs sur Jarry et autres," *Mercur de France* (1 Avril 1955), 664-665.

<sup>308</sup> Another documentable clague came to the show with the influential theatre critic Henry Bauër, who is the central subject of Chapter 4 of this dissertation. This critic was noted by colleagues for attending theatre productions with his own personal "troop of cronies," "herd of fools," or "chorus of crazed admirers" (87) — as they were variously described — who would cheer or jeer at Bauër's direction and perform "menacing zealotry in the theatre auditoriums." The quotations here are from Robillot's "La Presse d'*Ubu Roi*" in the *Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique* 3-4 (1951), pages 86-87. Specifically it is the articles of the critic Henri Fouquier from 11 and 13 December 1896 that are being quoted. Other reviewers confirm that Bauër's clague was with him in force at *Ubu Roi*, loudly demanding that the actors perform "the scene of the bear" (Act 4, scene 6), which had been cut from the production (Robillot, 83).

<sup>309</sup> Postlewait, 73.

example of this phenomenon. It involved André Antoine, founder and director of the recently-defunct Théâtre Libre. In an interview about his experience at *Ubu*'s debut, Antoine explains: "O, I hissed it with all my might, mainly because it was at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre and I made it a point to disrupt all of the plays performed there."<sup>310</sup> But Antoine did not shout down Lugné-Poe's productions out of anger. He engaged in such behavior because he enjoyed mocking his rival's work. This was fun for him. Like many others in the audience, Antoine came to *Ubu Roi* with a pre-set script for how he would act, fully intending to make a spectacle of himself.

One eyewitness's account of *Ubu*'s first performance captures the audience's delight in its own disruptive behavior particularly well. It describes the comportment of the celebrated man-about-town Willy. ("Willy" was the pen name of the music critic and novelist Henry Gauthier-Villars). Just when a vigorous exchange of oppositional shouting between audience factions died down, Willy climbed on his bench in the orchestra and began "waving his famous flat-brimmed hat, yelling to the crowd: 'let's keep it going.'" The witness notes: "he considered the only important scene to be the one in the audience."<sup>311</sup> Yet it was not only Willy who felt this way — his inclination was shared by many other spectators. It did not matter whether the play was bad, exquisite, revolutionary, vulgar, or otherwise. It was the participatory, no-holds-barred experience of audience-ing something in this contested environment at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre that

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<sup>310</sup> André Antoine, "Les Theatres: On raconte que . . .," *Le Galois* 4 Jan. 1922, 4.

<sup>311</sup> Rachilde, *Alfred Jarry, ou le Surmâle de lettres* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1928), 80.

was at the core of their enjoyment. And this contest is what many of them had come to the theatre for in the first place. The idea of it — and of its behavioral “enormities” — was firmly in the center of their horizon of expectations.

### **The Nouveau Théâtre, 15 rue Blanche**

One topic that is strangely absent from every published account of the premiere of *Ubu Roi* is any significant discussion of the theatre in which the play was performed: the Nouveau Théâtre, located at 15 rue Blanche in Montmartre. The few brief references to this theatre that do exist in the scholarly literature are contradictory and, collectively, they only add confusion to the historical occasion. In *The Banquet Years*, for example, Roger Shattuck writes of “the old Théâtre Nouveau in the Rue Blanche” and suggests it was a decrepit and disreputable venue.<sup>312</sup> But in *Symbolist Performance*, Frantisek Deak, refers to the same venue in the same year, 1896, as “the luxurious and modern Théâtre Nouveau.”<sup>313</sup> Other scholars bring other puzzles to the fore. In *Performing Opposition*, Neil Blackadder explains that “the theatre in which the Oeuvre presented *Ubu Roi*, the Nouveau Théâtre on Rue Blanche, held around one thousand spectators, and the house was close to full.”<sup>314</sup> But in *Dada and Surrealist Performance*, Annabelle Melzer asserts that

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<sup>312</sup> Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France, 1885 to World War I* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 205-206.

<sup>313</sup> Frantisek Deak, *Symbolist Theatre: The Formation of an Avant-Garde* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 224.

<sup>314</sup> Neil Blackadder, *Performing Oppositions: Modern Theater and the Scandalized Audience* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 53.

*Ubu*'s first audience consisted of "two to three thousand people who filled to capacity the Nouveau Théâtre."<sup>315</sup> Obviously a theatre cannot be old, modern, decrepit, and luxurious all at the same time. Nor can it vary its capacity by more than a thousand seats per night.

Historically speaking, though, it is not the age or size or luxuriousness of this building that is important. Rather, what matters is how this venue may have affected its patrons; for the theatre in which a play is performed is just as much a part of the show as the work's title, the actors who appear in it, or the author. So, the question that really ought to be asked about the Nouveau Théâtre in relation to the first performance of *Ubu Roi* is: how may the spectators' experience of this particular theatre have shaped their response to the play?

In regard to this sort of question, theatre historian and semiotician Marvin Carlson's 1989 study *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* offers a useful and relevant methodology for interrogating any performance space. In that work Carlson illustrates the several ways in which "places of performance generate social and cultural meanings of their own which in turn help to structure the meaning of the entire theatre experience."<sup>316</sup> The book's various chapters look at "not only at the traditional elements of stage and auditorium but at every distinct element of the theatre complex for what it

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<sup>315</sup> Annabelle Melzer, *Dada and Surrealist Performance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1994), 114.

<sup>316</sup> Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 2.

may reveal about the meanings of [any particular theatre] building for its society.”<sup>317</sup>

Specifically, the aspects of the theatre building which are focused upon are: the location of the theatre within the overall urban plan, the external appearance of the building, the spaciousness and partitioning of its lobby, the configuration of the auditorium, and the decoration of the interior and exterior in general.

Taking Carlson as a guide, this segment of my study considers how each of these aspects of the Nouveau Théâtre would have been perceived by patrons attending a show there in 1896. Additionally, I examine how fin-de-siècle patrons’ perceptions of the venue may have influenced their behavior there during the premiere of *Ubu Roi*. The illumination of the various significant elements of this theatre is not only a matter of archival research. The venue still exists today and may be readily visited. It is no longer called the Nouveau Théâtre, though; today it is the Théâtre de Paris.<sup>318</sup> It has been redecorated and renovated a number of times during the past century, yet its basic architectural bones have remained untouched. For the purposes of this writing, though, all comments about the venue and its décor refer to its condition during the 1890s and to this particular theatre’s status in Parisian society at that time.

The Nouveau Théâtre was (and still is, with its new name) situated roughly halfway up the slope of Montmartre on rue Blanche, a street which runs from Trinity

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<sup>317</sup> Carlson, 9.

<sup>318</sup> One can take a virtual tour of the present-day space at the organization’s website: <[www.theatredeparis.com](http://www.theatredeparis.com)>. In doing this one can get a feel for the basic architectural layout. It is even possible to see a few of the original decorative features, such as wall sconces and gilded moldings, that have been preserved throughout the various renovations.

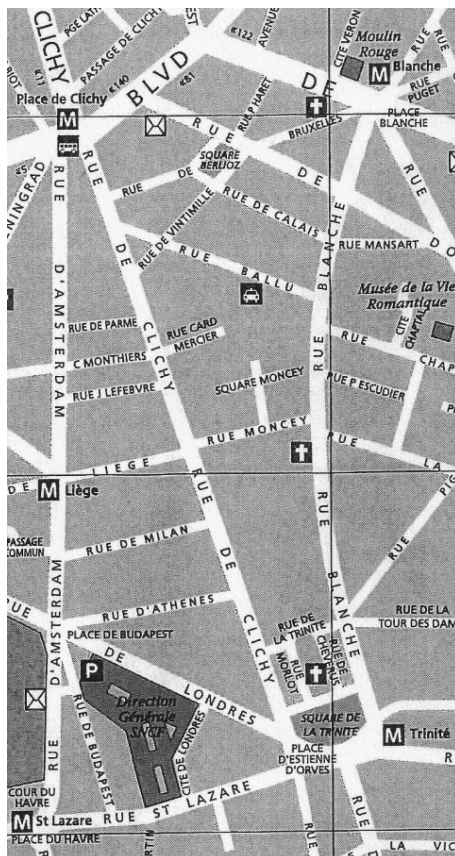


Figure 2.1: A map showing rue Blanche in Montmartre. This street runs from the Square de la Trinité in the south uphill and northward to Place Blanche, where one finds the Moulin Rouge dance hall. The entrance to the Nouveau Théâtre is slightly to the south of where rue Moncey connects rue Blanche to rue de Clichy.<sup>319</sup>

Church near the base of the slope, up to Place Blanche, already a celebrated nexus of ribald entertainment at the close of the nineteenth century. This location puts the 1890s theatre in the heart of Paris's bohemian-inflected but distinctly touristic pleasure district of Montmartre. Many members of *Ubu's* first audience, however, would have remembered that the site occupied by the theatre had once been a roller-skating rink.

<sup>319</sup> This map detail is reproduced from the guidebook *Eyewitness Travel Guides: Paris* (New York: DK Publishing, Inc, 2006), 411.

The architectural footprint of that remembered establishment had actually been much larger than the space taken up by the Nouveau Théâtre in 1896, for the skating rink occupied a plot of land that ran from rue Blanche in the east all the way through to rue de Clichy in the West. (The theatre needed only about one quarter of that total depth). Roller rinks were very fashionable from around the middle of the nineteenth century. This one had been built in the mid-1850s, during the Second Empire, when the overall Haussmannization of Paris had brought about the demolition of all of the structures that had previously existed on its site. Apart from its remarkable size, though, the only other thing that needs to be noted about the skating rink is that its entrance was on the rue de Clichy side of the allotment.

In 1880 the enormous roller rink was sold and was soon renovated into a new pleasure palace: the Casino de Paris and its conjoined Palace Théâtre (which would later become the Nouveau Théâtre). When this theatre was created during the renovation, however, it was not given its own entryway — the only way into it was through the larger Casino, whose entrance was, like the skating rink's, on Rue de Clichy. “Casino de Paris” was (and still is) the formal name of the new establishment, but the word “Casino” did not, at the time of its construction, carry the same connotation of gambling as it does for twenty-first century readers. To a nineteenth-century Parisian a casino was a large public building where pleasurable activities — dancing, music events, banqueting, etc. — took place. The Casino de Paris, which opened in 1881, was primarily a dance hall. It hosted dances and bazaars, and it catered to the middling to lower classes of its

not-yet-touristically-fashionable neighborhood. But this was not the same class of patron who came to attend the operettas that were given at the Palace Théâtre. Those patrons were significantly wealthier and more fashionable than the denizens of the dance hall . . . and that more affluent crowd complained continually to the management about the lack of separation of the two establishments.<sup>320</sup>

Over the next ten years, the neighborhood immediately surrounding the dance hall gentrified considerably. It became less hospitable to the class of customer to which the Casino catered. The establishment began to fail financially and in 1890 it was sold. The venue's new managers — Louis Borney and Armand Desprez — immediately plunged into a year-long renovation before holding a grand reopening. Partly this was to revitalize the main festival hall with a new look and electric lighting; partly it was to make the whole establishment more to the taste of a more moneyed clientele; and partly it was to give the theatre and the dance hall, two separate sides of the business, two separate entrances. The main Casino entrance was to remain where it always had been, 16 rue de Clichy. The theatre would now be given its own entrance at 15 rue Blanche. The architect Edward Niermans, celebrated for his Art Nouveau buildings and interiors, was hired to design and oversee the renovations.<sup>321</sup> His signature style is acknowledged in the renaming of the casino's theatre as the Nouveau Théâtre. It was “nouveau” both because it was “new” and because it was appointed in the Art Nouveau style.

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<sup>320</sup> Jean-François Pinchon, *Edouard Niermans: Architecte de la Café-Society* (Liège, France: Institut Français d'Architecture, 1991), 99.

<sup>321</sup> Pinchon, 99.

Even with separate entrances, the main hall of the Casino and the associated theatre remained connected internally, at the balcony level, by a passage that allowed certain patrons to move between them. A journalist, who was reviewing the venue's grand reopening in 1891, described the advantages of this innovation. Now the "bourgeois families attending the theatre" could cross into the upper gallery of the larger venue, where they could:

Take their fill of the fantastical vision that the dance hall offers without their having any fear of contact between the quiet and peaceable audience of their own sort . . . and the sort who are habitués of the Casino.<sup>322</sup>

Only part of the "fantastical vision" referenced here had to do with the music and revelry in the main festival hall. What is not directly stated in this passage, but is nonetheless evoked for Parisian readers in the 1890s, is the traditional spectacular business of a dance hall's *promenoir* (the wide lower balcony which surrounded the main hall), where the venue-approved prostitutes competed to attract clients.<sup>323</sup>

Neither these nor any other "habitués of the Casino" were permitted to ascend to the observation gallery. A ticket for the Nouveau-Théâtre was required to access that space. Theatre patrons, on the other hand, could freely come down into the dance hall and join the entertainments there if they wished. While there was no extra charge for

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<sup>322</sup> L'Homme qui vit, "Le Casino de Paris," in *La France Industrielle*, 8 novembre 1891.

<sup>323</sup> There are several detailed literary descriptions of the business of the *promenoirs* of the Parisian dance halls of this era. See, for example: J.-K. Huysmans, "The Folies-Bergère in 1879," trans. by Brendan King, in *Parisian Sketches* (Sawtry U.K: Dedalus, 2004), 34; Guy de Maupassant, *Bel Ami*, trans. by Margaret Mauldon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 12; Emile Zola, "Folies-Bergere," *Cronaca Bizantina* 2.7 (April 1, 1882). In the scholarly literature, in *Parisian Music Hall Ballet, 1871-1913* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2015), Sarah Gutsche-Miller concludes that, among the various Montmartre dance halls, the *promenoir* spectacle at the Casino de Paris was the most provocative (49).

this, the management soon discovered that it was an unexpectedly profitable feature of their recent renovation.

In a review appearing in the 25 September, 1892 edition of the *Courier Français*, one reads of a subgroup of the dance hall's — particularly its *promenoir*'s — bourgeois customers who did not wish to be seen entering the Casino directly. They “need a pretext,” as the journalist put it. Such patrons had learned to purchase tickets for the performances at the Nouveau-Théâtre, which were much more expensive than admissions to the Casino, and then, while they appeared to the outside world to be attending the play, in actuality they only used the Nouveau-Théâtre as an opportunity for accessing the dance hall via the crossover. This face-saving rue Blanche entrance made the Casino's *promenoir* especially favored in comparison to its counterparts at other Montmartre music halls, because, for coming here, the bourgeois gentlemen “have an excuse that they do not have for going to the Moulin Rouge” (or the Folies-Bergère or the Olympia).<sup>324</sup> The “secret entrance” was not really a secret, though. Its existence was widely advertised in Parisian guide books of the era, and it was also the subject of an amusing song regularly performed on the Casino's stage by the popular “*chanteuse cosmopolite*” Edmée Lescot, who headlined there in the early 1890s.<sup>325</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> Le Rideau de Fer, “Concerts: Casino de Paris,” *Le Courier Français*, Sept. 25, 1892.

<sup>325</sup> Some lyrics from Lescot's song: “*Au Casino de Paris / Les femmes et leurs maris / Pren'nt pour entrer le Dimanche / Par la ru' Blanche. / Quand il vient dans le semaine / De ses devoirs affranchi / Carrément le mari s'amène / Par le ru' d'Clichy.*” In English (roughly): “At the Paris Casino, on Sundays, women and their husbands enter by the rue Blanche. The husbands, on weekdays, enter straight through the rue de Clichy.” The song was published in a study of Parisian nightlife from the 1890s by Maurice Delsol, *Paris-Cythère: Étude de mœurs parisiennes* (Paris, Imprimerie de la France Artistique et Industrielle, 1893), 9-10.

This study is, of course, concerned only with the Nouveau Théâtre side of the establishment because that is the venue where *Ubu Roi* would be performed slightly later in the decade, in 1896. Nonetheless, it seems necessary to discuss the theatre in its context as a part of the larger Casino complex in order to establish the venue's cultural status in Parisian society at the time. As that status becomes clearer, it seems increasingly surprising, or at least ironic, that a show such as *Ubu Roi* should be given in this particular performance hall. The tale of how that came to pass is a curiosity of its own.

For the first three years after the 1891 re-opening of the Casino de Paris, the management produced their own original shows in both the dance hall and in the theatre. During the 1891/92, 1892/93, and 1893/94 seasons, the Nouveau Théâtre offered ballets, bourgeois dramas, and comedies to the public, while the dance hall, which had its own stage, presented pantomimes, fantasy spectaculars, *féeries* [fairy ballets], and variety entertainment.<sup>326</sup> At the end of the third year, though, the management came to the decision that the dance hall was so much more profitable than the theatre, that it was not worth their effort to continue to create shows for the smaller venue.

Consequently, at the close of the 1893/94 season they announced that they would no

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<sup>326</sup> At the end of her study *Parisian Music Hall Ballet, 1871-1913* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2015), Sarah Gutsche-Miller presents 75 pages of appendix material giving the dates and synopses for all of the shows staged by three Parisian music halls — the Folies-Bergère, the Olympia, and the Casino de Paris — during the period from 1871-1913. As it happens the spectacle that was being presented at the Casino de Paris on the days that *Ubu Roi* was performed at the Nouveau Théâtre was called *Venus à Paris*. Gutsche-Miller summarizes the show: “Mars and Venus want to know the wonders that Jupiter sees during his trips to earth, so they escape Olympia to go dancing in Paris. Juno and Jupiter come in search of them. Juno gets caught up in the revelries, joins in the eccentric dances, and is caught by Jupiter flirting with a young cavalier. Jupiter, in a fury, condemns Venus to her planet, but forgives Juno” (253). In addition to the provocative dancing, the spectacle of *Venus à Paris* also featured bolts of lightning unleashed by Jupiter's fury.

longer produce in the Nouveau Théâtre and that the venue would be available for rental.<sup>327</sup> However, even after they made the Nouveau Théâtre available in this way it was still possible for the patrons of whoever was renting it to use the crossover to enter the dance hall free of charge.<sup>328</sup> Apparently this arrangement was advantageous both to renter and rentee.

The first time Lugné-Poe's Théâtre de l'Oeuvre ever used the Nouveau Théâtre was very shortly after the hall first became available for rental, though it had not been Lugné-Poe's idea to use this space. The occasion was the second to last production of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre's debut (1893/94) season. The show was Henry Bataille's *La Belle au Bois Dormant* [*Sleeping Beauty*]. This play was intended by its author as a turn-of-the-century symbolist version of the well-known fairy tale. Unlike all of the rest of the Oeuvre's season, this offering was essentially a vanity production, where the author paid all of the expenses, hired professional workshops to construct the scenery and costumes, and engaged Lugné-Poe's company to enact the play. Bataille was wealthy enough to afford all of that. The venue that the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre company had used for all the previous plays in its first season, the rundown and badly-lit Bouffes-du-Nord, was unacceptable to Bataille. In part the issue was that the Bouffes-du-Nord was too shabby

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<sup>327</sup> "Nouvelles." *La Revue d'Art Dramatique* 35(1894): 378.

<sup>328</sup> The entry for "Nouveau-Théâtre, 15 rue Blanche" in the *Guide des plaisirs à Paris: Paris la Jour, Paris la Nuit* (Paris: Éditions Photographique, 1899), a tourist guide to the City of Lights from the end of the 1890s, says that this theatre is mainly used for "debut works of young authors performed by young actors and young actresses." It also states that the interior of the theatre "communicates directly" with the Casino de Paris, and that patrons attending shows at the Nouveau- Théâtre have the privilege of free admission to the Casino through the interior passage.

for his taste. More important, though, was the theatre's location. It was north of the Gare du Nord train station, bordering undeveloped fields, and generally difficult to get to. Bataille insisted that his show needed to be performed at some theatre that was closer to the center of Paris, feeling that his chic friends could not endure the Bouffes-du-Nord's remote and unfashionable location. He discovered that the elegant Nouveau Théâtre was available, and engaged it for the presentation of his play.

The production of *La Belle au Bois Dormant* was on May 24, 1894. It was a dismal failure that nearly ended the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in its first year. The company's supporters resented this show, bespoken, as it was, by an outsider, unrelated to the rest of l'Oeuvre's season, and mounted with expensive professional scenery and costumes in an unaccustomed theatre in a different neighborhood. They saw no literary or aesthetic merit in the work. To them it was a snobbish and badly-understood imitation of Symbolism made to appeal to the wealthy upper-class friends of Henry Bataille.<sup>329</sup> The core audience of faithful supporters felt, quite understandably, that Lugné-Poe had betrayed them with this project. But while they hated this production, this same audience had to admit that the Nouveau Théâtre was an improvement over the Bouffes du Nord.

There are several reasons why Lugné-Poe's audiences preferred the Nouveau-Théâtre. In the first place, it was situated in a far livelier locale. By the 1890s the slope of Montmartre had become the heart of Paris's pleasure district, where nearly all of the

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<sup>329</sup> More details concerning this production of Bataille's play appear in Deak, pages 224-225, and in Gertrude Jasper's *Adventure in the Theatre: Lugné-Poe and the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre to 1899* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1947), pages 143-147.

city's music halls and cabarets were to be found. For an audience who cared so deeply about self-display (as discussed previously), this was a far better neighborhood in which to engage in that practice. As for the building: its interior was extremely luxurious. The Nouveau had been designed to appeal to a well-heeled audience drawn, in theory, from the now affluent surrounding neighborhoods.<sup>330</sup> The owners had spent lavishly to enhance its comfort during the 1890 renovation. Plus, the renovated theatre was fully “modern,” which, among other things, meant that it had electrical lighting.<sup>331</sup> By the time Lugné-Poe first used the Nouveau-Théâtre, in 1894, electric light was no longer a complete novelty for Parisians. But with regard to theatres, only the most advanced and upscale venues were able to employ this bright and seemingly magical illumination. There is no doubt that the stage here was much more readily visible than at the Bouffes-du-Nord. Finally, in addition to the charms of the Nouveau-Théâtre's location, luxury, and modernity, there was also the fact that attending a show in this venue — even a tenant show produced by the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre — conferred free admission to the Casino de Paris on the show's patrons. Surely some members of Lugné-Poe's audience would have appreciated this perk.

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<sup>330</sup> The theatre is located in an area of Montmartre known as Saint-Georges and the adjacent Faubourg de la Chaussée d'Antin is just to the south. Throughout the nineteenth century, decade by decade, these were becoming increasingly fashionable neighborhoods. By the 1890s they were quite affluent. See Ratchiffe and Piette, *Vivre la ville, les classes populaires à Paris* (Paris: La Boutique de l'Historie, 2007), 312-313.

<sup>331</sup> The conversion to electric lighting had also been a part of the Nouveau-Théâtre's 1890/1891 renovation. Reviews from the early 1890s of premieres at this theatre rave about the magically bright lighting of the stage.

The splendid lobby of the Nouveau-Théâtre is worth taking a moment to appreciate in its own right. This space made much more of an impression than the small and functional entryways of such theatres as the Bouffes-du-Nord or the Comédie-Parisienne (the two out-of-the-way venues most commonly used by Paris's experimental theatre companies). Rather, this entryway was designed to function more like the grand audience reception areas at the Paris Opera or the Folies-Bergère — spaces intended for socializing and for being seen. Upon entry, the Nouveau's lobby gave the impression of being a kind of indoor park, painted in soft tones of pale green, white, and gold, and “bathed in bright light, proceeding from gilded lamps.”<sup>332</sup> In addition to the ubiquitous coat check, its interior spaces included sitting rooms, expansive open areas, and an American style bar — as well as the relative novelty of lavatories with running water and flush toilets.<sup>333</sup> On the building's floorplan, the Nouveau-Théâtre's lobby appears to take up more space than either the auditorium or the stage. It could easily absorb the entire clientele of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre without becoming overcrowded.

Lugné-Poe likely enjoyed all the features of the Nouveau Théâtre that have been described here, but most of all appreciated that it had a much bigger stage than the Bouffes du Nord. A summer 1894 issue of *La Revue d'Art Dramatique* reports that the

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<sup>332</sup> *Guide des plaisirs à Paris: Paris le Jour, Paris la Nuit* (Paris: Éditions Photographique, 1900) 53.

<sup>333</sup> See Jean-François Pinchon's *Edouard Niermans: Architecte de la Café-Society* (Liège, France: Institut Française d'Architecture, 1991). This study of the *fin-de-siècle/ belle époque* architect, Edouard Niermans, has a chapter on his 1891 renovation of the Casino de Paris and the Nouveau-Théâtre. It contains architectural drawings, color plates of the wall treatments, photographs, a ground plan for the entire complex, as well as a textual narrative.

director, needing a large stage for some of l'Oeuvre's upcoming productions (*King Lear* and *Le Chariot de Terre Cuite* are cited), had recently concluded arrangements with the management of the Nouveau Théâtre to present certain performances in that venue during the following autumn.<sup>334</sup> In fact, the Nouveau became Lugné-Poe's preferred venue for the next several years. Of the twenty productions that his company presented in its second and third seasons (1894/95 and 1895/96), more than half of them were given at the Nouveau.<sup>335</sup> And for l'Oeuvre's the fourth season (1896/97) — the season which included Jarry's *Ubu Roi* as its second play — Lugné-Poe managed to secure all his performance dates in advance, and was therefore able to advertise, as a selling point, that, for this season, "all performances will be given at the Nouveau Théâtre, 15 rue Blanche."<sup>336</sup> Thus, when the company's faithful audience came to see *Ubu Roi*, it was the fourteenth time that the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre was presenting a show in this posh venue. They were now all coming to a familiar theatre to participate in a familiar ritual.

Having established the locale, status, modernity, and history of the Nouveau-Théâtre, we will now consider some features of the venue's auditorium. This consisted of seven distinct audience seating areas, originally designed for different types of

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<sup>334</sup> "Nouvelles," *La Revue d'Art Dramatique* 36(1894): 125. These arrangements were clearly made very shortly after the 24 May 1894 performance of *La Belle au Bois Dormant*.

<sup>335</sup> The venues for all performances given by the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre from 1893-1899 are specified in an appendix to Bettina L. Knapp's *The Reign of the Theatrical Director: French Theatre 1887-1924* (Troy, NY: Whitston Publishing Company, 1988), 239-244.

<sup>336</sup> The advertisement and subscription form for the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre's 1896/97 season is reprinted in Henri Bordillon's archive-article "Dossier: Jarry à L'Oeuvre" in *L'Étoile-Absinthe* 4 (Dec. 1979), page 15.

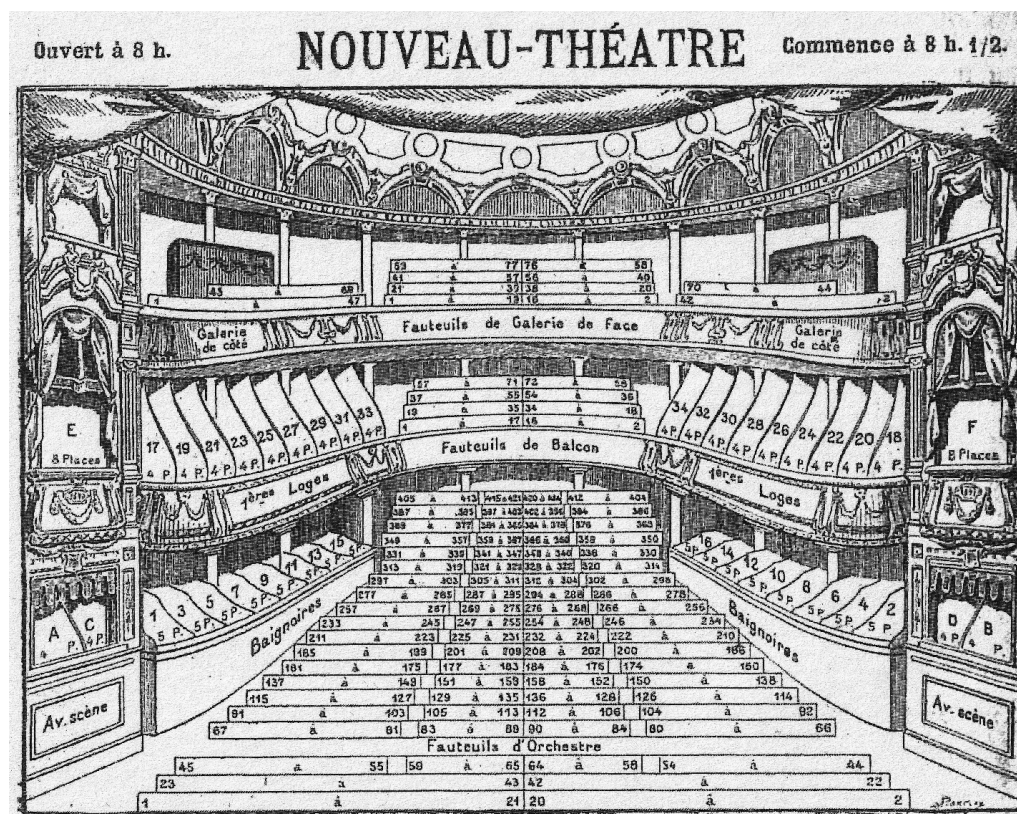


Figure 2.2: The seating plan for the Nouveau Théâtre in the 1890s.<sup>337</sup>

spectators with their different pocketbooks in mind. Immediately in front of the stage were a few rows of comfortable armchairs, called *fautouils*.<sup>338</sup> Behind this premium seating area came the *orchestre*, the venue's largest audience section, which consisted of seventeen

<sup>337</sup> This illustration is from the 1899 edition of the *Almanach Hachette* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1899), page xcix. There does not seem to be any variation in the *Almanach's* drawing of the Nouveau-Théâtre from year to year during the 1890s. The image from the 1899 edition is reproduced here because that was the highest quality original available. Of course, the *Almanach* also contains seating plans for many of Paris's other theatres as well.

<sup>338</sup> This seating area of moveable chairs was a common feature in Parisian theatres built during the second half of the nineteenth century. "Comfortable" is, of course, a relative description of the chairs — it is safe to assume that they were more comfortable than the benches. The practice began in the 1840s at the Opéra-Comique.

rows of backless benches, with the final six rows built on risers to improve sightlines for those at the back.<sup>339</sup> Because of crowding in this section, places in the orchestra were generally taken only by men. Also on the ground floor, along the left and the right sides, were sixteen exclusive boxes (eight per side), known as *baignoires*, which could accommodate parties of five persons. The Nouveau-Théâtre had two balconies as well. The lower of the two, known formally as the *balcon*, contained eighteen more private boxes, called *loges*. These were situated directly over the *baignoires*, with nine of them on each side. Both the *baignoires* and the *loges* were prestige seating, the *loges* slightly more so. Also in the *balcon*, at the back of the hall and directly facing the stage, was a single row of chairs, the *fauteuils de balcon*, behind which were three stepped rows of benches. And above all this was the second balcony, known as the *galerie*, which wrapped around the entire hall and had only benches on all sides. These were the most economical seats in the house. Lastly, at the Nouveau Théâtre there was also seating built into the proscenium arch itself, which was very thick — thick enough so that, on each side, it housed additional private boxes, both on the level of the *baignoires* and again on the level of the *loges*. These were the most exalted seats in the house.

All of these can be easily identified on the Nouveau Théâtre seating plan that was re-published each year (from 1894 onward) in the city of Paris's "little encyclopedia of practical life," the *Almanach Hachette* (see fig. 2.2). The *Almanach's* illustration is also

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<sup>339</sup> In France this section of the audience had traditionally been known as the *parterre*, but the name *orchestre* was increasingly replacing the older term by the end of the nineteenth century. "*Parterre*" tends to imply a standing area, sans benches, but the terms were used interchangeably in the 1890s, and benches were the norm at that point.

helpfully labeled to show how many spectators can be accommodated in each area, with the grand total coming to 826 places in the auditorium overall. That total should not be regarded as absolute, though. With squeezing on the benches and in the boxes, and with some standing room added in, it is reasonable to suppose that as many as one thousand spectators could be crowded into this theatre for a popular event.

One thing that is not apparent from the Nouveau Théâtre's published seating plan is the slight horseshoe curve of its auditorium. For anyone who visits the venue in person, though, that architectural contour is plainly evident. Also imperceptible from the published schematic (but palpable for visitors) is the extraordinary intimacy of the venue. Its separate seating areas all feel quite close together, both across the hall and along the diagonal axes. It is worth underscoring that the interior arrangement of this theatre causes the audience to face one another, rather than the stage, which brings a new appreciation of such eyewitness reports of *Ubu Roi* as "from the balconies to the boxes and back again, they hurled abuse."<sup>340</sup> Of course they did — both the orientation of the Nouveau-Théâtre's seating and the intimacy of its auditorium added architectural boosts to the already established culture of self-display and factional confrontation that surrounded any Théâtre de l'Oeuvre production.

Building from that effect of the seating arrangement, there are a few additional takeaways from this overall discussion of the Nouveau Théâtre that can serve as a conclusion for this segment. Most especially, I would re-emphasize that, in 1896, this

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<sup>340</sup> Rachilde, 80. In the original French: "on s'interpellait d'une loge à l'autre."

theatre was an opulent, newly renovated, modern venue designed to serve a wealthy bourgeois clientele. Its location on the south slope of Montmartre placed it at the heart of the municipal district to which wealthy bourgeois came specifically for the purpose of consuming risqué bohemian pleasures. When theorizing the venue, one should also be sure to note its interior “secret entrance” to the Casino de Paris — for the bourgeois themselves certainly made use of the feature. Ultimately, these factors combine to give the 1896 Nouveau-Théâtre cultural status as being a Citadel of Bourgeois-ness.<sup>341</sup>

Yet, when the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre produced plays in this very bourgeois playhouse, its stage was not being used to further the cause of bourgeois culture. In fact, that stage was being actively used to oppose bourgeois culture.<sup>342</sup> So, from the perspective of a largely bohemian and counter-cultural audience, partaking of an experimental production at this particular performance hall would have brought a dash of “taboo” to the occasion — something akin to the thrill of naughtiness that might be experienced if surreptitiously behaving in a profane manner while at a church ceremony. (Indeed, the fact that the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre used the Nouveau Théâtre at all can be interpreted as a type of nose-thumbing at the bourgeois from the box seats in the bourgeois’ own house). I would argue that this frisson of inappropriate-ness is yet another factor that would have intensified the celebratory misbehaving that was already a

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<sup>341</sup> This phrase is meant in the same way that the Salle Richelieu of the Comédie-Française might be considered a “Citadel of Classicism.”

<sup>342</sup> This statement would be true of any Théâtre de l’Oeuvre production, but it is especially true in the case of *Ubu Roi*, which, as a play, is very much intended by its author as an indictment of bourgeois culture.

part of the fin-de-siècle Parisian culture of attending avant-garde performances. And, like the effect of the venue's seating arrangement, it is another element that was generated entirely by the physical theatre itself.

In the last analysis, though, the examinations of the history, neighborhood, status, and architecture of the Nouveau Théâtre that have been conducted in the foregoing pages can illuminate only a limited range of things. The observations on these topics should not, therefore, be taken as an explanation of the root cause of the famous tumult that occurred during the first night of *Ubu*. Rather, these particular subjects have been addressed in order to fill a gap, for nowhere, in any of the literature pertaining to the premiere of *Ubu Roi*, have any aspects of the play's performance venue been considered in a substantial or rigorous manner. Yet even this brief survey shows that the semiotics of the venue did play some sort of synergistic role in the hurly-burly of that famous evening. Ultimately, my purpose has been merely to highlight the exact nature of that contribution, in hope that it will foster a fuller understanding of the historical occasion which is the larger subject of this study.

### **Ubu's First Audience: How They Really Behaved**

This next segment shows how the actively engaged and “very special” audience who attended the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre truly comported themselves during the first performance of *Ubu Roi* — the play's invited *répétition générale* — that took place at the

Nouveau Théâtre on Wednesday, 9 December, 1896.<sup>343</sup> It is known from several first-hand accounts that the Nouveau Théâtre was extremely full for this occasion, so it can be confidently asserted that the crowd consisted of somewhere between eight-hundred-fifty and one thousand spectators (the total seating capacity of the auditorium).

Approximately one hundred of these spectators were theatre critics and their guests. A reliable moment-by-moment account of this audience's collective behavior can be gleaned by comparing the dozens of newspaper reviews that were published in the immediate wake of the performance, and corroborating the concrete details.<sup>344</sup>

According, then, to this newspapers-only method of reconstruction, here is what happened at the first performance of *Ubu Roi*:

Just before the show began Jarry appeared on stage to give a welcoming talk. He thanked the several critics who had written preview articles, and apologized for having had to cut most of acts four and five from the play due to a lack of rehearsal time.<sup>345</sup> His speech did not have much of an effect on the audience, though. The critics report that he spoke softly and only those sitting very close to the front could hear him. When he concluded, the performance commenced.

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<sup>343</sup> "Very special" was the snide characterization of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre's audience by well-known critic Francisque Sarcey, cited earlier during the discussion of the specific composition of the crowd attending *Ubu Roi*.

<sup>344</sup> All of the reviews of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre's 1896 production of *Ubu Roi* are collected and presented (in my own English translation) in the appendices that are attached at the end of this dissertation.

<sup>345</sup> Alfred Jarry, "Preliminary Address at the First Performance of *Ubu Roi*," *Selected Works of Alfred Jarry* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 76-77. Although the critics could not hear what he said, the text of Jarry's prepared speech to the audience has survived, so its content is known today.

The curtain then rose, and the well-known actor Firmin Gémier, playing the role of Ubu, launched the famous first word: “Shit-*re!*” Nobody had difficulty hearing his powerful voice. The reviewer for *La Patrie* recorded the general reaction: “Stupor, hilarity . . . We continue.”<sup>346</sup> The play was received quite well for the first few scenes, but the human-puppet premise of the piece soon lost its novelty. As the critic Camille Mauclair explains in the *Revue Encyclopedique*: “We laughed for the first ten minutes, yawned after half an hour, and, after an hour, we hissed.”<sup>347</sup>

By the end of the first act, many spectators were bored. Some began to suspect that the play was all a big practical joke. One review shows a portion of the audience beginning to resist:

The public wonders: [. . .] Does the play mock them? Is it sincere? . . . the first word of the piece returns again every other minute. Some become angry and shout it back.<sup>348</sup>

Another critic, Edmond Stoullig, describes this same turning point, but interprets it differently. He did not see the crowd “becoming angry,” but beginning to contribute its own *esprit* to the entertainment. As he reports in *Les Annales du théâtre et de la musique*:

from the start of the second act, the evening was nothing but a lot of jokes made by the audience, the least witty of which were less inept [. . .] than what was being said on the stage.<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> “Coquerico,” review of *Ubu Roi* at Théâtre de l’Oeuvre, *La Patrie* 11[?] Dec. 1896, rpt. in Robillot, “La Presse,” 82.

<sup>347</sup> Camille Mauclair, review of *Ubu Roi* at Théâtre de l’Oeuvre, *Revue Encyclopedique* 172.6, rpt. in Robillot, “La Presse,” 80.

<sup>348</sup> “Coquerico,” 82.

Stoullig was unamused by either the play or the crowd, but other critics affirm that the audience's joking remained lighthearted. In *L'Evenement*, we read: "the audience exercised its wit with frequent interjections so that they were not too bored."<sup>350</sup>

Many reviews show a wide range of opinions among the crowd. "The audience applauds, hisses, laughs. They call out to the artists: Bravo! This is shameful! Superb! Idiot!"<sup>351</sup> In these contradictory responses we are probably hearing the rival clagues and the pre-scripted saboteurs in action. In fact, several of their specific interjections are preserved in the reviews. We read that: "one spectator shouted out 'Long live Monsieur Scribe!'"<sup>352</sup> Presumably this reference to the prolific mid-nineteenth century playwright, Eugène Scribe — extoller of bourgeois values and inventor of the carefully plotted well-made play — was made in protest to the puppet-inspired style and construction of *Ubu Roi*. Another spectator answered with: "You wouldn't understand Shakespeare!"<sup>353</sup> Which, in addition to expressing an opinion about the first speaker's intellect, also reminds the hearer that many elements of the production had been advertised in the

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<sup>349</sup> Edmond Stoullig, *Les Annales du théâtre et de la musique* (Paris: Librairie Paul Ollendorf, 1897), 423-424.

<sup>350</sup> "Un Sarcisque," review of *Ubu Roi* at Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, *L'Evenement* 11 Dec. 1896, rpt. in Robillot, "La Presse," 78. In French the reviewer's comment here is itself a bit of a pun: "qu'on n'est pas trop em...bété."

<sup>351</sup> "Coquerico," 82.

<sup>352</sup> Henri Fouquier, review of *Ubu Roi* at Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, *Le Figaro* 11 Dec. 1896, rpt. in Robillot, "La Presse," 85.

<sup>353</sup> "Coquerico," 82.

preview articles as being Shakespearean in origin.<sup>354</sup> The name of François Rabelais, satirical and scatological humorist of the French Renaissance, was also invoked by the play's champions as a revered literary ancestor for the piece. However, in the overall contest of spectatorial wit, the grand honors went to someone who punned on the name of the director, Lugné-Poe, and *pot de chambre*, the French term for a chamber pot. As one critic explains: "when, above the general clamor, one fellow was heard to shout *à bas Lugné-Poe...de Chambre* [down with Lugné-Chamber-Pot], the approval was nearly unanimous."<sup>355</sup> For, obviously, the best place for all of Ubu's "shit-*re*" is in a chamber pot.

Over an hour into the performance, the crowd's responses took a darker turn. Two accounts claim that, after one of Ubu's shouts of "*Merdre!*" someone shouted back "*Mang-re!*" A rough English equivalent for this would be: UBU: "Shit-*re!*" ... AUDIENCE: "Eat it-*re!*" This moment, according to Jules Renard, is when "everything is swallowed up."<sup>356</sup> Another journalist also notes the sustained uproar at this point, indicating that this is when Gémier improvised the famous jig that distracted the

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<sup>354</sup> The production's unchanging background, as well as its use of hand-written signs to indicate the action's locale, were both presented in the pre-publicity as have been Shakespearean theatrical conventions. This in addition to the obvious plot parody of *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*. See especially Aurélien Lugné-Poe's article "À propos de l'Inutilité du Théâtre au Théâtre," *Mercur de France* (1 Oct. 1896), 90-98. In addition to these spatial/staging conventions, the plot of *Ubu Roi* is also an obvious parody of *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*.

<sup>355</sup> "C' de N.," review of *Ubu Roi* at Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, *Paris* 11[?] Dec. 1896, rpt. in Robillot, "La Presse," 78.

<sup>356</sup> Jules Renard, *Journal (1887-1919)* (Paris: Gallimard Pléiade, 1960), 363.

audience from their voluble interactivity and allowed the play to continue.<sup>357</sup> (It is also likely at this point when Willy climbed on the bench and began waving his hat about, egging-on the assembly “let’s keep it going.”) But the play *did* continue. The review in *La Patrie* confirms that, even after this, “*Ubu Roi*, in the midst of this general racket, manages, with numerous interruptions, to be performed.”<sup>358</sup> Details of specific audience witticisms are more obscure for the final portions of the play, but the reviewer for *Le Soir* gives a useful description:

There was howling, whistling, and hissing. Cries of "Bravo!" were mingled with cries of "To the exit!", often delaying the show [. . .] Some of the scenes had to be cut, including that of the bear, which certain spectators demanded vociferously.<sup>359</sup>

Despite the general clamor, the performers reached the final scene of the play, and were approved by the crowd. Confirmed, here, by Louis Claveau of *Le Soleil*: “The public — after having hissed the work and enlivening it with jeering — applauded the artists.”<sup>360</sup>

To sum that up, then: at first the concept of masked actors moving and behaving like puppets, and speaking in profane, childish, and archaic language was novel and

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<sup>357</sup> René Druart, “Un témoignage sur la générale d’*Ubu Roi*,” *Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique* 20 (1955): 53.

<sup>358</sup> “Coquerico,” 82.

<sup>359</sup> Review of *Ubu Roi* at Théâtre de l’Oeuvre, *Le Soir* 11 Dec. 1896, rpt. in Robillot, “La Presse,” 83.

<sup>360</sup> Louis Claveau, review of *Ubu Roi* at Théâtre de l’Oeuvre, *Le Soleil* 11 Dec. 1896, rpt. in Robillot, “La Presse,” 76.

amusing for the audience. The novelty-effect wore off after around thirty minutes and the show became tedious. As it did, the penchant among *fin-de-siècle* Parisian playgoers for amusing themselves with witty contributions and interruptions began to take hold. Gradually, the interjections became more frequent, and the interjectors built upon one another's jokes. This development seems to have given the rival clagues some useful foci to organize around, and these pre-organized groups then contributed significantly to sustaining controversy and factionalism among the audience. The result was reported in the press as a quarrel among the crowd, making the show a *succès de scandale*, even if it was not really the advertised triumph of *mise-en-scénique* innovation. But the *succès de scandale* was probably Jarry's real goal anyway. A passage from the review that appeared in *La Lanterne* probably pleased him immensely:

And tomorrow's opinions will be just as divided as yesterday evening's audience: tumultuous, combative, curious, exploding with both applause and protests.<sup>361</sup>

This, one suspects, is what he had been aiming for all along.

### **Eight Explanations of the *Ubu Roi* Riot**

In the foregoing reconstruction of the *générale* of *Ubu Roi*, care was taken to cite only concrete details from primary accounts that describe concrete actions taken by the audience while the play was being performed. There is, however, a wealth of additional first-hand information available that is more interpretive or sententious in nature — but

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<sup>361</sup> Review of *Ubu Roi* at Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, *La Lanterne* 12 Dec. 1896, rpt. in Robillot, "La Presse," 81.

since these more judicial accounts of the crowd's behavior all contradict one another, they were not used in the as-objective-as-possible reconstruction. When considered in juxtaposition, though, the additional highly moralizing testimonies form a fascinating collage, adding richness and texture to the process of understanding exactly why the spectators at *Ubu Roi* were so energetic in their reactions to the play.

This study will now consider four different explanations offered by eyewitness participants as to why *Ubu*'s audience was so unruly. The four "primary" interpretations will then be enlarged with four additional explanations that have been proposed by a variety of scholars who have closely studied the play's premiere, bringing the total to eight alternative readings of the evening's theatrical transaction with the public. Each explanation summarized below is distinct. Some are mutually exclusive; some are capable of harmonizing with one another. All eight add illumination to our understanding, each in its own way. For the sake of organizational ease, these will be addressed in the chronological order of their publication.

First up is the review of *Ubu Roi* written by Henry Céard, established Naturalist novelist and theatre critic for the daily paper *Le Matin*. Céard's is one of dozens of critical commentaries published in newspapers in the immediate wake of the show's premiere, but his account is especially noteworthy for its depiction of a "three-way conflict" that took place among the audience.<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> Henry Céard, Review of *Ubu Roi*, *Le Matin* (11 Dec. 1896), rpt. in Robillot, 84.

As a basic orientation, Céard considered the whole production to be a joke. His review emphasizes the knockabout genre of the play as a “puppet-inspired comedy” [*comédie guignolesque*] derived from “the type of puppet show encountered at a village market or a local celebration.” He notes, in *Ubu Roi*, that the actors all wear masks and imitate the gestures of marionettes; that the painted scenery is cartoon-like and silly; that the shifts in the action’s location are announced by the placing of a placard (“often upside down or misspelled”) on an easel at the side of the forestage; and that the story is a grotesque parody of *Macbeth* as though retold by Mother Goose. As for the battle in the audience: he asserts that the conflict was mainly among and between different factions of faithful admirers of the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre. It escalated into a crisis, in his view, due to the absence of any deep meaning in Jarry’s “regression of dramatic art to so crude a form.”

Much of this review focuses on describing the particular devotees of Symbolist art who are drawn to the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre. These patrons, as Céard writes, are “always questing after symbols and certain that, at this theatre, only the most sublime things are performed.” Collectively, in *Ubu Roi*, they “sought to discover in the author’s joke a deep meaning and a philosophical weight that he did not choose to provide.” As the play progressed, a certain number of this sect “became annoyed to have found nothing [. . .] and began to demonstrate their disappointment with violence.” Those faith-challenged acolytes became the first third of Céard’s three-way conflict. The review turns next to the remainder of the l’Oeuvre’s flock, who were more steadfast in their

devotion to the infallibility of the company. This second group applied themselves more deeply to:

their tasks of admiration and of diligently trying to discover the play's absent beauties. They felt themselves to be insulted by the protests of their neighbors and therefore counter-protested in the name of Great Art in peril.<sup>363</sup>

Such was the contest's inner core. But finally, with that basic conflict of Symbolist vs. Symbolist established, the remaining third of the audience — to which Céard belonged — merely “experienced an intensification of merriment” when confronted by the noisy collision of the previous two groups, because they were so “delighted by this manner of reproducing the violent spectacles of the fairground theatres.” He does not specify what disruptive contributions this third group may have made.

Céard is clearly disdainful of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in general. Nonetheless, his analysis of the crowd at *Ubu Roi* is historiographically singular. It is especially valuable for underscoring that the audience's response to the show was not a simple dichotomy of *pro* and *anti*, but that the discourse among the spectators was more complex and multi-sided than is ordinarily supposed. It should be noted, though, that the interpretation which Céard puts forth — that the tumult at the performance was primarily a crisis in faith experienced by members of the Oeuvre's flock — makes no acknowledgement of a conflict between the young artistic generation and the bourgeois critics (himself, for

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<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*

one), which is how many of the other witnesses interpreted the primary contest that took place in the audience during *Ubu Roi*.<sup>364</sup>

Next, we turn to a commentary on the reception of the play's performance that was written by Jarry himself. This one appeared three weeks after the show. It was presented to the world in an article titled "*Questions de Théâtre*" ["Theatre Questions"] published in the January 1, 1897 edition of the *Revue Blanche*.<sup>365</sup> The young author's essay on the performance of his own play is both a crucial and a problematic document for interpreting the meaning of the audience's behavior at the historic event. Crucial, because it contains a clear statement of Jarry's "intent" for the production:

I intended that when the curtain went up the scene should confront the public like the magic mirror in the stories of Madame Leprince de Beaumont, in which the depraved see themselves with dragons' bodies, or bulls' horns, or whatever corresponds to their particular vice.

And as an explanation for the tumultuous crowd response to this "intentional" provocation he adds:

It is not surprising that the public should have been aghast at the sight of its ignoble other self, which it had never before been shown completely.<sup>366</sup>

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<sup>364</sup> For example: the radical poet Laurent Tailhade was also present at the celebrated debut of *Ubu Roi*. In his memoirs *Quelques fantômes de jadis* (Paris: Éditions française illustrée, 1920), Tailhade explains that the contest at the performance was "in every proportion a new battle of *Hernani* between the young schools — Decadents and Symbolists — and the bourgeois critics" (214). It therefore seems that what each witness saw at *Ubu Roi* depended largely on where they sat, both literally and politically.

<sup>365</sup> Alfred Jarry, "Questions de théâtre," *La Revue Blanche* (1 Jan. 1897), 16-18.

<sup>366</sup> Alfred Jarry, "Theatre Questions," translated by Barbara Wright, in *Selected Works of Alfred Jarry* (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1965), 83. The reference to the fairy tales of Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont (1711-1780) is to a particular device from her story "*Le Prince Chéri*" ["Prince Darling"] in which the titular prince is transformed into a monster with "the head of a lion, the horns of a bull, the feet of a wolf, and the tail of a viper" respectively for his rage, brutality, gluttony, and treachery. Moral correction via fairy magic is a common motif in Leprince de Beaumont's stories. This exact same beastly condition is used by her again in her better-known story "*La Belle et la Bête*" ["Beauty and the Beast"].

Yet this explanation from Jarry (that people rioted because they were shown an unflattering picture of themselves) — though enticing and ingenious — is also problematic and untrustworthy for multiple reasons. In the first place, the “public” to which it refers does not include the multifaceted Théâtre de l’Oeuvre audience as a whole. (It certainly does not evoke the same audience that Céard described). Jarry appears to be responding here only to certain bourgeois theatre critics who objected to the show, who all happened to write for conservative newspapers, and who all were traditionally hostile to the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre. In their reviews of *Ubu Roi*, these newspaper men wrote that they did not understand the play, that it was “incomprehensible,” “nonsense,” “a waste of time,” “harebrained,” “written for the occupants of a mental hospital,” and such like.<sup>367</sup> Answering them, Jarry asserted that this “public” (i.e., this group of critics) had actually resented *Ubu Roi*, not because it was incomprehensible, but “because they understood it only too well, whatever they may say.”<sup>368</sup> Indeed, this explanation — that spectators performed indignation when they saw that the stage was mocking them with an authentic unvarnished image of their own bourgeoisness — may even be true for the protests made during the performance by this

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<sup>367</sup> All of these critics’ characterizations are from the archive/article “La Presse d’*Ubu Roi*,” *Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique* 3-4 (1951), edited by Henri Robillot. Pages 79, 84, 75, 76, and 78, respectively. This archive/article is an annotated (re)publication of the notebook full of newspaper reviews of *Ubu Roi* that had been collected by Jarry himself. Appendix B of this dissertation contains my translation into English of the entire archive/article of newspaper reviews. The corresponding pages in my appendix for the citations are 375, 387, 364, 367, and 373.

<sup>368</sup> Jarry, “Theatre Questions,” 84.

particular demographic. However, as we already know from Céard's analysis of the spectacle at *Ubu Roi*, this cheeky explanation from Jarry cannot be applied to the audience in general, nor even to the majority of it.

The thing that is even more problematic about Jarry's account, though, is the fact that it does not match particularly well with what he had written earlier about the production as part of his publicity campaign.<sup>369</sup> Nor does it match the ideas about the play expressed in his curtain speech just prior to the performance.<sup>370</sup> And the explanation most especially does not reconcile with Jarry's own seeding of the theatre with multiple

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<sup>369</sup> For comparison, here is what Jarry had written in his publicity article "The Paralipomena of Ubu" that was published in the previous month's issue of the same journal, *La Revue Blanche* (1 Dec. 1896), appearing just a few days before the first performance of the play:

Soon Ubu will be demonstrated for the crowd [. . .] It may therefore be useful to explain something of Monsieur Ubu's past. [. . .] He is not exactly Monsieur Thiers, nor the bourgeois, nor the rabble: rather he is the perfect anarchist, possessing exactly what prevents us from ever becoming perfect anarchists, being, as he is, a man of cowardice, filth, ugliness, etc. (489)

While this is not exactly a statement of the production's intent, it also does not "match" Jarry's later statement. The characterization of the play in this preview article is inviting and complimentary to the spectator (who is clearly not cowardly, filthy, ugly, etc.). It's tone is a far cry from any implication that the goal of the show is to horrify spectators with a caricature of themselves and their vices as the author later claimed for his intention.

The translation of this publicity text is my own. Within the passage, incidentally, "Monsieur Thiers" refers to Adolphe Thiers (1797-1877), first president of the Third French Republic. Thiers was particularly notable for his 1871 annihilation of the Paris Commune by using German troops to execute 35,000 disarmed Parisians. Any reader of Jarry's article in 1896 would have been familiar with this historical figure. See also Chapter 1 of this study, note 197, for more on the term "paralipomena."

<sup>370</sup> And here — published under the title of "Preliminary Address at the First Performance of *Ubu Roi*" in the *Selected Works of Alfred Jarry* (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1965) — is part of what Jarry actually said to the audience during his pre-show introductory speech, just prior to the first performance of his play:

You are free to see in Monsieur Ubu as many allusions as you like, or, if you prefer, just a plain puppet, a schoolboy's caricature of one of his teachers who represented for him everything in the world that is grotesque. (76).

Like the publicity article of the previous week, these remarks are not an absolute contradiction of the author's after-the-fact statement of the intent of his play . . . yet, once again, the tone of the introductory speech and its relationship to the audience really do not match with the later post-production explanation wherein a depraved and vice-ridden audience are intended to recognize themselves on the stage.

contradictory clagues, at least one of whom had specific instructions to oppose itself stridently to whatever the prevailing audience attitude happened to be.<sup>371</sup> Given the context of that particular preparation, Jarry's claim (that a spontaneous disruption occurred when spectators did not like the way they saw themselves portrayed in the work) is left with little real credibility. Overall, the author's response-to-his-critics article seems to be a deliberate deflection of attention away from the genuine causes of the commotion at the début of *Ubu Roi* — while simultaneously celebrating the existence of the chaos itself.

A third distinct explanation for why the audience became upset at *Ubu Roi* was advanced by Jarry's only close female friend, Rachilde, the literary editor of the Parisian avant-garde journal *The Mercure de France*. Rachilde's account appeared approximately eight months after the performance of the play. In August of 1897 this critic wrote a review of Jarry's new and recently-published (post-*Ubu*) novel, *Days and Nights*. Rather than speaking immediately about the new book, though, she spends the first half of the review describing her experience of the situation at the December 1896 production of *Ubu Roi*, a topic that she regarded as a relevant preface to the book review at hand. Of most interest is the linkage she makes between the famous theatre disturbance and the profoundly aroused pre-show expectations of the audience. She writes that, before the performance, the overly hyped spectators were "turning blue from the erotic terror" of

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<sup>371</sup> See "The Parisian Audience and Its Horizon of Expectations" segment earlier in this chapter. Specifically, the memoir of Georges Rémond, "Souvenirs sur Jarry et autres," published in the *Mercure de France* (1 Avril 1955), wherein he recounts the instructions given to his claque by Jarry.

anticipation and “trembling from the sensuousness of awaiting” the start of the play.<sup>372</sup>

She then argues that the tempest in the theatre arose because the audience’s libidinal hopes were frustrated by the reality of the performance. As she put it, the crowd became upset:

because *there was no sex in the play*. They whistled and hissed above all at the lack of real filth. They thought this Punch of an *Ubu* would function sexually. They demanded a jig. They forced a great artist, the actor Gémier, to dance while he wore that mask of their own cruel bourgeoisness.<sup>373</sup>

It is a fascinating position to consider: that the riot took place because the action on stage failed to provide the kind of erotic payoff that a *fin-de-siècle* Montmartre crowd would have found satisfying. Certainly, this account’s depiction of the overly excited state of the audience’s anticipation is consistent with other testimony about the effect of Jarry’s publicity campaign.<sup>374</sup> At the same time, though, Rachilde’s erotic-frustration interpretation of the riot is not echoed by any other witness who wrote about the famous performance.

That 1897 book review was, however, not the only occasion on which Rachilde published an explanation for the *Ubu Roi* riot. Much better known is a different account of the play’s début that she included in *Alfred Jarry, or, the Supermale of Letters* — the

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<sup>372</sup> Rachilde, review of *Les Jours et les Nuits*, *Mercure de France* (Aug. 1897), 143-144. My translation of the complete text of this document is included at the end of this dissertation. See “Appendix C.”

<sup>373</sup> Rachilde, review of *Les Jours et les Nuits*, 144. The italicization is in the original.

<sup>374</sup> Please refer to previous subsections titled “The Extravagant Publicity Campaign” (in Chapter 1, especially pages 125-127) and also “The Parisian Audience and Its Horizon of Expectations” (earlier this chapter, especially pages 167-169).

posthumous narration of Jarry's life that she wrote thirty years later, in 1928.<sup>375</sup> That biography is, without doubt, the one and only source behind the legend of a scandalized audience who were said to be outraged and offended by the play's scatological first word. In it, Rachilde wrote that the spectators in the theatre "whistled and hissed relentlessly" when:

Gémier, wearing an appalling mask, hurled *the word* at them, the famous word that begins the play [. . .] which Jarry had enlarged by one letter giving it a new accent and more powerful resonance: "Mer-dre!" Such pandemonium resulted that the actor had to remain silent for a quarter of an hour.<sup>376</sup>

This version of events — wherein the spectators at the play instantly respond in shocked outrage at the bad taste and breach of propriety involved in beginning the play with an infantile profanity — is also (like Rachilde's earlier idea) uncorroborated by any other contemporary eyewitness account. More than uncorroborated, actually, this theory is clearly disproved by the collective testimony of more than thirty other witnesses who wrote about the event.<sup>377</sup> Nonetheless, as we saw in the introduction to this dissertation, that first-word-riot explanation holds a great deal of anecdotal charisma, and has become the basis for our modern understanding of the significance of the play. And since what is being surveyed at the present moment are several different explanations for why *Ubu's* audience rioted, this one, though discredited, cannot be disincluded.

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<sup>375</sup> Jarry died on November 1, 1907. The official cause of death was spinal meningitis, but his end was really a collaboration of alcohol/absinth/ether abuse, malnutrition, poverty, and exhaustion.

<sup>376</sup> Rachilde, *Alfred Jarry, ou Le Surmâle de lettres* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1928), 79-80.

<sup>377</sup> See Appendix B of this study: my translation into English of all of the reviews of *Ubu Roi* published in Parisian papers immediately after the performance.

Apart from the four ideas suggested above by eyewitnesses (Symbolist infighting; bourgeois recognition of self; erotic frustration; outrage over profanity), no substantively different rationalization of the crowd's comportment at this historical performance appeared until the twenty-first century. With the arrival of the new millennium, though, a new generation of theatre scholars began to re-examine, re-consider, and re-contextualize the legendary riot at Jarry's play. These new twenty-first-century *Ubu*-reconsiderers are few, but they have put forward some intriguing alternative theories to account for the conduct of the spectators at the first performance. So, to counterpoint the four primary (but highly-moralizing) explanations above, four secondary (and carefully researched) explanations are considered below.

This survey continues, then, with a fifth explanation from Kimberly Jannarone, notable twenty-first-century theorist of historical modernist theatre. Jannarone's idea is a sort of re-imagination of Céard's perspective. For her, the legendary riot of *Ubu Roi* was a result of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre's refined symbolist congregation being made to perceive their reality in an unfamiliar way. In her 2001 *New Theatre Quarterly* essay "Puppetry and Pataphysics: Populism and the Ubu Cycle," she argues that the special crowd who attended *Ubu*'s first performance found themselves presented-with/forced-to-experience certain working-class pleasures — which Jarry delighted in — but which they, as a symbolist collective, tended to disdain.<sup>378</sup> Ultimately, the reader is invited to

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<sup>378</sup> Kimberly Jannarone, "Puppetry and Pataphysics: Populism and the Ubu Cycle," *New Theatre Quarterly* 17.3 (August 2001), 239-253.

understand the “riot” as a physicalization of the growing pains associated with in-the-moment insights and new revelations experienced by this exquisite crowd.

Jannarone sets this analysis in the context of two contrasting traditions of puppetry that were both active components of French culture in the 1890s. Jarry, she explains, grew up actively participating in a tradition of rural working-class puppetry which was often vulgar, knockabout, and involved active (and crude) audience participation. Yet when he came to Paris, he began associating with symbolist poets and intellectuals. Like himself, these new friends revered puppetry, but of a more refined variety. For them, the “aesthetics of the wooden man” was able to transcend realism and bring a manifestation of “pure form” and “pure character” to the stage.<sup>379</sup> Their spiritual and intellectual puppets were transcendent and evocative of universal ideas, but they were not at all vulgar or knockabout.<sup>380</sup>

When the performance of *Ubu Roi* arrived, Jarry collapsed these two traditions — or, rather, he combined them according to his own “rigorous logic of pataphysics.”<sup>381</sup> His purpose was to “prick the sides” of his new friends (the refined symbolist audience) to force on them an experience of the joys of participating in a rurally-derived, lowbrow, vulgar puppet performance. As she puts it: “the synergy created from the combination of

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<sup>379</sup> Jannarone, 243.

<sup>380</sup> Jannarone quotes several examples of enthusiastic symbolist reviews of performances by the wooden men. This one, written by the *fin-de-siècle* playwright Paul Marguerite, gives a sense of their tone: “These impersonal puppets, being of wood and cardboard, possess a pale and mysterious life. Their aura of truth surprises, disquiets. Their essential gestures contain the complete expression of human sentiments” (245).

<sup>381</sup> Jannarone, 250.

*le beau monde* and the working class puppet” was at the heart of the legendary riot at the performance of *Ubu Roi*.<sup>382</sup>

A sixth distinct interpretation of the audience response at the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre historic production appears in Neil Blackadder’s 2003 monograph *Performing Opposition: Modern Theater and the Scandalized Audience*. A full chapter of that work is devoted to Jarry’s play. An important point of context for Blackadder’s analysis is the fact that by 1896, when *Ubu* was performed, the Parisian fringe theatres — of which there were more than a dozen — had already been in existence for approximately ten years. Parisians had become used to these alternative companies, they no longer struck the populace as unusual, and many of them now seemed like low budget versions of the ordinary mainstream theatres. For Alfred Jarry, though, who had recently become general manager for the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre, which was always the most aesthetically experimental of the small companies, this condition was unacceptable. As Blackadder argues: “for Jarry, it was vital that the work of the fringe theaters continue to be radically different from work performed on mainstream stages — that it strike the public as ‘crazy’ [. . .] Reinvesting the fringe theater with that quality is in large part what Jarry set out to accomplish with *Ubu Roi*.”<sup>383</sup>

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<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>383</sup> Neil Blackadder, *Performing Opposition: Modern Theater and the Scandalized Audience* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publications, 2003), 42-43.

In the production of his play, Jarry worked toward that goal *via* several aesthetic innovations:<sup>384</sup> use of a childishly painted background depicting multiple contradictory times and places simultaneously; use of depersonalizing full head masks for the actors; use of bizarre character voices and accents; use of a single actor to represent a crowd or army; plus several scene-specific staging innovations. Regarding this last, *Blackadder* showcases one example that proved especially provocative to the audience at *Ubu Roi*. Act III, scene v of the play is set in the dungeon of a castle. In this scene Ubu comes to speak to one of the dungeon's prisoners. According to Firmin Gémier, who played the role of Ubu:

Instead of a prison door, an actor stood on stage rigidly holding out his left arm. I put the key in his hand as if into a lock. I made a sound for the bolt, “cric-crac,” and then swung aside his arm as if I were opening the door. At that moment the audience began to howl and rage: shouts and insults exploded from everywhere at once, a barrage of booing, hissing, catcalls, and a thousand other noises. In brief, it was an uproar whose like I had never heard before.<sup>385</sup>

*Blackadder* argues that this gesture was the cause of the audience's outrage: “the depiction of a door by an actor's arm was the straw that broke the camel's back.”<sup>386</sup> The Théâtre de l'Oeuvre crowd “was deeply troubled by this representation that appeared to

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<sup>384</sup> These are, in essence, the innovations he spelled out in his Septemeber 1896 *Mercure de France* article “De l'Inutilité de Théâtre au Théâtre” (see discussion in Chapter 1 of this study, pages 131-132) plus those that he outlines in his 8 January, 1896 letter to Lugné-Poe (see Chapter 1, pages 107-108).

<sup>385</sup> Roger Valbelle, “M. Firmin Gémier nous dit ce que furent la répétition générale et la première d'*Ubu Roi*,” *Excelsior* 4 Nov. 1921: 4. This segment of Gémier's memoir is also reproduced and cited by *Blackadder* in *Performing Opposition*, but I am using my own translation here rather than *Blackadder's*. See Appendix D of this study for Gémier's complete account of events at the two performances.

<sup>386</sup> *Blackadder*, *Performing Opposition*, 62.

make light of the human body.”<sup>387</sup> The childishly rendered scenery, the masks, and the actors’ puppet-like behavior had all been amusing enough for them, but the “disturbing use of an arm as a door” was an innovation which “threatened the integrity of the body.”<sup>388</sup> It was an abstraction that the spectators were evidently not prepared to tolerate. Consequently, it was greeted with a vigorously negative, disruptive, and sustained outcry.

Two years later, in 2005, Blackadder offered a different explanation for the riot at *Ubu Roi*. He revised the chapter on Jarry’s play from his *Performing Opposition* monograph and re-presented it in a new edited collection which explored the role of “filth” in late nineteenth and early twentieth century culture. The re-tooled essay bears the title “*Merdre!* Performing Filth in the Bourgeois Public Sphere.”<sup>389</sup> The analysis of audience response is now placed firmly in the context of urban sanitation, sewer improvements, and emergent bourgeois ideas about cleanliness, which all intersect in the new restrooms with flush toilets that, in the 1890s, had started to appear in Paris’s most fashionable and modern homes and venues. Jarry’s intent when producing *Ubu Roi* is now described as a “carefully planned assault on the standards and expectations of the public” undertaken in order to provoke the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre’s spectators into a spontaneous public

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<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>388</sup> Blackadder, *Performing Opposition*, 62-63.

<sup>389</sup> Neil Blackadder, “*Merdre!* Performing Filth in the Bourgeois Public Sphere,” in *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), edited by William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson, 182-200.

discourse about poop.<sup>390</sup> The author argues that, by featuring the word “*merdre*” prominently as the play’s first word, and then repeating it in the dialogue thirty-three times, “Jarry induced the spectators to a revealing display of their own ambivalence toward bodily functions.”<sup>391</sup>

The display referenced here took the form of outbursts, traded insults, “*merdre*” jokes, shouts, and general disruption among the spectators — which is to say that it amounted to the overall scandal associated with the production. But the factor on which Blackadder places particular emphasis is the mixed tone of the audience response. He especially highlights evidence that many participants in the “riot” were clearly enjoying the occasion. Those audience members who shouted the term “*merdre*” back at the stage are one example; others who yelled out their own *merdre*-based witticisms to the rest of the gathering are another. These behaviors contrast those of other spectators who vocalized their reaction in a clearly unamused or indignant manner. Ultimately, Blackadder argues that Jarry’s play:

triggered not only the learned response of disgust in many audience members, but also in others a return of the repressed [childhood] coprophilia [love of feces]. Those spectators who repeated Jarry’s scatology or invented their own evidently took childlike enjoyment from uttering and even playing with the taboo term.<sup>392</sup>

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<sup>390</sup> Blackadder, “*Merdre!*” 195.

<sup>391</sup> Blackadder, “*Merdre!*” 183.

<sup>392</sup> Blackadder, “*Merdre!*” 191.

The riot is thus explained as having been a provoked but unexpected public debate on the proper role that should be played by fecal matter — both the actual substance and the idea of it — in modern life.

The final interpretation of *Ubu*'s premiere that this survey will consider also appeared in 2005. In that year Erin Williams Hyman, scholar of *fin-de-siècle* modernism, published an article concerning the occasion in the comparative literature journal *The Comparatist*. The title of Hyman's essay is "Theatrical Terror: *Attentats* and Symbolist Spectacle." In it, she ties the production of Jarry's play — as well as the evolving aesthetics of Symbolist theatre in general — to the several anarchist bombings that terrorized Parisians during the early 1890s. These dynamite attacks, generally referred to as *attentats*, were known more colloquially as "propaganda by deed." Hyman argues that Symbolist artists were artistically inspired by these violent and unignorable disruptions of daily life. Like political anarchists, part of the Symbolist mission was to "destroy the old mold."<sup>393</sup> Oppressive and unfair governmental institutions on one hand; oppressive conventions of Realism and Naturalism on the other. As she explains: "The *attentat* became the Symbolist spectacle *par excellence*, an act whose polysemic *éclat* [explosion] made it the model for a kind of theatrical terror."<sup>394</sup> Guided by this notion, Symbolist

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<sup>393</sup> Erin Williams Hyman, "Theatrical Terror: *Attentats* and Symbolist Spectacle," *The Comparatist* 29 (2005), 101.

<sup>394</sup> Hyman, 102. The French word *éclat* that Hyman uses here defies easy translation into English. The term evokes a kind of sudden bursting, as of a hand grenade, but it also means a sudden illumination, like throwing a light switch in a dark room, and it also means the sudden realization of being struck with an idea. In good Symbolist style, the author seems to mean all three of these things.

theatre artists, especially Jarry, began developing new techniques of *mise en scène* that moved toward “a theatre of action and of violent gesture in a mode of confrontation with the public.”<sup>395</sup> The culmination of this idea was the 1896 production of *Ubu Roi*. For Hyman, the purpose of the performance was to make a violent assault on the sensibilities of the audience, to terrorize them. As for the audience reaction: she explains that the opening night riot was the result of the audience rising in revolt against the anarchist aesthetics of the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre.

The eight ideas surveyed above comprise all of the substantively different explanations for the *Ubu Roi* riot that I have encountered in researching this subject.<sup>396</sup> In summary form, here is what has been suggested: (1) The audience riot at *Ubu Roi* happened because of a crisis in faith experienced by the Symbolist devotees in the audience (Céard). (2) The riot happened because the spectators at the play objected to seeing an authentic unflattering image of themselves portrayed on stage (Jarry). (3) The riot happened because the action on stage failed to provide the kind of erotic payoff that the spectators would have found satisfying (Rachilde in 1897). (4) The riot happened because the spectators were outraged by the bad taste and breach of propriety involved in beginning the play with an infantile profanity (Rachilde in 1928). (5) The riot happened because of the explosively synergistic collision of the separate worlds of

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<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>396</sup> To be clear: I have collected more than a hundred essays, articles, books, theses, etc., which discuss the 1896 premiere of *Ubu Roi* in some way. Many include an explanation for the behavior of the audience, but it is usually a reiteration of the scandalizing first word story. None suggest a cause for the audience’s behavior that is substantially different from what is included in this survey.

exquisite symbolist puppetry and knockabout working-class puppetry (Jannarone). (6) The riot happened because the use of an arm as a door was too much of a distortion of the human body for an audience of *fin-de-siècle* Parisians to tolerate (Blackadder in 2003). (7) The riot happened because the play's scatological nature provoked a spontaneous, public, and performative discourse of the spectators' various attitudes about poop (Blackadder in 2005). (8) The riot happened because the audience forcefully resisted theatre aesthetics which celebrated political anarchism (Hyman).

Although all these statements give conflicting reasons for the behavior of *Ubu's* audience, they can also all work together to enrich our understanding of several unsimilar-yet-intersecting cultural contexts that surrounded the performance of the play. Collectively, they evoke a quotidian world of Symbolist infighting, one where spectators are seriously invested in the evolution of puppetry, where anarchist bombings terrorize the populace, where recent sewer innovations were actively transforming public ideas about sanitation. By connecting relevant aspects of the performance to relevant concerns of daily life, many of the explanations above come across as more plausible than the better-known idea that *Ubu's* audience rebelled because the shockingly profane word *merdre* was “a kind of ideal entity effective by its internal power alone.”<sup>397</sup>

Plainly, each author represented in the collection above was included because he or she has suggested a distinct and contrasting reason for the unruly behavior of the

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<sup>397</sup> Jacques-Henry L vesque, *Alfred Jarry* (Paris: Seghers, Po tes d' Aujourd'hui, 1951), 39. L vesque was one of the key popularizers of this idea. He is quoted more fully in the Introduction to this dissertation.

crowd at Jarry's play. Yet one suspects that all the authors would, if pressed, agree that a truly definitive singular cause for the *Ubu Roi* riot is ultimately impossible to pin down . . . and probably does not even exist. What they have advanced should therefore more precisely be called "probable contributing factors," rather than causes. Nonetheless, pursuing the chimera of "cause" remains a valuable practice, if only for the sake of argument, analysis, and the opening of new perspectives. New theories and interpretations deserve a chance at general consideration. So it is understandable, to some extent, when their advocates overlook or suppress inconvenient (or contrary) data when constructing them — a thing which all of the surveyed authors have, to some extent, done. It is, of course, preferable, for historiographers and theorists do this mindfully, foregoing deliberate distortion or misrepresentation of verifiable historical details.

Looking back over the menu of ideas, I would argue that each account is ultimately either more or less persuasive based on how clearly each author has understood the specific audience who attended *Ubu Roi*; and on how honestly each author has portrayed that audience. The purely Symbolist crowd that Céard and Jannarone evoke is just as problematic as the purely bourgeois gathering that Hyman and Rachilde's popularizers rely on. On both ends of the spectrum, the authors homogenize the historically heterogeneous audience for the purpose of streamlining their arguments. It is easy to see why theorists engage this practice, yet an observation from the influential semiotic anthropologist Clifford Geertz arises as a caution. In the introduction to his

seminal 1973 collection of essays, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Geertz demonstrates that no theory of behavior “is going to enable us to understand people [i.e., the reason for their actions] without knowing them.”<sup>398</sup> And by “knowing” people, Geertz means acquaintance with two different sorts of knowledge about them. One involves familiarity with the current issues in the thought-world that the people inhabit; or, as he put it, “familiarity with the imaginative universe within which their acts are signs.”<sup>399</sup> (For *Ubu*’s audience this could consist of such concerns as improvements to public sanitation, anarchist terrorism, and the aesthetics of puppetry — so the imaginative universe is clearly being addressed by the surveyed authors). But the other, equally-important, element of “knowing people” involves becoming familiar with their personalities and social inter-relationships on an individual level. This is where the essays surveyed above tend to fall short, leaving room for a new intervention.

### **On the Exploits of André Antoine at *Ubu Roi***

To emphasize the value of knowing people on an individual level this study will now consider the specific audience situation of André Antoine. Antoine was a Parisian avant-garde theatre director, both mentor and rival to Lugné-Poe, known for pioneering extremely realistic techniques of *mise-en-scène*. At the time of *Ubu Roi* he was thirty-eight years old. The small theatre company he had founded in 1887, the *Théâtre Libre*, had experienced a financial collapse in April 1894, leaving him in significant personal debt

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<sup>398</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 30.

<sup>399</sup> Geertz, 13.

and without any further opportunities to direct. Multiple witnesses remarked Antoine's presence in the Nouveau Théâtre for the December 1896 *générale* of *Ubu Roi*, which is also confirmed by Antoine's own memoirs and by a newspaper interview with him years later. More significantly, at least one notable exploit that he performed in the theatre on this evening is also captured in the historical record. It took place at the very moment when the actor playing Ubu, Firmin Gémier, mimed the prison door during the play's third act. (A piece of stage business that was referenced earlier by the theatre scholar Neil Blackadder in the previous segment of this study). Upon seeing this child-like use of an actor's arm to represent a door on the stage, Antoine rose from his seat in the orchestra, announced "*Ab, par ici la sortie!*" ("Aha, this way to the exit!"), and left the theatre.<sup>400</sup>

The actor Gémier is very clear that this prison-door moment in the play is when *Ubu's* audience suddenly erupted into fifteen-minutes of continuous furor. His description of the occasion, however, neither mentions Antoine, nor does it offer any theory as to why the audience reacted in this way at this particular instant.<sup>401</sup> Blackadder suggested that the commotion occurred at this point because the scenographic use of an actor's arm as a door "appeared to make light of the human body" and that the gathered

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<sup>400</sup> Arnaud, 314; Deak, 236; Lugné-Poe, 177; Robillot, 83.

<sup>401</sup> A rather different detail mentioned by Gémier may be worth highlighting, though. Earlier in the interview the actor explained that he was encased in the full head mask of Père Ubu during the performance. That being the case, it is reasonable to suppose that, due to the mask, the actor's ability to hear well may have been slightly impaired. Perhaps he never heard Antoine's quip and therefore did not include it in his memoir. See "Appendix D" for Gémier's full account of the evening.

spectators found this offensive — but I would propose, alternatively, that the general assembly may have been responding in this moment to Antoine, rather than to the action on stage. In his own consideration of the audience’s response at *Ubu*, Blackadder does mention Antoine’s action, but he finds it a bit too pat and doubts its veracity. As he writes: “one cannot help but regard with skepticism such a perfect moment of conflict between the realistic [Antoine] and anti-realistic [Jarry] tendencies” on stage.<sup>402</sup> Still, the story of Antoine’s behavior is reported by multiple sources. Moreover, he was a well-known figure, and one who had, of late, been very much in the public eye with a scandal of his own. Indeed, Antoine’s personal prominence makes it easy to follow his steps in the historical record; to ascertain his political and artistic views; the avenues of association which brought him to this performance; the network of relationships which bound him to the show; his own investment in its success or failure; and even the sort of week he was having. In other words: it is possible to describe the meaningful personal and cultural context of Antoine’s spectatorship at *Ubu Roi* — as well as the impact of his particular intervention in the play’s performance — a bit more “thickly” (in Clifford Geertz’s sense of that term). So let us try and perceive the evening from Antoine’s point of view.

One might reasonably ask: why was André Antoine even at this performance? On the one hand, he had invented private theatre clubs, was extremely well-known among the progressive theatre set, and was unquestionably a part of the avant-garde

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<sup>402</sup> Blackadder, *Performing Opposition*, 58.



Figure 2.3: Portrait of André Antoine from approximately 1900.<sup>403</sup>

theatrical “in-crowd,” so his presence makes sense. On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine that Lugné-Poe would have permitted him an invitation to a *générale* at the *Théâtre de l’Oeuvre*. The two men had parted company on very bad terms some years previously, in January 1890, when Lugné-Poe had been an actor in Antoine’s *Théâtre Libre* company. One day, after Lugné-Poe had disobeyed instructions given to him by Antoine, Antoine had publicly dressed him down, embarrassing Lugné-Poe badly. Later

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<sup>403</sup> Image is reproduced from James B. Sanders’s, *André Antoine, directeur à l’Odéon: dernière étape d’une odyssee* (Paris: Minard, 1978), 28.

the younger man (Lugné-Poe was twenty-one at the time) had cornered his mentor on the set of the current *Théâtre Libre* show and punched him repeatedly.<sup>404</sup> Lugné-Poe was then fired and the two never worked together again after that. Some time passed and Lugné-Poe now had his own rival theatre company with an experimental aesthetic diametrically opposed to Antoine's. Each man, in his memoirs, speaks of the other in quite acid terms.

Yet Antoine found his way to the Oeuvre's *générales*, nonetheless. In his 1921 interview he claims to have attended all of the rival company's shows, if only for the purpose of disrupting them. But in the particular case of *Ubu Roi*, one should recall that Antoine was closely connected to the leading actor, Gémier, as well. In fact, apart from Antoine, there was hardly anyone in Paris who was more firmly associated with theatrical Naturalism in the public imagination than this particular performer.<sup>405</sup> It was likely on his account that Antoine took a special interest in the performance of *Ubu Roi* in the first place, for Gémier had starred in the majority of the plays ever produced by the *Théâtre Libre* — while there still was a *Théâtre Libre*, that is.

In the two and a half years since Antoine's theatre had failed, he had continually struggled to repay its old debts and had simultaneously been unable to find any employment as a director for the stage. That situation had changed quite suddenly during

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<sup>404</sup> Gertrude R. Jasper, *Adventure in the Theatre: Lugné-Poe and the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre to 1899* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1947), 33. The incident took place in January, 1890.

<sup>405</sup> Possibly Émile Zola, well-known champion of literary Naturalism and author of the important manifesto "Naturalism on the Stage" is an exception. Zola was also present at the *générale* of *Ubu Roi*.

the summer of 1896, though. That season, the Parisian press paid a great deal of attention to the not-unexpected resignation of two public figures, Émile Marck and Émile Desbeaux, the artistically-uninteresting-to-the-public co-directors of the government-supported *Odéon* theatre, the second *Théâtre Français*. That establishment had been faring very badly under the Marck/Desbeaux management for the past four years. Seeing the vacancy that their resignation created, some of Antoine's influential literary friends recommended him to the Minister of Beaux-Arts as a replacement who would generate excitement in the position. Antoine soon found himself summoned and interviewed by the minister, and then invited to serve as a new co-director of that official institution (along with the literary company-man Paul Ginisty as his collaborator and financial watchdog).<sup>406</sup>

Antoine accepted the *Odéon* appointment and, throughout autumn 1896, he set about making the second *Théâtre Français* into much more well-to-do version of the *Théâtre Libre*, where he would produce the works of such contemporary writers as Ibsen, Tolstoy, and Zola in his own Naturalistic style with far greater resources than he had ever previously had.<sup>407</sup> One of his first acts was to dismiss a large number of the *Odéon* acting company and replace them with his faithful but unconventionally trained actors from the

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<sup>406</sup> James B. Sanders, *André Antoine, directeur à l'Odéon: dernière étape d'une odyssée* (Paris: Minard, 1978), 33.

<sup>407</sup> André Antoine, *Mes Souvenirs sur le Théâtre Antoine et sur l'Odéon (première Direction)* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1928), 56. This text is a publication of Antoine's journals from 1895-1898. The majority of the entries are from 1896 and concern the vicissitudes of his first appointment as co-director of the *Odéon*.

*Théâtre Libre*. This included Gémier, an extraordinarily gifted performer who had never been admitted to the *Conservatoire*. As a matter of fact, for the occasion of *Ubu Roi*, Gémier was merely “on loan” for “two days only” to the *Théâtre de l’Oeuvre* from the *Odéon*.<sup>408</sup> Gémier had been given only two days off, because, at the state theatre, he was currently performing in a revival of Auguste Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s 1870 play *La Révolte* . . . which had been directed by Antoine.

This circumstance is even more ironic than it already seems, because *La Révolte* is (and was) considered to be a foundational Symbolist play. There was, however, nothing in Antoine’s *Odéon* production of it that the Symbolists could identify with. Those who went to see it were disappointed. The staging at the *Odéon* emphasized the social and moral issues of the piece and not its idealism.<sup>409</sup>

Yet, this context is also a bit sad, for, at the time of *Ubu Roi*, Antoine had literally just been forced to resign from his exalted and only-recently-acquired position at the *Odéon*. That resignation had occurred exactly ten days previously and had generated several day’s-worth of sensational coverage in the Parisian press.<sup>410</sup> Antoine’s humiliating withdrawal was due to the collective resistance and insubordination of the entrenched *Odéon* employees who would not accept the work ethic imposed on them by their new director. That event left Ginisty as sole director of the *Odéon*. And indeed, in his address

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<sup>408</sup> Alfred Jarry, “Preliminary Address at the First Performance of *Ubu Roi*,” in *Selected Works of Alfred Jarry*, ed. Roger Shattuck and Simon Watson Taylor (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 77.

<sup>409</sup> Deak, 38.

<sup>410</sup> Antoine, *Mes Souvenirs*, 75-103; Sanders, 43-56.

to the audience immediately preceding the first showing of *Ubu Roi*, Jarry publicly thanked Ginisty for the loan of Gémier. Two weeks previously, however, it would have been necessary for him to thank Antoine instead.<sup>411</sup> (Or, more likely, Gémier would not have been available for Jarry's play at all — it looks as though it was Antoine's forced resignation that made it possible for Lugné-Poe to "borrow" the actor to play Ubu in the first place).<sup>412</sup>

Thus, from Antoine's point of view, when Gémier mimed a door in Jarry's tedious farce of clownish human-sized puppets, and made the "cric crac" sound of drawing the bolt, it is not necessary to read a generalized conflict between Naturalist and Symbolist staging ideals. In Antoine's declaration that he had, just then, "discovered the exit" one can instead see a headstrong innovator whose conflict with Lugné-Poe was well known, who perceived himself to have been betrayed by the friend whom he had helped to obtain a prestigious and secure acting job at the state-supported theatre, who had just been forced out of his own job as director of that theatre, and whose own company had failed because its values had been abandoned by the crowd in general in favor of the more mystical offerings of his rival.<sup>413</sup> In short one can see a celebrity who was at this moment experiencing a profound sense of personal and public betrayal. As

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<sup>411</sup> Jarry, *Selected Works*, 77.

<sup>412</sup> This is speculation on my part. In his memoir *Actobaties*, Lugné-Poe explains that the actor Gémier had at first refused the role of Ubu on the grounds that it would compromise his position at the Odéon (176). Gémier later changed his mind and took the role. The actor appears to have changed his mind at the same moment when Antoine was forced to resign from the directorship of the state theatre.

<sup>413</sup> For additional context regarding this last point, see Herold, 518.

Antoine himself has told us, he hissed *Ubu* “with all [his] might,” simply “because it was at the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre” where he “made it a point to hiss all of the plays” that were performed.<sup>414</sup> For this particular performance, though, circumstances seem to have conspired to provide him with a reason for making a special effort to be disruptive.

What is more: the “in-crowd” audience who were attending the premiere would have been familiar with all these circumstances. They would have known exactly who Antoine was as well as his history with Lugné-Poe, with Gémier, and with the *Odéon*. Many who were present were partisans of the younger director and perhaps wished to silence or overwhelm Antoine’s gesture. Perhaps some perceived Antoine as the avatar of realistic theatre, and, being good Symbolists, opposed him on aesthetic grounds. Perhaps others, of a different faction, appreciated his quick witticism about the *mise-en-scène* and spoke up to approve or amplify it. Some may have seen his gesture of exiting as a dignified mirroring of his exit from the *Odéon* earlier in the week, felt that he had been wronged when forced out of his position there, and raised their voices in support of him. Other others may have felt this individual’s exit from the scene was overdue and shouted encouragement to use the door quickly. Still more others likely followed the cues of the leaders of the various *clagues* to which they belonged. Indeed, perhaps all these things happened simultaneously in the moments immediately following Antoine’s quip.

For me personally, this construction of events is more satisfying than the various alternatives which explain the impassioned response of *Ubu*’s spectators as owing to

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<sup>414</sup> André Antoine, “Les Theatres: On raconte que . . .,” *Le Galois* 4 Jan. 1922, 4.

their attitudes toward sanitation, puppetry, vulgarity, anarchism, or distortions of the human body. While it is plausible that all those elements played some role in the overall tempest at the play's *générale*, some direct narrative connections between the different big-picture issues and individual rioters would strengthen the proposals considerably. But when one thinks about a specific audience member, Andre Antoine in this case, it does not seem likely that his reported actions during the play's third act were in response to ideas about bodily functions or anarchism. Nor do they appear to be an objection to the absence of sex in the play. The scene in which he intervened does not include profane language, so that is not a consideration. As for the abstraction involved in using an actor's arm to represent a door: Antoine could quite credibly object to this. Not because it "threatened the integrity of the body," nor even because it was a staging antithetical to his own carefully wrought realism, but more probably because he thought it was stupid. (In his 1922 newspaper interview he added: "I also hissed because I was one of the few spectators who found the play completely idiotic").<sup>415</sup>

Regardless of whatever Antoine's true motivation was, he obviously seized a fleeting opportunity. When the "prison door" opened on stage, he delivered his acidic comment, was heard, and added the action of his own departure, giving the wisecrack more force. Consciously or unconsciously, he wielded his current notoriety, heightened by the *Odéon* scandal, to further his stated goal of bringing as much disruption as possible

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<sup>415</sup> Antoine, "Les Theatres: On raconte que . . .," 4.

to the *Théâtre de l'Oeuvre*. And this, perhaps, was the elusive spark which ignited the most especially notable explosion of the crowd that evening. Gémier, once again:

At that moment the audience began to howl and rage: shouts and insults exploded from everywhere at once [. . .] it was an uproar whose like I had never heard before.<sup>416</sup>

Admittedly, the idea just presented — that it was the performance of someone in the audience at the *générale* of *Ubu Roi* (rather than something on stage) which set off the infamous fifteen minutes of continuous uproar at the Nouveau Théâtre in December 1896 — is highly speculative. Nonetheless, the hypothesis rests on a few solid foundational points. Foremost is the fact that this account is what Clifford Geertz would call “actor oriented.”<sup>417</sup> In other words: this construction hews much closer than any other proffered explanation to Geertz’s dictum that, when interpreting another culture, in order to understand people’s actions, it is necessary, first, to know the individual people, and then to perceive the cultural situation from their point of view. Beyond this, the analysis also conforms well to what has been illuminated all throughout this chapter pertaining to: (1) the general *fin-de-siècle* Parisian culture of intrusive audience-ing; (2) the specific social identities of *Ubu*’s attendees; (3) the specific readiness of those attendees to perform their pre-determined support or opposition at the *début* regardless of what took place on stage; and (4) the synergistic “news-of-the-day” social drama context associated with a particularly polarizing celebrity influencer who was actively present in the theatre that evening. All of which is to say that this discussion of André Antoine’s

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<sup>416</sup> Valbelle, 4.

<sup>417</sup> Geertz, 14-15.

adventure at the *répétition générale* of *Ubu Roi* brings a valuable new perspective to the interpretation of an enigmatic theatre-historical occasion.

### **Collaboration in Crazyness**

However intriguing that new perspective, the greater purpose of detailing Antoine's adventure has been to provide a personal focus for this chapter's consideration of the "enormities" that were a normal part of a Parisian avant-garde theatre début in the 1890s. In other words: to know this individual's specific situation is fun, but to understand his behavioral archetype as a "typical" audience member is a window into the more general culture of intrusive audience-ing of this era. The opportunity to disrupt the production was a key part of the pleasure of attending Lugné-Poe's theatre, not only for Antoine but for many others as well. (Monsieur "*à bas Lugné-Poe de Chambre*" leaps to mind as another obvious example). Whether approving or resisting, approximately one thousand individuals joined forces in the rowdiness of *Ubu*'s audience. All thousand of those individuals had an analogous or parallel or contrasting personal path that brought them purposefully to this evening of experimental theatre . . . yet all were conforming to the same set of social rules and expectations.

It is not feasible to analyze all their stories, but a useful illustration of one contrasting path that led to the same destination can be had by recounting the *Ubu* experience of the Irish poet, William Butler Yeats. At the time of *Ubu Roi*, Yeats was on a brief visit to Paris with his friend, the English poet and translator of French Symbolist

literature, Arthur Symons, who had many contacts in the city. Thanks to the timing of their visit, the two foreigners found themselves drafted into the Armand-Silvestre-led *Mercure-de-France* claque at *Ubu's générale*. Yeats, however, understood almost no French. At the show he marveled to see “the audience shake their fists at one another”; was fascinated to learn from Symons, seated beside him, that “there are often duels after these performances”; and realized for himself that the actors on stage were impersonating marionettes.<sup>418</sup> As the evening progressed, the poet became more and more drawn into the mood of carnival misrule. “Feeling bound to support the most spirited party,” he later wrote, “we have shouted for the play.”<sup>419</sup> This on the side of the pro-*Ubu* Symbolists. But unlike Antoine, who attended the show with the intention of being disruptive, Yeats was merely swept up in a local custom. He found himself, as if by accident, helping to add “enormity” to the ritual commotion of the occasion. His story helps to underscore that the participatory brouhaha was not only a normal part of the horizon of expectations of the audience at the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre — it was also a powerfully charismatic feature of the culture.

Of course, not all first-night to-dos of at the Parisian art theatres were of the same magnitude. The disruptions were an expected part of the experience, to be sure,

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<sup>418</sup> William Butler Yeats, *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1938), 297. As it happens, there is at least one known duel that was fought as part of the eventual aftermath of *Ubu's* performance. It was between Aurélien Lugné-Poe, director of the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre, and Catulle Mendès, the critic quoted at the start of this chapter. Details of the matter are narrated by Gertrude Jasper in *Adventure in the Theatre: Lugné-Poe and the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre to 1899* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press: 1947), 261-264.

<sup>419</sup> Yeats, 297.

but the hurly-burly at *Ubu Roi* distinguished itself for its scale, its infectiousness, and its persistent resurgence throughout the evening. It also bears re-emphasizing that this was a desirable part of the experience for many attendees: Antoine, Willy, Colette, Silvestre, Rémond, and even, ultimately, Yeats and Symons, to name but a few. One influential critic, Henry Bauër, celebrated the play in his review for precisely this reason. The production of *Ubu Roi*, as he wrote, was magnificent because it “offered a framework where everyone could embroider his own pleasure and collaborate in craziness.”<sup>420</sup> That contemporary observation has been entirely neglected in the written histories of this affair, yet it articulates what is arguably *Ubu*’s most important accomplishment: namely, that the madhouse audience atmosphere which this 1896 production achieved was a sort of high-water mark of participatory audience-ing.<sup>421</sup> As the critic urged his readers: “let us give ourselves to the fantasy!”<sup>422</sup>

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<sup>420</sup> Henry Bauër, “Les Première Représentations: *Ubu Roi*,” *Écho de Paris* 12 Dec. 1896, 3. The significant social consequences resulting from this critic’s engagement with *Ubu Roi* is the central topic of Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

<sup>421</sup> In addition to its being a “high-water mark,” I would propose that one reason why the début of *Ubu Roi* should continue to stand out prominently in modern performance history is because this participatory pinnacle was achieved in an era when social pressures were beginning to transform the manners of theatre attendees in general, transitioning audiences’ expectations away from “collaboration in craziness” and toward the sort of un-interrupting passivity that is familiar to twenty-first century theatregoers. In fact, the pacification-over-time of the behavior of European and American theatre audiences is a major subject of at least three studies consulted as research for this chapter. One is Neil Blackadder’s *Performing Opposition: Modern Theatre and the Scandalized Audience* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), which, overall, argues that “protests against new plays of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries constituted acts of resistance to the transition toward a more passive form of spectatorship” (xi). Additional helpful perspectives on the participatory/non-participatory tendencies of theatre audiences are featured in Susan Bennett’s monograph *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and in Baz Kershaw’s essay “Oh for Unruly Audiences! Or, Patterns of Participation in Twentieth Century Theatre,” *Modern Drama* 44.2(2001).

<sup>422</sup> Bauër, 12 Dec., 3.

That image of *Ubu Roi* as a pinnacle of participation contains a paradoxical notion which can serve as a concluding thought for this chapter. Namely: the historical first performance of *Ubu Roi* was simultaneously an ordinary and also an extra-ordinary evening at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre. Ordinary in that it conformed to the expectation of the audience for participation (and jubilant, perhaps even ritual, confrontation) at an avant-garde theatre *générale*. Yet it was also extraordinary in that the canvas for this particular gathering had been exquisitely primed to maximize that behavior — primed by cultural tradition, by the publicity campaign, by the multiple disruptive agendas of the different clagues and individual attendees, by Jarry's special doctoring of the audience, and even by the architectural and social influence of Nouveau Théâtre itself. So, in a twist of pataphysical logic that the playwright would certainly have appreciated, this apotheosis of audience behavior, its "perfection," transforms the event into something that was *perfectly* ordinary. In contradistinction, then, to the well-known Violent-Rupture-with-Tradition and Birth-of-the-Oppositional-Avant-Garde narratives which have long dominated the study of *Ubu*'s historic first performance, the occasion could — and, I argue, should — be fundamentally re-conceived as The Perfectly Ordinary Premiere of *Ubu Roi*.

**Chapter 3:**  
**Rachilde's *Supermale of Letters***  
**and the Invention of the Merdre Riot**

This study's third resurrected history of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* explains the origin — and the originally intended purpose — of the *Merdre* Riot story that is commonly associated with the 1896 Parisian premiere of this play. The phrase “*Merdre* Riot” refers to the tale of a protracted and violent audience protest supposedly caused by the opening word, “*Merdre!*” The erroneous nature of this tale and of its theater-historical ubiquity were addressed in the Introduction to this dissertation, but the present chapter considers the problematic anecdote from a new perspective. Rather than discussing the legacy of the *Merdre* Riot as it continues to shape (mis)perceptions today, it examines how and why the fiction got started in the first place.

Following Chapter Two, several facts about the real audience who attended *Ubu Roi* are now known. Those present at the show were not bourgeois (as popular imagining imagines) but were an invited crowd of bohemians and literary celebrities. At the first performance these elite theatergoers did take part in lengthy, recurring, factional, noisy

— and even celebratory, for some — disruption that began after the first half hour, ebbed-and-flowed throughout the show, and had at least one sustained period of notable intensity during the play’s third act. Most relevantly, it is clear that the hullabaloo at the show had nothing to do with the audience being offended by the play’s use of a profane word. And — knowing all of this — it becomes obvious that the sustained third-act-of-the-first-night disturbance that took place among that fractious and avant-garde audience is the historical reality that has been bent into the myth of a first-word bourgeois *Merdre* Riot. The point is emphasized here because it is specifically the transformation of that kernel of historical truth (a factional quasi-celebratory uproar among a divided avant-garde) into its historiographical (mis)representation (unified avant-garde artists deliberately provoking a supposedly bourgeois audience) that is the core subject of the present chapter.

The following pages present the *Merdre* Riot as a purposeful distortion of truth invented specifically for the purpose of evoking the (false) idea of a scandalized bourgeois crowd at *Ubu Roi*. As discussed in the Introduction, that charismatic fiction has been the most important factor in maintaining the canonical place of this play in the history of modern theater for nearly a century. Yet, for this very reason the falsity has become important in itself. The circumstances surrounding the invention of the phony-but-influential story ought to be given serious attention, for the creation of the *Merdre* Riot is, itself, actually a landmark theatre-historical event worthy of investigation in its own right. Why was the anecdote conceived? What purpose was it meant to serve? The

current chapter answers these questions by investigating the personal significance of the début of Jarry's play from the perspective of its most profoundly influential mythifier: Rachilde, the inventor of the *Merdre* Riot.

This individual, Rachilde, was the literary editor for the avant-garde and Parisian literary magazine *The Mercure de France*. In addition to this, she was Alfred Jarry's closest friend from the time of their first meeting in 1894 until the end of his short life thirteen years later. She is also the one and only source for this famous fiction. Her account of a *merdre* riot made its first appearance in the memoir of Jarry that she wrote in 1928, titled *Alfred Jarry, The Supermale of Letters*.<sup>423</sup> Prior to the publication of that work, the story simply did not exist. Rachilde made it up for that book. Both Rachilde and her memoir of Jarry were discussed briefly in Chapter One. There *The Supermale of Letters* was acknowledged as the first full-length study of Jarry, and Rachilde herself was briefly featured for the career-damaging practical joke that she played on her young friend shortly after he first appeared at the offices of the *Mercure*. Naturally, since Rachilde is the main focal figure of this current chapter, she will soon be drawn in greater detail.

The recognition of Rachilde's book as the sole historical source for the *merdre* riot is not unique to the present investigation. Both Deak and Postlewait make note of this provenance in their own studies of the famous premiere of Jarry's play.<sup>424</sup> What neither

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<sup>423</sup> Rachilde, *Alfred Jarry ou Le Surmâle de lettres* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1928), 80-81.

<sup>424</sup> Frantisek Deak, *Symbolist Theatre: The Formation of an Avant-Garde* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 233-234; Thomas Postlewait, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 72.

predecessor discusses, however, are the highly polemical and political origins of the phony story itself. Nor is this topic addressed by any other scholar who writes about *Ubu Roi*. To this day the subject of Rachilde's motivation remains wide open to inquiry.<sup>425</sup>

Ultimately what is argued in this chapter is that Rachilde's invention of the first-word riot of *Ubu Roi* — an invention which did not take place until thirty-two years after the play's *début* performance — had far less to do with recording a true account of that historical occasion than it had to do with an intellectual custody battle that was raging internally among the Parisian avant-garde of the interwar period of the 1920s. Her charismatic fiction of *Ubu*'s shocking-to-the-bourgeoisie opening night was intended by her to play only a supporting role in a larger crusade belonging to that later era. Rachilde's overall goal, as shown here, was to wrest cultural control of the *idea* of Jarry (who died in 1907) away from his youthful Surrealist inheritors of this new era, who were led by André Breton; and also away from such ex-Surrealist “clowns” [*bouffons*] as Antonin Artaud and Roger Vitrac, who had founded the Alfred Jarry Theatre in 1926.<sup>426</sup> It is certainly true that this new breed of *enfants terribles* had lately appropriated the memory (and veneration) of Jarry for themselves. In Rachilde's view, though, their entire generation willfully misunderstood the real Jarry and his proper significance. Therefore, in a highly idiosyncratic biography of Jarry, she endeavored to set the record straight

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<sup>425</sup> The exception to this claim is an early version of this chapter that was published in 2012. Its bibliographic details: Sebastian Trainor, “Rachilde's Supermale of Letters and the Invention of the *Ubu Roi* Riot,” *Text and Presentation* (2012): 92-108.

<sup>426</sup> Rachilde, 78.

concerning her late friend. Ultimately, though, her book contains many distortions that seem to exist solely for petty political reasons of her own. One of these distortions is her account of the now famous *Merdre!* scandal.

In the larger scheme of this dissertation, this third “resurrected history” is somewhat atypical in that it strays from the tight focus on the 1890s used in the study’s other chapters. The departure is warranted, however, because the illumination of this particular mystery of the play’s *début* depends on examining the tale of the *Merdre* Riot in the context of the period in which the story was written, rather than in the context of the period that it purports to depict. And yet, despite this temporal departure, the inquiry remains firmly connected to the other chapters of this study by both its subject and its method. The subject, of course, is the history of the first 1896 Parisian performance of *Ubu Roi*. And the method is to retell the story of that premiere in a new context, specifically by reframing it in terms of the personal significance of the event in the life of one of the key figures who influenced it. In essence, this third chapter proposes to enter, imaginatively, into Rachilde’s conceptual universe of the winter of 1927/28 and to attempt to understand why she was lying to her readers. In doing this, the fictional *Merdre* Riot will come to be employed in a new way that reveals something of substance about the internal workings of the historical avant-garde theatre, while shedding new light on the history of *Ubu Roi* as well.

### The Size of Ubu

In the modern conception, the premiere of Jarry's play is usually thought of as an extravagantly produced affair, whose offensiveness had an immediate and powerfully negative effect on contemporary Parisian society. That conception is largely due to the embellishment and canonization of the *Merdre* Riot story (as discussed in this study's main Introduction). A type of historiographical magnification has occurred, inflating, in the collective mind's eye, the idea of the historical production to monumental proportions. Indeed, even in the context of this study it is useful to pause and actively re-center the knowledge that *Ubu*'s real 1896 production was a small-scale, exclusive, and clannish event.

The facts that that the show was produced quickly (with only two weeks of part-time rehearsal), with the utmost economy, and for a special audience are worth remembering. The financially important part of that audience were the two hundred subscribers who came to the show on the second night, the *première*, avoiding the noisy ritual of the *générale*. Those two hundred subscribers, however, had to completely finance the 1896/97 season of all eight productions mounted by the company. In perspective, then: the income from only twenty-five paying patrons had to offset the full expense of mounting *Ubu Roi*. In such circumstances the show's production values could not have been particularly extravagant. Nonetheless, two thousand invitees came eagerly to see it; for the theatre was filled to capacity for both performances with the "very special audience" typical of *soirée* at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre.

It is also salutary to keep in mind just how young the creators of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre's events were. Jarry was twenty-three years old at the time of the production of his play; Lugné-Poe, director of the company, was twenty-seven; and most of the actors in the show were equally youthful volunteers who performed wearing improvised costumes of their own devising.<sup>427</sup> Thus, the historical production of *Ubu Roi* was realized by an under-rehearsed company consisting (mostly) of unpaid young people, who enacted it before a (mostly) unpaying audience of invited (and specially prepared) guests.

When viewed in the overall context of the Parisian theatre season of 1896/97, the existence of *Ubu Roi* becomes almost entirely invisible to the “average” bourgeois or touristic theatergoer. During this same week a hypothetical average customer might instead choose to patronize such mass-marketed attractions as Sarah Bernhardt in *Lorenzaccio*, or the hypnotic *danses lumineuses* of the sensational American dancer Loïe Fuller at the Folies-Bergère, or the *corps de ballet* at the Garnier Opera palace, or a work of Molière at the Comédie-Française, or a revue of satirical songs at one of city's dozens of *cafés-concerts*, or the mechanical miracle of *Around the World in Eighty Days* which had been performing on the Boulevard for more than twenty years, or any of a hundred other options, both grand and small, to be found in the French capital. In this vast Parisian entertainment tapestry, any performance by the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre could only ever be a

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<sup>427</sup> The roles of Ubu and Mère Ubu were exceptions. These were played by Firmin Gémier and Louise France, respectively, both of whom were well known professional performers with an interest in the experiments of the avant-garde theatres. They acted their parts for a very nominal fee.

tiny piece of the fringe: a theatrical experiment designed for a very select assembly of illuminati.

### **Rachilde, Man of Letters**

As for Rachilde, she was such an important member of that illuminated audience, that without her the rest of it would probably never have existed. It should be clarified, though, that “Rachilde” was not Rachilde’s real name, but her gender-bent *nom de plume*: “Rachilde, man of letters,” said her visiting cards. She was addressed by this assumed name for the majority of her life, but her legal name was Marguerite Eymery Vallette — and she was a colorful and influential figure on the French literary scene throughout the *fin de siècle*. We already know that, in 1928, she became the initiator of the first-word-riot story that led to the *merdre* myth. But the main reason why her account of the occasion was able to gain such a solid foothold in later years, owes to the crucial role that she played in mounting the original production of *Ubu Roi* in 1896. Certainly, she was there for the premiere. But what gives her phony story so much historiographic weight is the fact that the play would never have been produced were it not for her influence.

In 1896, the year of the *merdre*, she was thirty-six years of age. She had entered Parisian letters as a novice journalist during the previous decade, very much a woman in her twenties in a middle-aged-man’s world, and soon began cross-dressing, purportedly for safety reasons. Within a few years she made her own scandalous début as an author of pornographic novels, and was the only woman to form part of the Decadent



**Figure 3.1:** Illustration of Rachilde from the cover of the 27 February 1887 issue of the Parisian gossip journal *La Vie Moderne*. Rachilde is shown here with hair cut short, and wearing a man's hat and a tailored man's jacket.<sup>428</sup>

movement of the 1880s and 1890s.<sup>429</sup> In 1889 she married Alfred Vallette, editor-in-chief of the *Mercure de France*, the most influential avant-garde journal of arts and literature of the era. From 1892-1926 she was the literary critic for this journal and creative advisor to her husband, while remaining a prolific novelist herself and attracting the literary talent

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<sup>428</sup> Image is reproduced from Melanie C. Hawthorne's *Rachilde and French Women's Authorship: From Decadence to Modernism* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 139.

<sup>429</sup> Diana Holmes, *Rachilde: Decadence, Gender and the Woman Writer* (New York: Berg, 2001), 1.

of the era to her salon, which was, of course, also the salon of the *Mercure de France*.<sup>430</sup> It is certain that the Symbolist theatre could not have begun without her assistance.<sup>431</sup> She made the literary connections that were necessary for both Paul Fort and his short-lived Théâtre d'Art, and later for Aurélien Lugné-Poe and his Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, to be supplied with plays, playwrights, subscribers, and enthusiastic volunteers — all in the service of bringing ecstatic visionary theatre to the French stage as a counterpoint to André Antoine's established and naturalistic Théâtre Libre. From this résumé one might conclude that Rachilde wielded a great deal of Parisian cultural clout during the closing decade of the nineteenth century.

In 1894 she first met the young writer Alfred Jarry, who, at that time, was beginning to insinuate himself into the crowd associated with the *Mercure*. Though an unlikely pair, the two hit it off extremely well. Notwithstanding the damaging practical joke she played on the young man near the start of their association — or possibly because of it — she soon made herself into his best friend and protector.<sup>432</sup> In fact, were it not for Rachilde's intervention at a critical moment in the pre-production, *Ubu Roi* would never even have reached the stage of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre. As it happened, two weeks prior to the play's premiere the company's director, Lugné-Poe, was suddenly

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<sup>430</sup> For more details pertaining to the salon of the *Mercure de France*, see Chapter 1, notes 87 and 88, as well as the associated paragraphs in the main text.

<sup>431</sup> Holmes, 205.

<sup>432</sup> For more detail about Rachilde's practical joke see the section of Chapter 1 titled "Rachilde's Practical Joke."

seized with worries about how *Ubu* might be received by his company's subscribers. Even though the play had been widely publicized among the theatre's partisans, and several articles about it had been printed, the young director was considering canceling the production. Rachilde, to whom he confided his misgivings, responded with a chastising letter admonishing that "it would be reprobate to break [his] word to an author who has every right to count on [him]" and that "the l'Oeuvre must mount it."<sup>433</sup> Since Lugné-Poe could not afford to lose the highly influential support of Rachilde and the *Mercure*, he opted to proceed with the production.<sup>434</sup>

When the day of the début arrived Rachilde was there, in the theatre, together with a dozen other members of the editorial staff of the *Mercure*.<sup>435</sup> All were prepared to play their customarily effusive roles in support of Jarry's play — as noisily as necessary<sup>436</sup>

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<sup>433</sup> Aurélien Lugné-Poe, *Acrobaties*, vol. 2 of *La Parade* (Paris: Gallimard, 1931-33). As was discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, Jarry had been working for the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre since June 1896, essentially as an unpaid secretary and administrator, and had rendered many indispensable services to Lugné-Poe and to the company. It was apparent on all sides, though, that Jarry's enthusiasm for his job derived largely from the expectation of a production of *Ubu Roi*. As for Rachilde's letter, Lugné-Poe reproduced it in his memoirs:

Look, if you didn't sense a success when you accepted the play, then why did you agree to it? . . . At my place I keep hearing again and again that all the younger generation, and a few of the oldsters who like a good joke, are all eagerly awaiting the performance. So what's the problem? . . . it would be reprobate to break your word to an author who has every right to count on you . . . Maybe it won't be a perfect success, but rather an oddity which will marvelously prove your eclecticism . . . Yes, the l'Oeuvre must mount it. (174-175, my translation).

<sup>434</sup> Deak, 229.

<sup>435</sup> Laurent Tailhade, *Quelques fantômes de jadis* (Paris: Éditions française illustrée, 1920), 215.

<sup>436</sup> Though Lugné-Poe reproduced Rachilde's chastening letter of 15 November 1896 in his memoirs (see note 15, above) he omitted a few sentences. The letter itself has survived, however, and was published in facsimile form in the December 1979 issue of *L'Étoile-Absinthe* ("Dossier: Jarry à l'Oeuvre," collected and presented by Henri Bordillon, *L'Étoile-Absinthe* 4 (Dec. 1979): 12). One of the elided passages speaks to the sort of loud, enthusiastic, and organized support that would be manifested by the *Mercure* faithful at the performance of *Ubu Roi*. Here, Rachilde assures the director that "Armand Silvestre [a

— to represent their camp as part of the “very special audience” who were present for the occasion.<sup>437</sup> Since it is certain that Rachilde was present, and because of her close association with Jarry, one can easily understand why some historians would have credited her version of events, even though she did not write it until decades later, and even though it is uncorroborated by any other report.<sup>438</sup> According to her, as soon as Firmin Gémier, the actor who played Ubu, pronounced the first “*merdre*”:

Such pandemonium resulted that [he] had to remain silent for a quarter of an hour, and a quarter hour is a long time on the stage! We call this a “hole.” This was a true abyss! The literary elite laughed, but the uninitiated commoners, especially the women, never recovered. From the balconies to the boxes and back again, they hurled abuse. There was such howling that [one of my companions] deemed the performance in the audience to be more important than the one on stage. He egged it on, shouting to the throng, “let’s keep it going!” while waving his flat-brimmed hat in encouragement. Each time the word was said during the rest of the play, and this was quite often, it received the same welcome: shouts of anger, indignation and crazy laughter.<sup>439</sup>

In this one easily discerns the template for a familiar picture: the uncomprehending crowd which (inexplicably) consists of a high proportion of “uninitiated commoners” [*profanes*], who are presumably bourgeois, and who are so

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notable literary figure of the era] is thrilled to be able to lead the *claque* [an organized cheering/jeering faction of the audience particular to French theatre] in the audience when the day arrives,” and that, “all our band of young folks will wholeheartedly support the comrade in question [i.e., Jarry].” Indeed, this may have been the assurance that persuaded the director to continue with the production.

<sup>437</sup> “Very special audience” comes from Sarcey’s review of *Ubu Roi*, *Le Temps* 14 Dec. 1896, rpt. in Robillot, “La Press,” 75. As for details pertaining to the composition of that audience: see Chapter 2 of this study.

<sup>438</sup> For specific examples of “some historians” see notes 3 through 13 in the Introduction to this study.

<sup>439</sup> Rachilde, 80-81. My translation. Whenever not specified otherwise, translations from the French are my own.

scandalized by the pronouncement of this filthy word in so public a forum that they “never recover” their bourgeois complacency.<sup>440</sup> In this way Rachilde established, for the first time, Ubu’s famous word as a shocking *coup de grâce*, delivered by an avant-garde play (which could not have been produced without her intervention), after which “the theatre was never the same again.”<sup>441</sup>

Rachilde, of course, knew this story to be false at the time when she wrote it. Admittedly: it is *possible* that she may have genuinely misremembered the event. She *might* have believed her report to be accurate. She *might*, with befogged hindsight, have thought that the extremely exclusive invited dress rehearsal for Théâtre de l’Oeuvre partisans was open to the general bourgeois public. But that possibility seems remote.<sup>442</sup> It is far more likely that she was not interested in accurate reporting, and that the account quoted above was deliberately distorted by her to achieve some specific agenda. Trained as a

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<sup>440</sup> This interpretation of Rachilde’s account is traditional, and to me it does seem to be what she meant. The equivalence between “*profane*” and bourgeois is made particularly explicit by Jacques-Henry L evesque in his 1951 monograph on Jarry. This is worth noting because L evesque was among the first generation of historians to rely on Rachilde’s account, and his interpretation (of her) then became foundational for later scholars. As L evesque understood it: “Because the action began with this word [*merdre*], un-preceded by anything else, this word crystallized . . . the indignant rage of an individual suddenly snatched from his sense of bourgeois well-being . . . it is this that constituted the intolerable provocation and inexcusable attack” (L evesque:39).

<sup>441</sup> George Wellwarth, *The Theatre of Protest and Paradox* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), 1.

<sup>442</sup> Even in 1927, when Rachilde was in the process of writing her memoir of Jarry, she was still surrounded by many of the same companions who had also attended the premiere with her, and with whom she could easily have compared notes had she wished. Several other mnemonic aids were available to her also, if she were interested in accuracy. For instance: her own book’s chapter on *Ubu Roi* goes on to quote from a selection of articles that appeared in the 1896 press response to the play. Though she does not quote anything that actually contradicts her own version, her use of such materials suggests that she either kept clippings from the original press proceedings, or else she researched the matter. In either case, her memory should have been jogged toward a truer recollection.

combative journalist of the *fin de siècle* and *belle époque*, she certainly was not above peddling sensational fabrications to achieve a desired political effect. But why would she distort this particular detail in this particular way? Or, to put it slightly differently: how, precisely, could publishing misinformation about this occasion have benefited her? These questions are the gateway to a new understanding of the anecdote of the *Merdre* Riot.

### **From One Era to the Next**

To answer them, the clock must be advanced to the 1920s, the era in which Rachilde composed the memoir of her friend, *Alfred Jarry, or The Supermale of Letters*. It must also be acknowledged how the many cultural conditions that had changed since the 1890s may have influenced her memory of that era, or at least how they may have influenced her agenda when narrating that memory. Jarry had died a particularly sad death in 1907 from alcoholism and malnutrition, practically forgotten within his own lifetime. During the following decade, the First World War had irrevocably altered the Parisian avant-garde community of which he and Rachilde had been a part. In the 1920s that community was dominated by Dada and Surrealism, which, in Rachilde's eyes, were dangerous foreign practices. And quite unexpectedly, in the wake of the war, an idealized myth-memory of Jarry — Jarry as an anti-rational, folk heroic “Surrealist in absinthe”<sup>443</sup> — had sprung up (propelled mainly by Surrealists) and had made him more famous in

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<sup>443</sup> André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, translated by Richard Seaver and Helen Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 27.

death than he ever had been in life. The capstone of his posthumous celebrity may have been the founding of the Alfred Jarry Theatre in 1926 by the expelled Surrealists Antonin Artaud and Roger Vitrac, whose company offered its first production only a few weeks before Rachilde began her memoir.

The Rachilde of the 1920s, she who wrote the memoir, was no longer the Rachilde of the 1890s. Her own attitudes and circumstances had inevitably been affected by these external transformations: by her friend's death of alcoholism, by World War I, by the advent of Surrealism, by the diminishment of the importance of the *Mercure*, by Jarry's apotheosis as a folk hero, and by the founding of a theatre in his name. Each of these factors played a role in urging Rachilde to fabricate the morally outraged bourgeois audience who supposedly attended the first showing of *Ubu Roi*. Yet it should be noted that this famous story is actually only a passing detail — a supporting argument — in Rachilde's book-length remembrance of her friend.

Therefore, to know how the invention of a *merdre* riot might have benefited her, it is necessary first to understand the larger purpose of her writing of *The Supermale of Letters*, for the one is an integral part of the other. The guiding question, then, should be: why did Rachilde choose to write this particular memoir *at this particular time*? I would argue that her main intended purpose was to reclaim (for herself and for her *fin-de-siècle* colleagues) the cultural custody of Jarry's legacy from the clutches of the new generation, who had, of late, appropriated it for themselves. Seen in this way, the book was part of an inter-generational power struggle within the Parisian avant-garde. And when placed in

this frame, Rachilde's proposition of a first-word *merdre* riot at *Ubu Roi* becomes a discursive tool employed by her toward the achievement of a political goal. In order that its reasoning may be more readily followed, let us briefly examine the evolution of the popular *idea* of Jarry — of his general *significance* to Parisian society — during the interval between his death in obscurity and his later resurrection as a cultural commodity, for it was ultimately to this evolution that Rachilde's book was responding.

### **The Idea of Jarry: A Surrealist Resurrection**

In life, Jarry had always been engagingly eccentric. He was conversant on nearly any literary, scientific, or philosophical topic. In his behavior he was often deliberately anti-conventional, and, increasingly as he grew older, he loved to shock people with his opinions and antics. At the same time, he was also exceedingly polite, sensitive, and charming. This combination of qualities remained with him at least until his final dementia, and it often made him a successful addition to any artistic or literary gathering of his day.<sup>444</sup> But as a writer, apart from the 1896 publication and production of *Ubu Roi*, Jarry's extensive literary output made practically no impact on his own era. In fact, all of his later efforts were greeted with nearly total critical indifference, even by his close associates at the *Mercur de France*.<sup>445</sup> Notwithstanding, he remained quite close to the *Mercur* crowd, and especially to Rachilde, throughout his lifetime.

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<sup>444</sup> See Chapter 1, footnote 142.

<sup>445</sup> Incidentally, the subtitle of Rachilde's biography of Jarry, *The Supermale of Letters*, derives from Jarry's final completed novel, *The Supermale* [*Le Surmâle*], in which the main character is a monster of

Without question, in the years immediately following his death no one could have gainsaid any interpretation she might make concerning his life. But in this new era of the 1920s, the Paris Dadaists and their Surrealist successors had appropriated the veneration of Jarry for themselves. Perhaps they even initiated it, for they discovered proto-Surrealist beauties in the same Jarryan novels that had been tedious to his own era of fully flowered literary Symbolism and Decadence. Even beyond these literary merits, they revered Jarry's eccentric (post-1900) personality because they saw it as a willful defiance of reality, a refusal to compromise with an idiotic world.<sup>446</sup> This Surrealist veneration bothered Rachilde, for she was no friend to this new generation, and the memory of Jarry was, in a sense, her cultural property on which they were trespassing.

Then again, a great deal of property — whether material, intellectual, cultural, or spiritual — changed hands during the Great War. In fact, that war may have been the best thing that ever happened to Jarry's literary reputation. After it, *Ubu's* theatricalization of the rapacity, self-interest, and bourgeois idiocy of the pre-war years seemed prophetic. The “Savage God” was now recognized in this formerly trivial

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scientific, athletic and sexual masculinity. Published in 1902, it was the most successful of Jarry's novels — which is not really saying much as it did not even sell out its small print run and received no favorable reviews. Despite the similarity of title, Jarry's *Supermale* bears only a distant relation to the Nietzschean *Superman*.

<sup>446</sup> The outrageous and uncompromising behaviors that the Surrealists so admired in Jarry manifested mainly after 1900 — that is: they manifested well after the era of his association with the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre had ended. It seems worth noting here also that the Surrealists' veneration of Jarry most definitely colored Roger Shattuck's account of the writer's personality as it appears in *The Banquet Years*. For parallels, please see the section of Chapter 1 of this study called “The Ubiquitous Influence of Shattuck.”

puppet-inspired satire,<sup>447</sup> a new edition of *Ubu Roi* was printed, a new scandal over the actual authorship of the play was hotly debated in the Parisian press,<sup>448</sup> a new production was mounted, and many of Jarry's acquaintances of old began to publish memoirs recounting his outrageous (mainly post-1900) behavior. Some of the stories were even true, though most were exaggerated. By the mid 1920s, the popular identification of the alcoholic Jarry with the monstrous but comical character of Ubu was nearly complete. The two were viewed almost as one riotous and farcical individual.<sup>449</sup> The *idea* of Jarry had become a highly fashionable commodity in the artistic life of Paris. In twenty-first century terms he had suddenly become the intellectual flavor of the month.

Unsurprisingly, the first biographical article on Jarry was published during this era. It was authored by André Breton, the twenty-something leader of the emerging Surrealist movement. His influential 1919 portrait-essay for *Les Écrits Nouveaux* is an earnest, systematic, and Romantic interpretation of Jarry's life. It is worth underscoring that this study emerged from the new (post World War I) generation of the Parisian avant-garde, rather than from the former generation of Jarry's actual historical

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<sup>447</sup> In relation to Ubu, "the Savage God" was famously invoked by William Butler Yeats — yet another Symbolist celebrity who happened to be attending the first night of Jarry's play. In Yeats's 1922 *The Trembling of the Veil*, the earliest of the poet's *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1955), he remembers back across the intervening decades and "foresees" in the performance of *Ubu Roi* the end of Symbolism and the coming of savagery. In his own words: "After S. Mallarmé, after Verlaine, after G. Moreau, after Puvis de Chavannes, after our own verse, after the faint mixed tints of Conder, what more is possible? After us the Savage God" (348).

<sup>448</sup> This was the so-called Chassé Affair, discussed in Appendix D of this dissertation.

<sup>449</sup> Lewis F. Sutton, *An Evaluation of the Studies on Alfred Jarry from 1894 to 1963*, unpublished dissertation (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1966), 44.

collaborators. In his essay Breton notes that “the author of *Ubu Roi* still lacks a biographer, in the proper sense of the term.”<sup>450</sup> He then commences to fill in this void, inspired by the significance that (the idea of) Jarry — Jarry as uninhibited *id* in revolt against the Freudian reality principle — held for his own generation of young people who had “reached the age of twenty years during the war.” He and his circle planned to bring “an assault on reasoning,” and for such a siege, he felt, “no better example than Jarry can possibly be found.” But if his own idea of Jarry must arrive “before others’ who may have more authority to pay tribute to his memory,” it would nonetheless be validated by the sincerity and passion that urged its creation. As Breton put it: “the features that I have imagined for him, though I never knew him, are, for me, singularly unforgettable.” The features that Breton imagines, however, are not those of the Jarry of the early 1890s, who was featured in Chapter One of this study, but of the post-1900 absinth, ether, and alcohol addicted Jarry, who, along with his addictions, also developed a knack for perpetrating anti-conventional social enormities.

Most especially the tales of Jarry’s intoxicated antics are what Breton found so inspirational. In another study by the Surrealist guru he explains that, in Jarry’s manner of living, “the distinction between art and life, long considered necessary [in society], found itself challenged and wound up being annihilated.”<sup>451</sup> Breton exemplifies this claim

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<sup>450</sup> André Breton, “Alfred Jarry.” *Les Ecrits nouveaux*, 19 janvier 1919, 17. All short quotations in this paragraph are taken from the first page of Breton’s essay.

<sup>451</sup> André Breton, *Anthology of Black Humor*, translated by Mark Polizzoti (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997), 212.

with several supporting anecdotes pertaining to one of Jarry's favorite possessions: the Bulldog pocket revolver that he began to carry with him everywhere from approximately 1898 onward. In one of these revolver exploits, Jarry discharged the gun at the sculptor Manolo [Manuel Martínez Hugué], to whom he had taken a dislike at a dinner party (in 1904). During the course of the dinner, he had ordered Manolo out of the room, and when the sculptor again showed his face around the door, Jarry shot at him. Manolo was not injured, but Jarry was expelled from the event. To the friends who were dragging him away, he remarked: "wasn't that a beautiful work of literature?"<sup>452</sup> Breton adds other examples as well, ultimately interpreting the frequent and socially problematic discharge of Jarry's handgun as "the paradoxical hyphen between the outer and inner worlds."<sup>453</sup> Of course, Jarry's intoxication often plays a key role in these stories. This was achieved preferably by means of absinthe, but he might substitute other intoxicants at need. It is for this reason that, when Breton wrote his 1924 "Manifesto of Surrealism" — in which he defines surrealism as "psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express . . . the actual functioning of thought . . . in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern"<sup>454</sup> — he again celebrated Jarry's lifestyle as having been "surrealist in absinthe."

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<sup>452</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>454</sup> Breton, *Manifestoes*, 27.

Yet Jarry's old confidante, Rachilde, took quite a different view. She considered that his "eternity" — as Jarry, late in his life, called his state of perpetual chemical enhancement — was not worthy to be celebrated. "When I agreed to narrate the short existence of that incorrigible bohemian Alfred Jarry," she writes, "I did so because no one else had known him, in his unguarded privacy, as well as I did. He was the victim of a mental delusion that was cruel both for himself and for those close to him."<sup>455</sup> This less rapturous, less theorized, and more human introduction of her friend's life was merely one aspect of Rachilde's struggle against the new Surrealist generation for custodianship of the *idea* of Jarry. It was, however, not her only quarrel with them. Shortly before writing those words, she and they had literally come to blows — which will be discussed presently.

But what must be established now are the bases of their alternative interpretations of the life of Jarry. The Surrealist Jarry was a creature of pure *id* impulse — like his creation Ubu — who had no moral or aesthetic hesitations about satisfying his *id* desires. He discharged his pistol whenever he felt like it, and generally lived in the world in an absinthe haze as though society were created by his own imagination. His lack of control and disregard of social mores made him an excellent incarnation of the principles of their idealized Surrealist revolution. For Rachilde, though, Jarry's admirable qualities were entirely elsewhere. She rejected the Surrealist exaltation of his supposedly unrestrained *id*-into-action-ness. Indeed, she rejected this quality's very existence in Jarry.

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<sup>455</sup> Rachilde, 28-29.

In her view, Jarry's artistic program was carefully thought out, pre-planned and based upon painstaking attention to moral and aesthetic concerns. Though transgressive, it had little to do with subconscious vagaries. The real Alfred Jarry, as she claims, "timed even his minutest performances" for the sake of their pragmatic effects — and one must concede that she knew him better than anyone.<sup>456</sup>

This difference in the interpretive opinion held by Rachilde and Breton on the matter of Jarry may seem petty on the surface. Yet the difference is symptomatic of a fundamental incompatibility between the mind set of the Symbolist generation of the 1890s and that of the Surrealist generation of the 1920s. At its core, this incompatibility was a highly political opposition in artistic philosophy. For the parties concerned, it was a difference that was worth fighting over. It was also a difference that led, eventually, to the invention of the *Merdre* Riot that we have inherited today.

### **Politics of the Avant-Garde**

Though World War I had unmade and remade many aspects of French society, it barely slowed Rachilde's literary productivity. Well into her sixties, she continued her activities as novelist, literary critic, salon hostess, and twilight celebrity. The war did, however, temporarily displace her from Paris. It also caused her to become intensely xenophobic and frankly reactionary.<sup>457</sup> And it also drastically transformed the nature of

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<sup>456</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>457</sup> Elizabeth E. Covington, *Egotistical Spectator: Rachilde (1860-1953) and the Fin-de-Siècle Novel*, unpublished dissertation (University of California, Los Angeles, 1998), 71.

the Parisian avant-garde in which she functioned. During the pre-war *fin de siècle*, when Decadence and Symbolism were the most pioneering forces of aesthetic innovation, she had been an extremely powerful figure. But the ideals of those movements were now old-fashioned, and had been long superseded by the new, more democratic, energies of a younger generation.

Politically speaking, the old and new schools did share some common ground: all despised the mores and materialism of the dominant bourgeois society. Yet the movements with which Rachilde associated dealt with that contempt by simply turning away. The Decadents and Symbolists withdrew — or perhaps transcended — into the ideal and often abstruse world of their own creations. Their poems, paintings and novels tended to be allusive, subjective, and atmospheric. They made them for an elite audience: themselves. In the theatre they created a hermetic and exclusive environment in which only devotees and their acolytes were welcome. To appreciate their works required effort, practice, and initiation; and only a connoisseur, endowed with the necessary learning and leisure, could grasp them fully. Dada and Surrealism, on the other hand, channeled their rancor toward the bourgeois social order more confrontationally. They brazenly assailed the institutions of mainstream culture with new literary, journalistic, visual, and theatrical shock tactics, attempting to undermine established patterns of behavior and perception. Their challenging output aimed to liberate the viewer from entrenched systems of thought — a liberation applicable to bourgeois, proletarian, and

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**Figure 3.2: Photographic portrait of Rachilde from the late 1920s, the era in which she struggled against the Surrealists.<sup>458</sup>**

aristocrat alike. The shocked but emancipated individuals would, they theorized, achieve a reinvigorated creative state: each would be newly attuned to his or her own unconscious impulses and ready to participate in a saner civilization.<sup>459</sup> Since the Surrealists were already thusly committed to rescuing society from the jingoistic and conventional mindset that had led to the recent war, they collectively joined the French

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<sup>458</sup> Image reproduced from Holmes, 62.

<sup>459</sup> Kimberly Jannarone, *Artaud and his Doubles* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 85.

Communist Party. In so doing, they sought to bring their aesthetics — their ideological revolution — to the impending material revolution.<sup>460</sup>

The post-war Rachilde did not support this socially engaged program of the new generation. Perhaps she did not understand it. Or perhaps she felt threatened by it — for, by this point, she had become the elder stateswoman of an entrenched and passé avant-garde establishment that was, itself, being uprooted by the new school's ideological revolution. (The Surrealists certainly had no use for her elitism). Or maybe her reasons for opposing them were otherwise. But whatever the cause may have been, it is clear that this one-time queen of the avant-garde refused to adapt herself to the new era. Instead, she appointed herself protector of “French culture,” and used her editorial platform and fading star power to lambaste the Surrealists, whom she perceived as repellently un-French, an idiotic alien influence, unwanted, and principally German in origin.<sup>461</sup> She attacked them regularly in print for contaminating the French-ness of Parisian culture. Throughout the 1920s her popularity waned, and her significance to the avant-garde considerably diminished, due largely to her active rejection of the new movements in art and literature.<sup>462</sup> As will soon be shown, the *merdre* myth of *Ubu Roi* is readily

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<sup>460</sup> Gérard Durozoi, *History of the Surrealist Movement*, translated by Alison Anderson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). The Surrealists, as it turns out, had a rather difficult time in the Communist Party and were often reproached for having published texts and illustrations that were “incomprehensible” to “the people” (137-138).

<sup>461</sup> Holmes, 62-63.

<sup>462</sup> Covington, 72.

understandable as propagandist flotsam riding the anti-Surrealist drift of Rachilde's writing.

The mutual antagonism between Rachilde and the new generation came sharply into focus in July 1925. The setting for this was a banquet hosted by her journal, the *Mercur de France*, in honor of the poet Saint-Pol-Roux *le magnifique* [Paul-Pierre Roux], a member of the pre-war Symbolist old guard who was returning to Paris for the first time in thirty years. Breton and several other of the Surrealist young-bloods had been invited to the occasion, for they, too, exalted Saint-Pol-Roux as having been “surrealist in his use of symbols,”<sup>463</sup> and had dedicated the most recent issue of their own journal to a celebration of his work. Early on in the banquet, after some deliberately provocative remarks made by Rachilde toward the new generation, the occasion transformed into something less celebratory. The resulting *mêlée* of flying food, smashed crockery, overturned tables, and pulled-down chandeliers had, eventually, to be quelled by the police, who arrested Rachilde and many of the other combatants. When these authorities arrived, she was reportedly standing atop one of the banquet tables, hurling invective and torn-off hunks of bread at her adversaries. She was also armed with a revolver.<sup>464</sup>

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<sup>463</sup> Breton, *Manifestoes*, 27.

<sup>464</sup> This restaurant battle — which, through media coverage, escalated into a civic issue — erupted on Thursday, 2 July 1925, at the *Closerie de Lilas* in Paris's Montparnasse neighborhood, a café which had been an important bohemian meeting place both before and after the war. Further details concerning the occasion can be found in Diana Holmes's *Rachilde: Decadence, Gender and the Woman Writer* (2001:61-66), and in Melanie C. Hawthorne's *Rachilde and French Women's Authorship: From Decadence to Modernism* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2001: 203-216). A contrasting perspective to these can be found in Gérard Durozoi's *History of the Surrealist Movement* (2002: 89-92), which explains the Surrealists' pre-banquet arrangements that helped to insure the resulting hostilities. The detail about Rachilde's revolver is cited by Hawthorne (204).

The description of this episode is included in order to show the depth of each side's commitment in this conflict between the old school, pre-war avant-garde and its new, post-war leading edge. The opposing camps were mired in a fight that was, for them, well worth their efforts, for the prize they vied for was the custody of the "real" avant-garde — the right to define what it is and where it will go next. The campaigns were waged on many ideological fronts, with the Surrealists generally winning the day. Among a long list of ideological battles, one small issue under dispute was the place of Jarry. He, like Saint-Pol-Roux, was claimed by both the old guard and by the new. Specifically it was the cultural memory of this poor fellow that was being contested — control over what the *idea* of him was supposed to mean to the larger culture. We have already seen what he represented for the Surrealists, and know of his close relationship with Rachilde. But at this point — 1925/26 — some new champions also enlisted in this seeming tournament for custody of her friend's image and retroactive glory.

These late arrivals were Antonin Artaud and Roger Vitrac. It was, in fact, quite shortly after the disrupted banquet for Saint-Pol-Roux *le magnifique* that these two figures were expelled from the Breton-led Surrealist collective. Together they promptly founded the Théâtre Alfred Jarry, which realized four productions between 1926-1929, at least one of which was attended by Rachilde. Yet those productions had surprisingly little to do with the principles of dramaturgy outlined by the company's namesake in his three

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famous essays on this subject.<sup>465</sup> Nor did the company ever produce any of the plays written by Jarry. However, the animating vision behind this theatre does seem to have been closely related to a Surrealist idea of the man as uninhibited *id* turned loose to terrorize the quotidian.

It is quite easy to imagine that the activities of the Jarry Theatre were experienced by Rachilde as a proverbial “last straw” that could be tolerated before some sort of forceful response. After all, whatever it is that Jarry had achieved during his short life, had been achieved on her watch as queen of the *fin-de-siècle* avant-garde; no one, whether living or dead, had been closer to him than herself; and it was properly her own political camp that should be glorified by Jarry’s current celebrity. Surely it is no mere coincidence that Rachilde wrote her own “corrective” biography of Jarry precisely at the time of the Jarry Theatre’s greatest activity. Thus, it seems probable that her reasons for undertaking the writing of this memoir — including its mythologizing account of the premier of *Ubu Roi* — had at least as much to do with her hostility toward the new generation, with her attempt to wrest the control of the image of Jarry away from the likes of Breton and Artaud, as it did with a desire to leave a truthful interpretation of Jarry’s life.

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<sup>465</sup> For specific analyses of the four productions mounted by the Théâtre Alfred Jarry, see Kimberly Jannerone’s article “The Theatre Before Its Double: Artaud Directs in the Alfred Jarry Theatre” (*Theatre Survey* 46.2 (2005): 247-273). As for Jarry’s dramaturgical essays, all of them are available in English translation in the *Selected Works of Alfred Jarry* (1965) under the subheading “Writings on the Theatre.”

### The Supermale of Letters

In *The Supermale of Letters*, Rachilde sees the new generation as glorifying her dead friend for the wrong reasons. “All the clowns of today's letters,” as she writes, who had allowed Jarry to “die of starvation” and who “want only novelty, novelty to the point of the absurd, to the point of the impotence of the absurd” are now “frantically applauding things which they do not understand at all.”<sup>466</sup> For her, Jarry’s true significance was certainly not his “hyphenation” of the gap “between the outer and inner worlds,” nor his “absence of any control exercised by reason.” Rather his value lay in his ability to neatly separate the elite from the herd through *carefully planned* distortions of conventional morality. No matter whether this was through his writings, his theatre, or his behavior in daily life. The fact that Jarry caused people to become shocked by his behavior and attitudes is not in dispute. What is in dispute is whether his shocking effect on the world was the result of deliberate planning (Rachilde’s view) or an unintentional side effect of Jarry’s lived hallucination (Breton’s view). More simply: was Jarry in control of this effect, or was the effect in control of him? This may seem like an insignificant doctrinal difference, and yet the dispute must be taken seriously for it has led to the invention of a celebrated and influential theatre myth.

Specifically with regard to the theatre, Jarry’s own theory asserts that “the masses do not understand anything by themselves, but wait to be told how to see.”<sup>467</sup> He would

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<sup>466</sup> Rachilde, 78-79.

<sup>467</sup> Alfred Jarry, *Selected Works of Alfred Jarry*, edited by Roger Shattuck and Simon Watson Taylor (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 71.

prefer “to eject forcibly any member of the audience who doesn’t understand,” but this, he admits, is not yet possible.<sup>468</sup> Ultimately, rather than troubling himself about such unworthies, he chooses to ignore them and to devise a theatre specifically for the “five hundred people” who among “the whole universe” have the ability to understand and to participate in “the active pleasure” of decoding and creating the play for themselves, each in his own mind.<sup>469</sup> All of these sentiments appear in Jarry’s essay “Of the Futility of the ‘Theatrical’ in the Theatre,” published in the autumn of 1896 in the *Mercure de France* and discussed earlier as part of the fanfare leading up to the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre production of *Ubu Roi*. That essay as a whole shows much more sympathy with the elite social separatism of the Symbolists than with the Surrealist generation, who ultimately interested themselves in social equality. Insofar as Jarry was concerned, if the uncomprehending masses were, by chance, to attend an elite event, then the *cognicenti* should at least enjoy the consternation of the lower order.

What this 1920s generation of literary clowns fails to grasp, in Rachilde’s opinion, is the truth that her friend’s literary, dramatic, and personal enormities were practical demonstrations of social taxonomy. Those who appreciated his *beaux gestes* belonged to the higher order of the true avant-garde, and those who did not, did not. Her implicit critique of the Dada-Surrealist-Artaudian veneration of Jarry — particularly of their invocation of (the idea of) Jarry in their theatrical performances — is simply this:

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<sup>468</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>469</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

they do not understand this basic pragmatic function of Jarry's artistic program. Thus, in their ignorance, they are misrepresenting his legacy. Rachilde, by contrast, will stress the deliberateness of his effects.

Only *then*, immediately after her book carefully articulates the wrongheaded-ness of the new generation, does Rachilde tell her reader of the power of Ubu's "*Merdre!*" and the magical effect of that utterance upon those attending the premiere. "The literary elite laughed, but the uninitiated commoners," as she wrote, "never recovered." In Chapter Two it was shown that the first part of this statement is confirmed by other eyewitness accounts. The literary elite did indeed laugh. But it has also been shown that the second part is fictional. The uninitiated commoners were not present; neither they nor anyone else burst into fifteen minutes of shouting after the first word; and consequently no one needed to recover from that initial shock. In this particular case Jarry's shocking effect was neither deliberate nor happenstance, it was imaginary.

Yet if one sets aside the non-facticity of this account, and instead reexamine its surface claim, it becomes apparent that this story presents the occasion as a harmonious extension of Rachilde's own elitist values — values that were common among the Symbolists and Decadents of her generation. The stylistic conventions of the latter include portraying a near spiritual delight in artificiality, particularly in "unnatural" relationships. A gathering of high society personalities, perhaps even in a theatre, who all experience an active pleasure in a celebration of "*shit-~~re~~*," is one example of an unnatural

Decadent construction.<sup>470</sup> The premiere of *Ubu Roi*, as told by Rachilde, clearly fits this aesthetic. The true connoisseurs in the audience “got” it, and savored the “*merdre*” as a brilliantly decadent *coup de théâtre*, but the masses found it provokingly distasteful. This was, as Rachilde would have her readers believe, one of those pragmatic effects by which Jarry sorted the gifted from the inferior.

The fact that Rachilde knew her description of the crowd’s reaction to be untruthful is entirely beside the point, for what was at stake in her 1927/28 invention of the “*merdre* riot” was the political custody of the avant-garde itself — or, at the very least, the right to define a piece of it that was acknowledged as important by all of the potential custodians. Her incontrovertible presence at the 1896 premiere of *Ubu Roi*, combined with her intimate association with Jarry, gave her a special authority to interpret the events of that evening for the larger public. Such eyewitness and insider authenticity in this matter was one distinct advantage that she held over her young rivals in an era when she often lacked the upper hand. Rachilde was well aware of this advantage and chose to use her superior authority to misrepresent the nature of the disturbance that actually did take place. In this way the political spin of the “official” memory of the performance of Jarry’s most famous work would glorify the elitist (and reactionary) camp of her own waning avant-garde, rather than the “impotent” and “absurd” activities of her rivals.

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<sup>470</sup> Indeed, Rachilde herself had glorified it as such in her review of Jarry’s 1897 novel *Les Jours et les Nuits*. See Chapter 2, pages 207-208.

The revisions that she made to the historical facts of *Ubu's* début gave her two closely related, yet distinct, points of purchase in her struggle against the new generation. Firstly, by inventing a riot that erupted immediately after the first word, Rachilde reminded her reader of the scandalizing power that was occasionally unleashed on the general population by her own avant-garde of the 1890s. (The effect she describes for *Ubu's* “*merdre*” is analogous to the reception of her own pornographic novels of the same period).<sup>471</sup> This maneuver craftily reestablished herself, Jarry, and all their loose federation of Symbolo-Decadent collaborators, as the historical co-pioneers of the art of scandalizing the public, even though this particular scandal was bogus. And secondarily, by insisting that those who were supposedly outraged at *Ubu Roi* were uninitiated bourgeois (who inexplicably found themselves present at this exclusive and elite event) Rachilde retroactively achieved an *a priori* occupation of the Surrealists’ own theatrical/political program of the 1920s. For by inventing an audience of “*profanes*” who are “suddenly snatched from [their] sense of bourgeois well being,” she shows that one of the main effects which the young generation were currently striving to achieve — the continual theatrical shocking of the bourgeoisie — had already been thoroughly accomplished in the theatre by an earlier, more intelligent, more French, but currently unfashionable, avant-garde: her own.

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<sup>471</sup> Perhaps the best known response to her writing was the reception of her first major novel *Monsieur Vénus* in 1884. The work was so scandalous that she was tried for pornography and convicted *in absentia* in Belgium, where the initial editions had been published. She was sentenced to two years of prison, essentially ensuring that she remain in France after that. See Hawthorn, 119-120.

In Rachilde's estimation, "all of the clowns of today's letters" strive merely to imitate the surface effect of the Symbolist shock without understanding its purpose, ultimately bringing them "to the point of the impotence of the absurd." They celebrate Jarry, and even name theatres after him, because his manner of behaving in social situations caused consternation and outrage among the public — which occurred because Jarry, as they felt, literally lived the dream of his *id* impulses "in the absence of any control exercised by reason." But they never understood the "true" socially taxonomic reason why Jarry radiated the shock and outrage that they so worshipped.

Ultimately, when one cuts through the misrepresentations and distortions found throughout the 1927/28 *Supermale of Letters*, it is this one central idea — Rachilde's elitist and belatedly *fin-de-siècle* interpretation of the life of Jarry — which serves as the basis of her effort to reclaim the custody of (the cultural memory of) her friend from the clutches of the new generation. Her need to bolster the rightness and superiority of the old school led her to distort the premiere of *Ubu Roi* in her description. Consequently, Rachilde's inaccurate account of that event is not really an account of *Ubu Roi* at all. Rather it is a sensationalization custom made to serve a polemical purpose on one side of a quarrelsome social discourse of the 1920s, a contest over the official rights to explain the life and acts of Jarry.<sup>472</sup> More concisely: her account of *Ubu Roi* is best seen, not as a

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<sup>472</sup> Rachilde did not really have to expend much mental effort to establish her platform in this "contest" with the new generation. Her views, statements, and actions throughout the 1920s flowed easily and automatically from her enculturated roles as an important member of the pre-war avant-garde, as a combative journalist, as literary editor of the once pre-eminent avant-garde journal of Paris, as a political reactionary, as a celebrity whose influence was waning, and as the late Jarry's closest friend. In the process of protecting her cultural territory, the casual manufacture of a supporting incident, such as the eruption of

historical record of the play's premiere, but as a gambit in a political custody battle.

### **The New Use of an Old Story**

Today it no longer matters whether Jarry's posthumous celebrity should have glorified the political platform of the old school avant-garde of the 1890s, or of the new school of the 1920s. The final resolution of that dispute holds no interest any more. Nonetheless, the recognition that the dispute was, at one time, an issue of urgent importance for the parties involved is a very different matter. Simply to acknowledge the historical existence of this conflict immediately erects a new interpretive frame around *Ubu's* tired theatre-historical legend. The new perspective on the matter that is offered by this shift in thinking revitalizes the threadbare fable of a *Merdre* Riot, making it possible to use that fiction as a tool for understanding the internal intrigues and conflicts among the creators of the historical avant-garde theatre. With this alternative way of looking, the famous-but-false tale of the play's *début* is suddenly able to become part of a new and illuminating portrait of the canonical theatrical past. And *that*, by way of contrast, is a result of considerable interest.

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the famous *Merdre* Riot, was more likely a rhetorical reflex than a product of belabored strategic planning. It was merely one drop in an ocean of implicit, second nature argumentation.

**Chapter 4:**  
**The Last Stand of Henry Bauër,**  
**Anarchist Theatre Critic of the Parisian *Fin de Siècle***

This study's fourth resurrected history of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* reconsiders the 1896 Théâtre de l'Oeuvre presentation of the play from one last unexplored perspective: the impact that the production had on its own era. Did the performance of this play actually change anything significant about the *fin-de-siècle* Parisian theater? If so, exactly what did it change . . . and why might this change be important?

To answer this, this chapter lets go of the idea that what mattered most about the production was the manner in which the audience behaved. As shown earlier, intrusive heckling and boisterous approval were both typical behaviors for Parisian audiences of the *fin de siècle*. Disruptive participation in theatre productions predated the showing of *Ubu Roi* by more than a century and would continue long after the 1896/97 theatre season concluded. No cultural custom was begun, terminated, or altered by the shouting of the crowd at this puppetry-inspired comedy.

Perhaps this is the reason why, in his brief and often overlooked 1985 study of Jarry, the theatre historian Claude Schumacher argued that, “the real battle of *Ubu* [Roi] was waged in the press,” and not in the theatre.<sup>473</sup> Here Schumacher introduced a useful critical notion about *Ubu*’s performance that has remained largely unexplored. In making this key observation, though, Schumacher did not mean that the mediated contest among the newspaper pundits was harder fought than the live altercation among the play’s first audience. Nor that their opinions were more deeply divided, or more sincerely held. Rather, the element that made the journalists’ struggle more “real” than the spectators’ is the fact that the critics’ fight ultimately transformed something important about the social and political landscape of the Parisian theatre of the era. Their battle was “real” because it had real consequences. The quarrel among the play’s live audience, on the other hand, changed nothing.

Yet even today, almost forty years after Schumacher called attention to *Ubu*’s real battle, its most telling aspect is still uninvestigated. The ferocious personal dispute that the most powerful Parisian newspaper critics had with each other — grievances that were brought into sharp focus by their episodic and published contest over *Ubu*’s premiere — has never been closely appraised as a political struggle in its own right. Not even by Schumacher, who is the only scholar so far to have treated the critics themselves as a subject for critical analysis. His introductory survey of the matter suggests a promising direction for investigation, but stops short of making a close analysis of

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<sup>473</sup> Claude Schumacher, *Alfred Jarry and Guillaume Apollinaire* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1985), 75.

individual journalists and their personal stakes in the proceeding.<sup>474</sup> This chapter therefore picks up where he left off. By pursuing that neglected avenue of exploration, it arrives at an unexpected and unfamiliar view of the significance of the 1896 Théâtre de l'Oeuvre production of *Ubu Roi*.

### **The Real Battle of *Ubu Roi***

The battle of *Ubu* that was waged in the press did not even begin until two days after the play's début performance had concluded. Yet it was also a showdown that had been years in the offing. Its most spectacular combatants were two important theatre critics. Leading one side: the anarchistic former Commune officer, former political prisoner, and repatriated New Caledonia inmate, Henry Bauër, who wrote for the morning paper, the *Écho de Paris*. In 1896 this newspaper was radical in its political orientation. It was also one of the city's larger papers, printing 53,000 copies daily.<sup>475</sup> Among the dozen daily papers published in Paris at this time, the *Écho* was held to be premier in regard to artistic and literary matters.<sup>476</sup>

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<sup>474</sup> Schumacher devotes approximately 2,000 words to a discussion of the battle that was waged in the press. See pages 75-81 of his study.

<sup>475</sup> In the five volume *Histoire Générale de la Presse Française*, edited by Claude Bellanger, Jacques Godechot, Pierre Guiral, and Fernand Terrou (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1969-1975), one can often find circulation figures for any given French newspaper in any given year. Volume three (covering 1871-1940) of this reference contains a graph showing the circulation figures for *L'Écho de Paris* throughout the 1890s (Tome 3: 347-348).

<sup>476</sup> Jules Bertaud. *Paris, 1870-1935* (New York: D. Appleton Century Co., Inc., 1936), 151. According to Bertaud, after the turn of the century the *Écho* would cede its claim to being "the premier literary paper of Paris" to another newspaper, but in 1896 its arts coverage was particularly respected.



**Figure 4.1: Henry Bauër, the crusading drama critic for the *Écho de Paris*, as he appeared in the early 1890s. This etching is based on a portrait photograph and serves as the illustration for his entry in *Figures Contemporaines*, a directory of Parisian celebrities that was published annually during the *fin de siècle*.<sup>477</sup>**

Leading the opposing camp was the utterly conventional former Prefect, former Censor of the Press for the Ministry of the Interior, and recent retiree from the Chamber of Deputies of the French *Assemblée Nationale*, Henri Fouquier,<sup>478</sup> who wrote for the

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<sup>477</sup> Image is reproduced from *Figures Contemporaines* (Paris: Ernest Flammarion, 1897), unpaginated.

<sup>478</sup> “Henry Fouquier,” *Wikipédia: L'Encyclopédie libre*, 2010, <[http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry\\_Fouquier](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Fouquier)> (29 May 2011). In France a Prefect is a government executive who administers a geographic Department, roughly equivalent to the status of the Governor of an American state. The Chamber of Deputies is the lower house of the French legislature, something like the American House of

politically conservative afternoon paper *Le Figaro*, which had a daily circulation of 75,000.<sup>479</sup> In 1896 this newspaper targeted a bourgeois republican readership. It promoted opinions in keeping with the doctrine of the decade's right-of-center Opportunist Republican government, supporting generally anti-foreign cultural policies, extremely high tariffs on import goods, and helped to vilify organized labor.<sup>480</sup>

Both of these theatre critics had held their positions for several years. Both were well known. Both were highly influential. But as for *Ubu Roi*: although it was the seeming subject of the journalistic duel between them, their true conflict had little to do with the play *per se*. Rather, *Ubu Roi* provided the two critics with an ideal occasion to clash over a matter that was much more substantial for them: the role that should be played by avant-garde art in contemporary politics. This was the nucleus of the real battle, wherein each critic fought the other for the right to define the direction of aesthetic progress in the French capital. Eventually, the utter defeat experienced by Bauër on this occasion halted the advance — in terms of both aesthetic experimentation and of leftward political drift — of the French theatrical avant-garde for (at least) the next ten years. For, once this radical crusader was gone, no one took his vacant place as the critic/champion of avant-garde innovation.<sup>481</sup>

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Representatives. It should be noted, though, that French and American political systems are not similar and any comparisons between them are, at best, only rough approximations.

<sup>479</sup> Bellanger, *et al.*, Tome 3: 348.

<sup>480</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>481</sup> Aurélien Lugné-Poe, *Acrobaties*, vol. 2 of *La Parade* (Paris: Gallimard, 1931-33), 182-183.

More significant than this story itself, however, is the interpretive domino effect that its illumination sets in motion, for the tale of Bauër's downfall puts new light on a tired stereotype associated with this highly mythologized moment in the development of modernist theatre. The most luminous detail is the revelation that the politically radical Bauër lost the battle of *Ubu* because his anarchism was no longer culturally acceptable in 1896 — not even to the bohemian avant-gardists whose cause his criticism was intended to advance. This revelation begs the rethinking of a canonical idea concerning the politics of this seminal production of the avant-garde theatre.

In fact, the apparent unacceptability of Bauër's anarchism suggests that, for several decades, critics and historians have been looking at the premiere of *Ubu Roi* upside down. Persistently the occasion has been interpreted from the wrong end of the political spectrum. It has often been narrated as a fairy-tale of efficacious anarchistic revolt.<sup>482</sup> But what Bauër's tale teaches is that, when examining the politics of *Ubu's* premiere, one should cease to focus on the outrages of (supposedly) anarchist art, and focus instead on the era's aggressive legal and cultural silencing of the artists and journalists of the radical left. In this way a pragmatic understanding of the event can be obtained. Whereas the established line of interpretation offers exciting visions of

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<sup>482</sup> The "efficacious anarchism" interpretation is ubiquitous. It is embraced (at least implicitly) by all of the studies cited in footnotes 9-19 in the Introduction to this study — though the exact role of artistic anarchism is not necessarily the focus of each authors' comments. In addition to these general examples, three critics who interpret the premiere of *Ubu Roi* specifically within a framework of anarchism are: Richard D. Sonn, *Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin de Siècle France* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989: 77); Gérard Damerval, *Ubu Roi: La Bombe Comique de 1896* (Paris: A.G. Nizet, 1984: 11-12); Erin Williams Hyman, "Theatrical Terror: *Attentats* and Symbolist Spectacle" (*The Comparatist* 29 (2005): 101-122). The idea is examined more closely later in this chapter.

anarchistic behaviors (*merdre* explosions, artists attacking the audience, rioting bourgeois patrons), this alternative line of interpretation seems to showcase a likelier political history of the occasion.

### **Propaganda by the Deed**

At its deepest level, the tensions between *fin-de-siècle* Parisian anarchism and established cultural authority are the animating force of this chapter. They lurk beneath the central conflict of Bauër versus Fouquier and cannot be prevented from emerging. Therefore, before turning to the details of the Battle of *Ubu Roi* itself — the one fought by the critics — it will be useful to survey a few landmark events of the capital's anarchist discourse of the early 1890s. Some of these events have exerted considerable influence in the formation of the prevailing understanding of the social and historical significance of the premiere of Jarry's play. Others of them have not exerted such an influence, but should have. Among them all, the bombings provide the most practical starting point.

Eleven times between 1890 and 1895, militant anarchists of Paris's political avant-garde made their rage against the established, self-serving, and bourgeois political regime known to the general public by means of the *attentats* (bomb attacks) that they carried out at symbolic strongholds of state power. Dynamite, in the opinion of the anarchists, was the best available tool to focus public attention on the injustices suffered by the disfranchised, and to bring about social change. They fashioned this substance

into the bombs that detonated at the home of a judge in a controversial trial, at a military barracks, at a busy restaurant where government ministers often dined, and at other sites of this sort. The explosions transformed the city into nerve-racking and dangerous place to carry out a daily existence — and they most definitely captured the attention of the populace. Colloquially, the bomb attacks were known as “propaganda by the deed.” But these were not random acts of terrorism. They were conceived of (by their perpetrators) as retribution for specific government acts,<sup>483</sup> and they generated a surprising amount of public sympathy for the anarchist point of view.

Many leftist intellectuals found themselves to be in agreement with the anarchists’ critiques of the repressive and authoritarian plutocracy of industrialists (though not necessarily with their violent methods). Similarly, many of the young generation of bohemians and avant-garde artists saw the anarchists as kindred spirits to themselves. They felt that the anarchists’ revolt against political authority was cut from the same ideological cloth as their own revolt against the cultural authority of traditional artistic structures. Between them, the artists and the intellectuals transformed the anarchists from criminals and murderers into culture heroes. For example, the one who called himself Ravachol (François Claudius Koenigstein), who had undertaken the bombing of the home of the magistrate who presided over the Clichy Affair,<sup>484</sup> and who,

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<sup>483</sup> See Alastair Brotchie, *Alfred Jarry: A Pataphysical Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 61. Brotchie offers a summary of several anarchist attacks with some account of their immediate provocations.

<sup>484</sup> On 1 May 1891, at Clichy (a suburb slightly northwest of Paris), three anarchists were arrested after gunshots were fired during a street demonstration in support of workers’ demands for improved laboring conditions. The anarchists were interrogated by police and severely beaten during this process. At

on 11 July 1892, robustly sang *La Carmagnole* as he mounted the platform to be guillotined,<sup>485</sup> became an instant martyr for the political left. His *attentat* and execution inspired stirring cabaret songs (“*La Ravachole*”),<sup>486</sup> poetic tributes (“*Eloge de Ravachol*”),<sup>487</sup> and special desserts in cheeky restaurants (“*Bombe Ravachol*”).<sup>488</sup>

It is in this context of counter-cultural exultation over anarchist insurrection that several modern scholars have chosen to set their interpretations of the début production of *Ubu Roi*. Gérard Damerval, for instance, embraces it even in the title of his study *Ubu Roi: La Bombe Comique de 1896*, in which he insists that the play was “a bomb thrown into

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the ensuing trial they were sentenced to extraordinarily long prison terms despite the lack of any real evidence against them. For more detail see John Merriman’s *The Dynamite Club: How a Bombing in Fin-de-Siècle Paris Ignited the Age of Modern Terror* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009), 71-72.

<sup>485</sup> “*La Carmagnole*” is a 1792 people’s anthem of the French Revolution. It persisted in its popularity throughout the nineteenth century, particularly with the disfranchised classes. A translated sample of one of the verses: “When Antoinette saw the tower / She wanted to turn back / She wanted to turn back / She is sick at heart / To see herself without honor / Let’s dance the Carmagnole / Long live the sound / Long live the sound / Of the cannons!” (In French this all rhymes). The song’s title refers to the short jacket worn by the militant working-class *sans-culottes* of the French Revolution. For more see: <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carmagnole>>.

<sup>486</sup> “*La Ravachole*” was a popular Montmartre cabaret song in honor of Ravachol, sung to the tune of “*La Carmagnole*.” It first appeared shortly after Ravachol’s execution on 11 July 1892. A translated sample of one of the verses: “There are sell out magistrates / There are big-bellied financiers / There are cops / But for all these scoundrels / There’s dynamite / Let’s dance the Ravachole / Long live the sound / Long live the sound / Of the explosion!” For more see: <[http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/La\\_Ravachole](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/La_Ravachole)>.

<sup>487</sup> “*Eloge de Ravachol*” was penned by the Symbolist writer Paul Adam (1862–1920) and first published in a Parisian literary journal in July 1892, immediately following the anarchist’s execution. A sample of the text: “Ravachol saw the suffering and misery of the people around him, and sacrificed his life in a holocaust. His charity, his disinterestedness, the vigor of his actions, his courage in the face of ineluctable death, raised him to the splendor of legend. In these times of cynicism and irony, a saint has been born to us.” Translated quotation in Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (New York: Verso, 2005), 114.

<sup>488</sup> For more on “*Bombe Ravachol*” see Eugen Weber, *France: Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1986), 266, n39.

the face of the public . . . exploding right under the nose of the authorities who were charged with preventing such spectacles.”<sup>489</sup> His idea is based partly on the fact that the heyday of Propaganda by the Deed was a near contemporary to the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre’s production of *Ubu Roi*; and it is also based partly on Rachilde’s false report of a morally outraged audience, who supposedly rioted because of the first word. Although, both of these bases for interpretation are faulty, they are shared by many of the other scholars who have also equated *Ubu Roi* with anarchist attacks. Among them Richard D. Sonn, whose 1989 *Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin de Siècle France*, echoes Damerval in asserting that the play was “an anarchist *attentat* in its violent assault on the sensibilities of the audience.”<sup>490</sup> Or in 2005, in an article entitled “Theatrical Terror: *Attentats* and Symbolist Spectacle,” Erin Williams Hyman argued that, with the production of *Ubu Roi*, the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre “moved to a form of theater conceived explicitly as an attack on the crowd.”<sup>491</sup>

Each of these authors either implies or overtly states that the production of *Ubu Roi* occurred during the height of the era of *attentats*, that the play was an extension of that anarchist discourse translated into *mise-en-scène*, and that the artists who created it were anarchists themselves. Even leaving aside the fallacy of Rachilde’s testimony —

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<sup>489</sup> Gérard Damerval, *Ubu Roi: La Bombe Comique de 1896* (Paris: A.G. Nizet, 1984), 11-12. “C’est une bombe jetée à la face du public [. . .] une bombe qui explose au nez de l’autorité . . . chargé d’exercer la censure.”

<sup>490</sup> Richard D. Sonn, *Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin de Siècle France* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 77.

<sup>491</sup> Erin Williams Hyman, “Theatrical Terror: *Attentats* and Symbolist Spectacle” (*The Comparatist* 29 (2005): 101-122). 117.

which Hyman does acknowledge — all of these studies convey to us a distorted idea of the production because they interpret the scandal associated with this play in an inappropriate context. In actual fact, the play was not staged during the era of *attentats* (the period of anarchism's greatest cultural ascendancy), but two years later, after a very significant sea change in the cultural status of Parisian anarchism had taken place.

The cultural tide to which I am referring began to turn on 9 December 1893, the date of the most famous of the *attentats*. On this occasion the thirty-two-year-old anarchist Auguste Vaillant threw a bomb that he had built out of a large cooking pot into the main legislative body of the Third French Republic, the Chamber of Deputies.<sup>492</sup> Standing atop a bench in the Chamber's public observation gallery, he hurled his homemade device over the railing and into the midst of the day's debate. This particular bomb had not been well constructed. It caused no fatalities, and only slightly injured one deputy.<sup>493</sup> Yet the attack provoked an enormous political response. It had, after all, been directed against the nation's legislative nerve center. That, plus the fact that Vaillant's was only the most recent in the series of *attentats* that had shaken all of Paris, resulted in an immediate flood of draconian anti-terrorist legislation. Within weeks the bourgeois

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<sup>492</sup> The 16 December 1893 *New York Times* article, "Vaillant Before the Judge," reports Vaillant's testimony concerning the details of the construction of his bomb.

<sup>493</sup> It caused no fatalities except for Vaillant's own: he was immediately arrested, hastily tried, sentenced to death, and publicly guillotined on 3 February 1894. At the trial he claimed his intent was not to kill but to wound as many deputies as possible in revenge for the execution of the anarchist Ravachol.

government had proposed and adopted the *lois scélérates*, the so-called “villainous laws.”<sup>494</sup>

Every conceivable manner of violent anarchist attack was already illegal, of course, but these new laws criminalized a much wider range of activities. They targeted not the anarchists, but the anarchists’ sympathizers. It now became a criminal offense to utter any expression in any medium — including but not limited to: cartoons, illustrations, newspaper articles, private letters, public speeches and casual conversations — which might be construed as a sympathetic reflection of an anarchist act.<sup>495</sup> The wordings of these “villainous laws” were kept deliberately vague so that practically no evidence was needed for arrest or prosecution. And these laws were quite vigorously enforced. As it turned out, many innocuous activities could be viewed as sympathetic to (and therefore an active encouragement of) anarchist insurrection if the authorities wished to interpret them in such a way. On one occasion, for instance, a number of people were arrested under the *scélérates* laws as fomenters of anarchism because they failed to grieve publicly for the victim of an *attentat*.<sup>496</sup>

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<sup>494</sup> All English translations of the term *loi scélérate* are awkward. “*Scélératé*” on its own means rascally, blackguardly, dastardly, deplorable, wicked, *etc.* . . . none of which hits the ear harmoniously when modifying the word “laws” in English. In its general usage today the term *loi scélérate* refers to any extremely unfair or repressive statute, but the term originates with the anti-anarchist legislation of the Third Republic.

<sup>495</sup> The specifics of the *lois scélérates* are summarized by Jean Maitron, in his *Histoire du mouvement anarchiste en France: 1880-1914* (Paris: Société Universitaire d’Editions et de Librairie, 1951), 231, note 2.

<sup>496</sup> Émile Pouget, “L’application des lois d’exception de 1893 et 1894,” in *La Revue Blanche* (15 juillet 1898), 436.

Thus, from the start of 1894, the Parisian police were invested with very broad powers to launch their own wave of terror against the city's anarchists, anarchist sympathizers, leftist journalists, avant-garde artists, disfranchised classes, and government critics in general. The ensuing cultural contest between the state and its discontents was very hard fought during that year. Bombs continued to explode. Thousands of arrests were made. There were trials, executions, acquittals, secret trials, sensationally public trials, and more trials. During the month of June the President of France, Marie François Sadi Carnot, was assassinated by the anarchist Sante Geronimo Casario. But by the year's end, thanks to its extraordinary measures of repression, the government had successfully stifled its problem with anarchist "propaganda." Historical hindsight reveals that, at this point, nearly all the anarchist activists who still remained in France abandoned the doctrine of "propaganda by the deed" as a tool for social transformation. They now came to focus on syndicalism and union organization instead.<sup>497</sup> (Yet some of their sympathizers took a bit longer to make the transition). This general 1894 re-theorization of anarchist praxis was the direct result of the French government's intensive effort to eradicate the anarchist movement once and for all; which itself had been the direct result of Vaillant's attack on the Chamber of Deputies.

The point here is that by the time *Ubu Roi* was produced in December 1896, the era of *attentats* was already over. The threat of potential anarchist attack still lingered — as it would for the remainder of the decade — but it had been two years since the last

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<sup>497</sup> Bernard Moss, *The Origins of the French Labor Movement* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 147.

actual bombing. Public faith in the authorities' ability to control the "propaganda by the deed" was somewhat restored. People were now less fearful than they had been earlier in the decade. A bridge had been crossed. Society was moving on with an increased sense of security. The overtly anarchist press had been entirely shut down. Anarchistic utterances in other publications or other media had dropped off significantly. The cultural mood had shifted.

A darker aspect of this same general mood shift can be observed in the subculture of the city's artistic and theatrical avant-garde. Within that subculture, the transformation of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre is a typical example. This organization had been under surveillance by the Parisian police ever since its overtly anarchist staging of Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*.<sup>498</sup> That event took place in November 1893, at the height of Ravachol's posthumous cultural glory, and shortly before Vaillant's *attentat* against the Chamber of Deputies. Regarding the production, the play's co-director, Camille Mauclair,<sup>499</sup> who coordinated the crowd scenes (which involved over a hundred supernumeraries) recalls that: "anarchism was the powerful infatuation of the young at the time. We understood the entire play, Dr. Stockman [its hero], and Ibsen, as examples

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<sup>498</sup> Deak, 203. Many of the police reports concerning the surveillance of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre have survived. Today they can be consulted in the archives of Paris's Police Museum, 1 bis, rue de Carmes, dossier Lugné-Poe, DA 168.

<sup>499</sup> Camille Mauclair was the pseudonym of Séverin Faust (1872-1945), a French poet, novelist, and art critic of the Symbolist school. Together with Aurélien Lugné-Poe he was the co-founder of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, though his active participation with the company diminished from year to year.

of anarchism.”<sup>500</sup> He then describes how he directed the scenes in order to emphasize an anarchist interpretation, adding the retrospective comment “we were all anarchists then because it seemed grand and romantic.” According to one witness, during the performance the cry of “long live anarchy” was shouted among the audience more than twenty times.<sup>501</sup> Given these details, it is hardly surprising that police took an interest in the tiny theatre company. But in November 1893 such behavior was not yet illegal.

After the passing of the *scélérates* laws, however, the close police surveillance, combined with their vigorous enforcement of those statutes, soon curbed the passion for anarchism that had previously been expressed at the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre’s performances. Witness the company’s very next project following *An Enemy of the People*: a production of Gerhart Hauptmann’s recent play *Lonely Lives*. After this piece had been rehearsed, and all of the preparations for its presentation had been made, the performance was interdicted by the police.<sup>502</sup> This was done under the authority of the new legislation, and because of the play’s supposedly anarchist content.<sup>503</sup> Additionally,

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<sup>500</sup> Camille Mauclair, *Servitude et Grandeur Littéraires* (Paris: Ollendorff, 1922), 107-108. Incidentally, the supernumeraries, mostly students from the Latin Quarter, were remunerated with free admission for seats in “paradise” (the highest balcony) for the remainder of the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre’s 1893-1894 season.

<sup>501</sup> Qtd. in Deak, 202.

<sup>502</sup> This tale is more fully told by Deak in *Symbolist Theatre*, 203-204.

<sup>503</sup> *Lonely Lives* is a play in which progressive thought is stifled by retrograde traditional values. In it, a visionary country doctor — inspired by the exciting new ideas of Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, Ernst Haeckel, and other such evolutionary thinkers — has no true peers in the deeply religious rural community in which he lives with his deeply religious wife and his parents. He is a fish out of water. Briefly, though, he is able to connect on a platonic and intellectual equal with a Russian woman who drifts into town, and who is free of rural superstition. In the end, the foreign woman is driven away by the community, and the doctor commits suicide out of intellectual loneliness. In the text of this play I am

the play's translator, who was Dutch, was arrested and expelled from France. Over time, such high-handed treatment tested the depth of the political commitment of the theatre's devotees. For many of them, the outward zeal for anarchism turned out to be only an accessory for their individualist rebellion against artistic conventions: a matter of current fashion, rather than of solid political allegiance.<sup>504</sup> Such "anarchism" as this could be easily shed at need, and indeed, the fashion had suddenly changed. Thus, the formerly parallel paths of political revolt and artistic revolt had become divergent by the start of 1895.<sup>505</sup> This is not meant to suggest that there were no seriously committed anarchist sympathizers among the supporters Théâtre de l'Oeuvre. Indeed, there were several — and the critic Henry Bauër was certainly one of them. But the company's director, Aurélien Lugné-Poe, was not.<sup>506</sup> And so, subsequent to this critical cultural juncture, the

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unable to find anything that might be read as anarchist propaganda. At the same time, though, I am also unable to read it with the same sensitivities that an 1894 Parisian would bring to it.

<sup>504</sup> See Weber, 118-119, for more on fashionable anarchists, people "who found nothing better to do than to play with fire." For such as they, Weber adds, "the Théâtre Libre and talk of blowing up Paris could enliven the conversation of jaded salons." In Weber's analysis the majority of anarchist sympathizers had little interest in the betterment of the lives of the poor, rather they were "defeated Boulangists, ruined holders of Panama stock, frustrated enemies of the regime . . . [who] all felt that the anarchists were paying off their grudges" (119). See also Weber's discussion of Emile Zola's satire of this same fashion (120).

<sup>505</sup> For another account of the divergence of Parisian anarchism and the city's avant-garde culture at this particular historical moment see David Weir, *Anarchy and Culture: The Aesthetic Politics of Modernism* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997) 123-130.

<sup>506</sup> Lugné-Poe's audience during the early years of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre (up until 1900) often stood significantly further to the political left than he did. One of his former associates, the poet Laurent Tailhade, expressed in his memoir *Quelques fantômes de jadis* (Paris: Éditions française illustrée, 1920), his opinion that the director had served as an informer to the police (213). And in Lugné-Poe's own memoirs, he refers to the radical faction of his audience as "noisy undesirables" (Lugné-Poe, 137). But presumably these are the very same people to whom he granted free admission as remuneration for their services to the company. A number of scholars have characterized the director as a time-server and an "affairiste," one who exploits political controversies for his own gain. In his case "gain" means the creation of publicity — whether positive or negative — which ultimately reveals the nobility of his theatre company. For an

theatre's politically committed fellow travelers began to consider their words and actions more carefully, for they had become a minority among this subcultural minority.

These points are emphasized in order to solidify the foundation for the little-known history that this chapter strives to resurrect. Up until now, all studies of the Battle of *Ubu Roi* that acknowledge anarchism in some way — regardless of whether they see the fighting as having happened primarily at the theatre or primarily in the media — consider the event as though it occurred during the heyday of the anarchist bombing campaigns. In actual fact, though, that celebrated conflict over Jarry's play took place well after the twilight of Propaganda by the Deed. The Paris of 1896 was a new era in which wise anarchist sympathizers were more wary of authorities than the authorities were of them; and the formerly broad avant-garde support for French anarchism had considerably diminished. The remainder of this chapter constructs a reinterpretation of the Battle of *Ubu Roi* in this more exact political context. This two-year shift in historical conditions might seem unimportant at first glance, yet it significantly alters the story that needs to be told about the event.

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analysis of this aspect of the director's behavior see Sally Charnow's *Theatre, Politics, and Markets in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 115-149. What I especially wish to note, though, is that when push came to shove over the issue of anarchist sympathy, the director was much more interested in running an experimental theatre than he was in making a political impact on contemporary society. To have a performance forbidden by the police obviously did not bode well for his organization.

## Henry Bauër

Over three hundred celebrity “*invités d’honneur*” were present at the 9 December 1896 *répétition générale* of *Ubu Roi*, and among these notables there was one who looked exactly like Alexandre Dumas *père* at middle age.<sup>507</sup> This was a giant of a man, well over



**Figure 4.2: On the left: Alexandre Dumas. On the right, Henry Bauër, his illegitimate son. These images were made when each man was around twenty years of age, and the resemblance is already striking. As Bauër aged, it became even more so. He was known to the older generation as “the living portrait of the author of *Monte-Cristo*.”<sup>508</sup>**

six feet in height and possessed of an equally impressive girth.<sup>509</sup> He was the famous author’s illegitimate son, Henry Bauër, the forty-five year-old drama critic for the *Écho de*

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<sup>507</sup> Noël Arnaud, *Alfred Jarry: d’Ubu Roi au Docteur Faustroll* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1974), 321. Each of these honored guests brought with them their own guests, of course, and often more than just one. For specific demographic details see “The Composition of the First Audience of *Ubu Roi*” subsection of Chapter 1 of this study.

<sup>508</sup> Both images are reproduced from Marcel Cerf, *Le Mousquetaire de la plume: La Vie d’un grand critique dramatique, Henry Bauër* (Paris: Académie d’Histoire, 1975), 88.

*Paris*, a politically radical morning newspaper, highly respected at the time for its coverage of artistic and literary matters.

By 1896 Bauër had been at his post at the *Écho* for over a decade and had proven himself to be an important champion for many new innovations in the art of the theatre. In the face of widespread cultural resistance he had led the campaign that forced the Parisian public to accept Wagnerian opera for the first time. Later he did the same for sordid Naturalism, and then again for Scandanavian mysticism. This critic, however, was also something of a meddler, and he began to use his accrued influence (and the influence of the *Écho*) to urge his own pet projects into the programming of the various fringe theatres.<sup>510</sup> As his reputation (for successfully introducing new cultural trends) grew, he came to view himself as the *eminence grise* of the contemporary avant-garde theatre — a notion corroborated by his “official” biographical profile in *Figures Contemporaines*, a directory of Parisian celebrities published annually during the *fin de siècle*:

Only those who have never attended a *répétition générale* can fail to recognize Henry Bauër at first glance. Ordinarily in a ground floor box, he sits enthroned . . . for M. Bauër is, to the avant-garde generation, just as M. Sarcey is for traditionalists. Yet M. Bauër is not so absolutist in his dramatic criticism. He challenges himself to understand whatever comes along . . . being always on the

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<sup>509</sup> Bauër’s acquaintances nearly always mention three memorable points concerning the critic’s personal appearance: his enormous stature; the fact that he was rather fat; and his striking resemblance to his father. André Antoine, for instance, records his own 13 October 1887 introduction to Bauër in *Mes souvenirs sur le théâtre libre* (Paris: A. Fayard, 1921): “After the first act of *Sister Philomène*, Monsieur de Goncourt came to the stage to present a cordial and smiling giant, who bore an astonishing resemblance to Dumas *père*, and who turns out to be Henry Bauër, the formidable critic of the *Écho de Paris*, whom I know so well in my thoughts.”

<sup>510</sup> Marcel Cerf, *Le Mousquetaire de la plume: La Vie d’un grand critique dramatique, Henry Bauër* (Paris: Académie d’Histoire, 1975), 79. André Antoine, for one, could not tolerate this sort of interference, and this led to a serious break between himself and the critic. After this Bauër transferred his main theatrical allegiance to Antoine’s rival, Lugné-Poe, who was more receptive to the critic’s suggestions.

lookout for new arrivals, for anything that presents an innovative profile. And his opinions have the force of law — if not for the public in general, at least among the artists.<sup>511</sup>

The present concern, however, has less to do with this critic's dominion than it does with his undoing. (Which was beginning even as this profile was first published in January 1897). As this case study of Bauër develops, it will examine the proximate causes of his downfall; the overall cultural consequence of that event for the contemporary avant-garde theatre; and the ways in which his story urges the revision of certain widely accepted ideas concerning the politics of this celebrated production of modernist theatre.

The specific narrative that is of interest commences with the *répétition générale* of *Ubu Roi*, with the critic at the apex of his cultural prestige. His rapid decline can be better understood, however, by knowing something of how he came to acquire his impressive significance in the first place. It is true that he had powerful genealogical ties to the Parisian theatre industry — he was the son of a famous author and culture hero, and half-brother to one of the most celebrated French playwrights of the late nineteenth century — but these connections should not be over-emphasized, for they seem to have aided him little in his career. Rather, Bauër's path to his influential position had been a difficult one, choked with briars, and cleared mainly through a combination of his own determination, audacity, and sincerity. He became a successful crusader in the 1890s mainly because he had had decades of practice.

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<sup>511</sup> *Figures Contemporaines* (Paris: Ernest Flammarion, 1897), unpaginated.

In 1871, at the age of twenty, Henry Bauër had been an officer in the militia of the Paris Commune, a socialistic workers' government that ruled Paris from March until June of that year. (The Commune had emerged in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War, which had brought an end to the reign of the Emperor Napoleon III, and with that ending, the end also of the Second French Empire).<sup>512</sup> But the Commune was short-lived. It was immediately besieged and soon starved into submission by a wealthier rival government, the aristocratic Government of National Defense. When the Commune fell, tens of thousands of its supporters (Communards) were then shamefully massacred by the regular French army. The victorious Government of National Defense, which soon transformed itself into the monarchistically-inclined Third French Republic,<sup>513</sup> then caused Bauër, along with many other surviving Communard notables, to be arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment in the penal colony of New Caledonia (in the South Pacific).<sup>514</sup> He was lucky to receive this sentence, for many of the surviving Communards were simply executed.

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<sup>512</sup> The Paris Commune arose in the wake of the Franco-Prussian war, after the Emperor Napoleon III was deposed by the newly formed Government of National Defense, which was aristocratic and monarchist in its makeup and orientation, and which was also eager to appease the German conquerors. On perceiving that their interests had been sold out by this new government, the working class citizens of Paris seized the city and declared themselves to be the true government of the French people. Following this, the Commune soon came to be besieged by the forces of the wealthy and aristocratic Government of National Defense. It was starved into submission, and tens of thousands of Communards were executed by the regular French forces when the city was eventually retaken by the "legitimate" government.

<sup>513</sup> The policy makers of the Government of National Defense settled on a republican form of government, even though nearly all of them would have preferred a monarchy. The difficulty was that they could not agree on whether the monarch should be a Bourbon, an Orléan, or a Bonaparte.

<sup>514</sup> Cerf, 29-42.

In 1880, however, there was a major turnover in the power balance of the Third Republic, and a new government began establishing national policy. This new government — which was less aristocratic and more bourgeois industrialist, less Monarchist and more Republican — declared amnesty for all Communarde political prisoners. Through this amnesty Bauër was able to repatriate after serving only eight years of his life sentence. He took up residence in his native Paris, where he began a career as a “*journaliste de combat*” at a radical newspaper — a journalistic crusader for social justice. In this capacity, he presented his articles with a sort of inflammatory bombast that quickly earned him the nickname “*le mousquetaire de la plume*” [“the musketeer of the pen”], which obviously owed something to his famous forebear. To his detractors, though, he became “Dumas *père* of the public toilets.”<sup>515</sup>

In these early years as a journalist, Bauër was sometimes assigned to fill-in for the well-known but ailing playwright Alphonse Daudet, as a substitute drama critic. He showed a distinct talent for this task, and when Daudet retired, Bauër became the regular theatre critic for the paper. It was at this point that his campaigns on behalf of new Art began in earnest. It should be noted, though, that while Bauër came to specialize in theatre criticism, he also continued to write general cultural commentary, confronting whatever stirring issue had recently arisen.<sup>516</sup>

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<sup>515</sup> Léon Daudet, *Souvenirs des milieux littéraires, politiques, artistiques et médicaux* (Paris: Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1920), 508.

<sup>516</sup> In 1899 Bauër published a self-edited collection of his journalism entitled *Idee et Réalité* (Paris: H. Simonis Empis, 1899). While many of the articles in that collection pertain to the theatre, as many others address issues of more general social and political concern.

Bauër's values, as one might readily suppose, were firmly anti-establishment. He remained a Communarde at heart: a radical in the best sense of the Jacobin tradition, seeking the personal enfranchisement of each and every downtrodden individual. This orientation translated itself even into the critic's personal writing paper, which was headed with a design bearing the injunction "Live Free!"<sup>517</sup> As a journalist he published fiery left-wing views on many political topics. He spoke out against the injustice done to Captain Alfred Dreyfus several years before Zola's "*J'Accuse*" and the escalation of the famous affair. During the era of *attentats* he wrote in praise of the idealism and political message of figures like Racvachol and Vaillant. But he simultaneously strongly disapproved of actual bloodshed — whether perpetrated by the state or against it — and he repudiated the violent methods of these propagandists. He was no stranger to being dragged into court for his journalism.<sup>518</sup> When the villainous laws were enacted at the start of 1894, he began actively to taunt the enforcers, defiantly concluding a front page opinion article on Vaillant's impending (February 1894) execution with the sentence: "If these comments are an encouragement of bomb attacks, I herewith embrace the penalty."<sup>519</sup>

Although Bauër constructed no bombs — nor even encouraged them — his interest in political anarchism was clear. Yet the circle in which he moved during the

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<sup>517</sup> Cerf, 70.

<sup>518</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>519</sup> Henry Bauër, *Idée et Réalité* (Paris: H. Simonis Empis, 1899), 12. The specific article quoted here was originally published in *L'Écho de Paris* on 11 February 1894 under the title "*La Peur*" ["Fear"].

1890s was ultimately more artistic than political. And within that circle he himself was a very high profile practitioner of what was known as “literary anarchism.” Roughly stated, this is the faith that progressive values in aesthetics and in political morality must, in some cosmic way, coincide. One of its tenets is that a true era of liberty, equality, and fraternity can begin only after the corrupt and repressive old order has been swept away — the old aesthetic order as well as the old political order. It was to this aesthetic housecleaning that he applied his own propagandistic talents.

Among the dozens of Parisian theatre critics, Bauër was the one who did the most to advance the cause of the avant-garde theatre *du jour*. Whether Wagner, Ibsen, Maeterlinck, Strindberg, or Jarry, it was always Bauër who first extolled the virtues of the new art. His extreme importance and crusading spirit are attested in the memoirs of Aurélien Lugné-Poe, the director of the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre:

I’ve mentioned the critic for the *Écho de Paris*, Henry Bauër, and the power of his writings? Bauër was sympathetic [to the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre] and he had some guts! . . . Neither Octave Mirbeau, nor Catulle Mendès would ever have marched in favor of this or that, were Bauër not there to lead the way. He was always the first to press, with the first article, in the first column, on the first page of the *Écho de Paris*. It was he who roused the public’s interest. Every cause needing an aggressive writer to clear its road, found — in its darkest hour — help from Bauër who, without hesitation, committed himself fully.<sup>520</sup>

Although Bauër was often said to act without thinking, his audacious haste and “recklessness for the charge” (as Lugné-Poe put it) were the very qualities that had won him his considerable reputation over the past dozen years. He was always on the front

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<sup>520</sup> Lugné-Poe, 178. Mirbeau and Mendès were two other critics who were often favorably disposed to the aesthetic experiments of the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre.

line of the latest literary battle. Yet on the specific occasion of *Ubu Roi*, the critic behaved too hastily and was too reckless. With the *scélérates* laws the politico-artistic climate of Paris had changed, and he had not particularly adapted his rhetoric and methods for the new zeitgeist. As a result, he sacrificed all of his considerable prestige and influence because of the manner in which he supported this play — and this consequence, in turn, cost the contemporary avant-garde theatre its most powerful proponent.

That Henry Bauër had taken any interest whatsoever in *Ubu Roi* speaks to his dedication to youth and experimentation in the arts. (Though such dedication might also be seen as merely an extension of his own political agenda). He had no history at all with Jarry, who was a literary newcomer, only 23 years old in 1896. As part of the publicity campaign for the production, Jarry had sent this important critic a copy of the play — with a polite request that, if Bauër were willing, as someone who had supported past efforts of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, would he perhaps mention the upcoming production in one of his columns. Bauër read the play, and was delighted to recognize its alignment with his own particular interests. Two weeks prior the performance, on November 23, on the front page of the *Écho de Paris*, the critic offered an effusively literary-anarchist introduction and analysis of the piece:

This work is an extraordinary joke, made of monstrously rude and excessive language, of the most colorful imagination disguising a scathing and aggressive wit [. . .] It is a politico-philosophic satire whose big mouth spits impudently into the face of the illusion of tradition and of the old masters who were created by people's adoration. [. . .] Ah! What violence and disrespect! What a strong flavor! And how I love the young herald capable of stripping the institutions of

their facades, of tearing the masks from their hideous faces and proclaiming: Behold!<sup>521</sup>

Such enthusiasm from a major critic, especially with its taboo political implications, effectively inspired readers to want to know more about this new work. It was a highly successful piece of preview propaganda. In the article, Bauër even made the “politico-philosophic satire” a bit more specific by further expounding his own anarchistic interpretation of the play:

Ubu is the extreme product of the dynasties of cloddish bungling, begotten by the French Revolution and the nation of civilian and military bourgeoisness. Whether he calls himself Caesar, Bonaparte, Louis-Philippe, Joseph Prudhomme, Chauvin or Napoleon; whether he takes power by *coup d'état*, rioting or corrupt ballots; he swings, nonetheless, like the giant pendulum of national stupidity, from throne to dung heap, from glory to kicks in the ass, from popularity to infamy. That's him perched on the shoulders of those silly geese cheering in the Capitol: but soon he sails to exile across a tempest of booing.<sup>522</sup>

As Claude Schumacher has noted, Parisian theatre critics of the *fin de siècle* had little interest in objectivity; their allegiances were to political values rather than to accuracy or fairness.<sup>523</sup> Bauër, as a literary anarchist, prefers to publicize Ubu's adventure as a pastiche of the perpetual political turmoil of nineteenth century France: from Revolution on through Empire, Restoration, Second Republic, Second Empire, and Third Republic. For him the play makes visible — and satirizes — the “giant pendulum of national

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<sup>521</sup> Henry Bauër, “Chronique,” *L'Écho de Paris* 23 Nov. 1896, 1.

<sup>522</sup> *Ibid.* The references here would be quite transparent for a nineteenth-century French reader. For instance: Bonaparte took power by *coup d'état* in 1804; Louis-Philippe installed himself on the throne amid the rioting of 1830; Bonaparte's nephew, Napoleon III, seized imperial power *via* corrupt ballots in 1852; etc.

<sup>523</sup> Schumacher, 75.

stupidity” which has again and again placed the greedy, self-serving, and incompetent in power. He sees the work as a gross and comical anarchist anthem, totally new in its form, totally destructive to the old order, and he awaits it eagerly. As he puts it in the conclusion to his preview article: “Ah! The evening of raw hilarity! The bizarre and astonishing bonfire that will, by Ubu’s green candle, blaze for our entertainment!”<sup>524</sup>

In the wake of this article, audience expectations for *Ubu Roi* ran quite high. Unfortunately for Bauër, the production itself did not live up to the standards of hilarity and satire that had been promised in his preview. Even more unfortunately for him, many contemporaries held him to have been personally responsible for the exaggeratedly disruptive behavior that took place at the performance. This was not merely because of the critic’s preview article, but also because of their past experiences with him, and because of his actual conduct during the performance (discussed later). The *Oeuvre’s* director, Lugné-Poe, is one individual who held such an opinion. In his memoir he theorizes that Bauër had long “believed he could create just such an [anarchic] atmosphere for a *répétition générale*,” and that the critic had therefore “worked toward this goal for several years.”<sup>525</sup> This remark of the director’s indicates that at least some avant-garde insiders felt that Bauër had hijacked the production in order to achieve his own political goals.

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<sup>524</sup> Henry Bauër, “Chronique,” *L’Écho de Paris* 23 Nov. 1896, 1.

<sup>525</sup> Lugné-Poé, 182.

Lugné-Poe was not the only one who chose to see the *Écho*'s critic as a root cause of the *Ubu* tempest. Several others, including a number of rival critics whom Bauër had shamed or embarrassed over the years, seized this opportunity to pin blame for the entire fracas on him. Their longstanding gripes against the radical crusader had motivated them to attempt to dislodge him on many previous occasions, but in *Ubu Roi* they saw a new and better opportunity. Unlike Bauër, the conservative and bourgeois theatre critics rejoiced in the recent shift of zeitgeist. They recognized that their nemesis's support base of fair-weather fellow travelers had been silenced by the *scélérates* laws, and that his brand of literary insurrectionism had become passé. In this perception they were far more astute than he. Soon after the performance of *Ubu Roi* was over, the anarchist content of Bauër's preview article — and the idea of the “evening of raw hilarity” that he had prophesied — were used against him by all enemies who had any sort of influence. In print there suddenly appeared a terrible and sustained outcry against him. As new attacks appeared each day, Bauër was soon obliged to defend himself. Thus on December 19, ten days after the performance of *Ubu Roi*, he began his column:

Since the performance of *Ubu Roi* a river of indignation has raged against me, flowing from the pens of some honorable writers. They hold me to blame for the events of the evening . . . In the first place, I had nothing at all to do with the performance given by the *Théâtre de l'Oeuvre*. I first beheld the staging of M. Jarry's fantastical-work at the same moment as the public. At that time, I had merely read *Ubu Roi* and was extremely amused by it.<sup>526</sup>

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<sup>526</sup> Henry Bauër, “Chronique,” *L'Écho de Paris* 19 Dec. 1896, 1.

He then reconfirms his anarchist political leanings by explaining how he would have staged the play more effectively. But by this point there was no way for Bauër to distance himself from the events of the evening, nor was there anything he could say to redeem the *répétition générale*, which was problematic for the bourgeois critics, from their proclamations that the occasion was shameful. And even if he could do these things, they would have made no difference, for, during the intervening week, his enemies had elevated their attack beyond the mere context of this particular play. It was now directed against Bauër's politics and his decade-long tyranny over the direction of avant-garde art in general. *Ubu Roi* was merely the occasion that left him vulnerable to attack. The resentments against him, his politics, and his authority had been building for years.

Despite his spirited defense, the clamor against this critic soon caused him to lose his influential position at the *Écho de Paris*. This result was a profound loss, both for the leftist avant-garde in general and for Bauër personally. In the twenty-five years since his repatriation, championing the avant-garde had been his life's work, his principal means for continuing his anti-establishment campaign. When he lost his position at this important newspaper, he simply no longer mattered in society.

Thus, *Ubu Roi* was literally a tragedy from Bauër's perspective: a precipitous fall from grace. He had anticipated a frenzy of anarchic hilarity, a new evolution of theatre that would excoriate the political hypocrisies of the era, and he had gambled his political and artistic credibility on the *Théâtre de l'Oeuvre* providing a high-quality presentation that would live up to the analysis given in his preview. It was a bad bet. Rather than radical

and innovative satire, the under-rehearsed production was more generally viewed as a tiresome and offensive prank. Bauër lost everything that mattered (position, credibility, prestige) as a result of his investment in this play. It should be noted, though, that his costly gamble was not so much for *Ubu Roi* in particular, as it was for the sake of the literary anarchism of which he was a chief exponent. Alas, after he was out of the picture, no other critic took on his role as champion of the avant-garde. Consequently, the Parisian avant-garde theatre became significantly less oppositional for quite some time.

As for Bauër himself: a few months later he became the drama critic for a much less prestigious newspaper, the *Petite République Socialiste*. Yet he never really fit in there, and his opinions no longer carried any real weight in the world. Friends who encountered him on the street perceived him as a changed and diminished figure. To Lugné-Poe, who reports conversing with him on the sidewalk some months later, he seemed to have been “amputated.”<sup>527</sup>

### **Henri Fouquier**

Thus far Henry Bauër has been presented in a relatively positive light. He has been shown as a steadfast champion of the underdog, of artistic innovation, of youth, of the rights of the individual (over those of the state), and of leftward cultural movement in general. He currently appears to have been a high-minded crusader for liberty, equality

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<sup>527</sup> Lugné-Poe, 183.

and fraternity — the trinity of French social revolution — and, because of his particular métier, it is especially easy to see him as having been a crusader for new Art as it energizes and is energized by these grand ideals. Yet one arrives at a very different perception of the radical critic when viewing him through the eyes of his enemies. Rather than a hero, Bauër then transforms into a bully; and rather than a promoter of innovation, he becomes a hustler and a thug. Undoubtedly either idea of the man — whether positive or negative — is partly true and partly distorted. Nonetheless, by embracing the hostile perspective, additional insights can be gained into the reasons why Bauër’s style of literary anarchism had made him a potent force in the avant-garde theatre of the 1890s, and also insights into why his continued practice of this doctrine brought about his undoing on the occasion of *Ubu Roi*.

The most vivid picture of Bauër’s overbearing and more-than-journalistic efforts on behalf of literary anarchism, comes from the case made against him by his chief critic-rival, Henri Fouquier. This rival journalist, who, like Bauër, was also one of the *invités d’honneur* for the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre’s *répétition générale* of *Ubu Roi*, probably did little more than hiss at that experimental play during the course of its famous first performance. Yet when all was said and done, Fouquier was the individual who gained the most in stature and influence as a result of the scandal that developed in the production’s aftermath. It was, in fact, he who led the attack against Bauër, and he who initiated what Claude Schumacher referred to as “the real battle of *Ubu*.”

At the age of 58, Henry Fouquier was the drama critic for *Le Figaro*, a newspaper classified by Bellanger and company as the “grand journal of the Center.”<sup>528</sup> Like *L’Écho de Paris*, *Le Figaro* was another of the city’s most influential daily papers. Its drama critic, however, was Bauër’s exact opposite on a political spectrum. While Bauër was a former Communard Freedom Fighter who had been confined in exile for eight years as a political prisoner, Fouquier was extremely conventional in every way. During his active political career he had occupied several important government posts.<sup>529</sup> Most recently he



**Figure 4.3: The celebrated actress Sarah Bernhardt escorted by the drama critic and politician Henri Fouquier. This image is a detail from the panorama “Tout-Paris,” painted by Charles Castellani and displayed as part of the 1889 Paris World Fair.<sup>530</sup>**

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<sup>528</sup> Bellanger, *et al.*, Tome 3: 347.

<sup>529</sup> See footnote 478, this chapter.

had been (until the end of 1893) a duly elected legislator in the Chamber of Deputies, having served there as a member of the (majority) Opportunist Republican party, the right-of-center party of bourgeois republicans who dominated the policies of the Third Republic throughout the 1890s. After Vaillant's *attentat* of December 1893, Fouquier either resigned his post or simply did not seek reelection.<sup>531</sup> Whichever the case may have been, with the start of the new year the veteran politician/journalist retired from formal government service. After that point — like Bauër after his repatriation — he channeled his energy entirely into journalism.

While Bauër's style of criticism was highly inflammatory, Fouquier was particularly admired by the bourgeois public for his "common sense" and for the charm of his writing.<sup>532</sup> The many contrasts between the two critics are quite striking, yet they shared the critical stage and spoke from platforms of equivalently prestigious statures: Bauër for the *Écho de Paris* and Fouquier for *Le Figaro*. "Shared," however, is perhaps too cordial a word to describe their critical cohabitation, for neither man was likely to willingly share anything with the other.

For reasons of personal rivalry, rancor, and political disapproval, Fouquier wanted to cause a downfall for Henry Bauër, whom he considered to be a dangerous

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<sup>530</sup> This image is in the public domain. It is reproduced from the French wikimedia website <[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sarah\\_Bernhardt\\_et\\_Henry\\_Fouquier.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sarah_Bernhardt_et_Henry_Fouquier.jpg)>.

<sup>531</sup> "Henri Fouquier," *Assemblée Nationale*, <[www.assemblee-nationale.fr/sycomore/](http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/sycomore/)>. Among the biographical information that can be found here at the website of the French Chamber of Deputies, one discovers the detail that Fouquier did not seek re-election after 1893 for the next legislative term.

<sup>532</sup> Robillot, 85.

anarchist.<sup>533</sup> (One should not forget Fouquier’s closeness to the bombing at the Chamber of Deputies; following that event he had a strong personal motive to help eradicate anarchism). He wished, if possible, to permanently deprive this anarchist critic of his platform for speechifying. And he waited a long time for the ideal moment to attempt this goal. As things turned out, when the highly publicized *Ubu Roi* finally came to the stage, the opportunity presented itself. Due to a unique combination of several factors that came together on this occasion — including (1) the boringness and stupidity of the actual production of *Ubu Roi*; (2) Bauër’s published anarchistic enthusiasm for the play; (3) the factional shouting match that took place at the theatre; (4) Bauër’s own conduct in that quarrel; and (5) the recent reluctance among bohemians to support anarchism vocally in the post-*scélérates*-laws era — Fouquier sensed that the time was right to launch his attack. Thus, for this conservative critic, the terrible evening in the theatre was lined with gold. “In spite of the fatigue of a long and tedious farce,” as he explains in the first of his articles written against *Ubu Roi*, “and the revulsion of its incredible filthiness, . . . last night’s visit to the theatre was, for me, excellent.”

Ironically, the evening was also proclaimed by Bauër to have been “excellent.” In that critic’s review he writes, “I laughed tremendously, especially in the first parts of the discourse of the excellent Ubu.” He further explains, “it pleased me immensely that certain jokers [in the audience] collaborated with the characters of the play,” and that the

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<sup>533</sup> *Ibid.*

production provided a framework for “everyone to join together in craziness.”<sup>534</sup> Here he is referring to the intra-audience invective that occurred during the play (“Down with Ligné-Chamber-Pot,” “Don’t you understand Shakespeare?” “Eat-*re* the shit-*re*,” “Knock it off,” “Bring on the bear,” *etc.*) in which he himself participated enthusiastically. But Fouquier, of course, declared the evening to have been “excellent” for entirely opposite reasons. He perceived this same shouting in the hall rather differently:

On this evening, as it seemed to me, there was a sort of deliverance — a literary Ninth of Thermidor.<sup>535</sup> At the very least, this night has begun the end of the Terror-like condition that has been dominating the literary world.<sup>536</sup>

Where Bauër sees the clamor in the auditorium as a victory for anarchism and iconoclasm, Fouquier perceived the same general *mêlée* as directed primarily against Bauër himself, or at least against Bauër’s anarchic values. The conservative critic then visualizes the audience of the *Théâtre de l’Oeuvre* as a Revolutionary Convention — all seeking the liberation of the French stage from oppressive outdated regimes — but this audience/convention had long been dominated by a Robespierre figure, Bauër, and his loyal mob of anarcho-symbolist snobs, who were the equivalent of the Jacobins. Fouquier therefore invokes the The Ninth of Thermidor (July 27, 1794) as the date the

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<sup>534</sup> Henry Bauër, “Les Premières Représentations,” *L’Écho de Paris* 12 Dec. 1896, 3.

<sup>535</sup> The Ninth of Thermidor (27 July 1794) is the date on which the Revolutionary Convention turned against Maximilien Robespierre, outspoken leader of Committee for Public Safety, and passionate but impersonal advocate of the Terror (a collection of price control and anti-hoarding laws that was often abused by the French populace to settle personal grudges).

<sup>536</sup> Fouquier, 11 Dec., 86.

Convention was “delivered.” This was the date on which certain members of the Revolutionary Convention, fearing denunciation by Robespierre (equivalent to a death sentence), orchestrated Robespierre's arrest to occur before he could begin his speech to the assembly. By the following evening Robespierre and his followers had been guillotined. This was the beginning of the end of the historical Reign of Terror, and Fouquier announces it as the beginning of the end for Bauër and his present reign of anarchistic Literary Terror.<sup>537</sup>

But Fouquier takes the comparison even further. He not only equated Bauër with Robespierre, who was an excellent speaker and personally “Incorruptible” — but parallel to this he simultaneously equates Bauër with the character of Ubu himself, who is a violent, childish, and idiotic windbag:

The booing, whistling, and hissing has three-quarters overthrown a certain symbolic tyrant who comes to mind wearing the features of *Ubu Roi*, whom he resembles in several ways. Like Ubu he is fat, fearsome to the weak, full of impudence, greedy for power, grasping for social position, making a terrible noise in the world, and wanting to overthrow everything to take all for himself. . . . Empty of ideas, but stuffed full of his own importance — the same as Ubu's appetite — this tyrant of the intellect experienced one flash of insight: the realization that it is possible to make an empire for oneself simply by relying on human stupidity.<sup>538</sup>

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<sup>537</sup> In actual fact, the historical Terror intensified significantly when Robespierre was removed from the equation. It did, however, burn itself out through sheer intensity and lack of skilled direction not terribly long after his removal.

<sup>538</sup> Fouquier, 11 Dec., 86. Incidentally, this comparison between Ubu and Bauër refutes the critic's own claim that the play was “nonsensical garbage.” On the contrary, it seems as though Fouquier understood Jarry's drama and its central character perfectly well.

Apparently the comparison made here between Bauër and Ubu struck home. There seems to have been enough parallel in the fatness, the self-importance, the methods, the “terrible noise in the world,” and the desire to “overthrow everything” for the target to be unambiguous. The radical critic’s well-known meddling came back thus to haunt him. Having made the connection, Fouquier now focuses more closely on Bauër’s means of exercising his Literary Tyranny. This is achieved through his having fashioned a militant minority of art snobs who blindly support his opinions and who force their irrational (lack of) taste on the majority of the population:

In order to lead a herd of fools it suffices to persuade them that anything new (or said to be so) is superior, that anything crude is strong, that anything obscure is deep, and that anyone who does not understand this is an out-of-date half-witted idiot. Hearing this, the herd obeys, follows, and cheers. And for some years now this abstract, gibberish-spouting, disconnected tyrant — this literary Ubu — has been terrorizing the snob herd, fashioning them into a troop of cronies who have, in turn, been terrorizing the masses.<sup>539</sup>

Bauër persuades and controls this herd of terrorist snobs — as Fouquier explains — through his newspaper articles, wherein he indicates what should be cheered and what should be hissed.<sup>540</sup> Did they not cheer and shout for the unacceptable *Ubu Roi* at Bauër’s bidding? Just as, in years past, they had previously shouted for *Lohengrin*, *An Enemy of the People*, and many others. But this time these “anarchists of art” had reached a limit.<sup>541</sup> Specifically, they had reached a limit inspired by the villainous laws.

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<sup>539</sup> Fouquier, 11 Dec., 86.

<sup>540</sup> Henri Fouquier, “La Terreur Littéraire,” *Le Figaro* 13 Dec. 1896, rpt. in Robillot, “La Presse,” 86-88.

The quantity and the efficacy of Bauër's cronies seems to have been significantly curtailed by that legislation — they were, in any case, unable to dominate the occasion. Nonetheless, even without a clear victory in the theatre, Bauër claims to have been delighted with *Ubu's* audience because everyone present collaborated in the "craziness." Meanwhile Fouquier delights because this time the art-terrorists "demanded too much indulgence, depended too much upon the docility of the crowd," and as a consequence, "the public became enraged."<sup>542</sup> This conflation of Ubu, Bauër, and Robespierre, as well as the conflation of the present state of French theatre with the Reign of Terror of the French Revolution found an attentive audience, one that extended beyond this critic's usual bourgeois readership. Fouquier thus managed to use the Ubu "revolt" to elevate the critical discourse to the general condition of the French theatre, where he was able to portray Bauër as three tyrants in one. "It is with great joy," he declares at the conclusion of his first attack, "that I witnessed the revolt."<sup>543</sup> Two days later, in another hostile article, this very governmental and bourgeois critic further elaborated his idea of a concentrated minority of Jacobin "art anarchists" led by Bauër, the self-aggrandizing, obscuritanist, bombastic "pontiff-pundit."<sup>544</sup>

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<sup>541</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>542</sup> Fouquier, 11 Dec., 86.

<sup>543</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>544</sup> Fouquier, 13 Dec., 87.

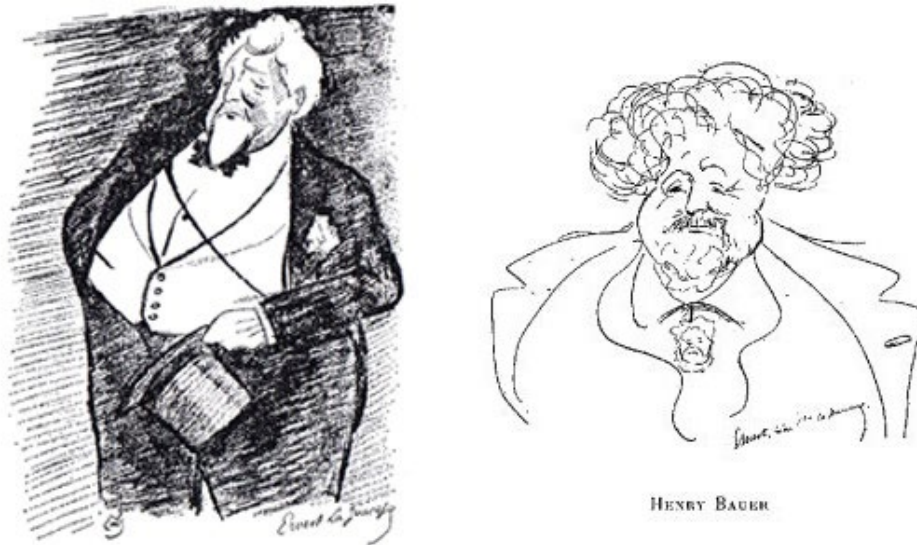
As noted earlier, many attempts had been made to ruin the critic of *L'Écho* during the past decade, but Bauër had weathered every storm. (One of the more spectacular was the lawsuit brought against him in 1891 by André Antoine).<sup>545</sup> Yet we also noted that the début of *Ubu Roi* combined a special set of factors that all collaborated against him. Of these, the single most important element is the fact that the convergence of negative forces occurred during the post-*scélérates*-laws era of anarchist witch hunting. This altered zeitgeist made Bauër's literary anarchism much less tolerable than it had been during any of his previous grand campaigns as a champion of new art.<sup>546</sup> Fouquier clearly recognized this new vulnerability in his rival. He seized the opportunity that the circumstances of *Ubu Roi* had presented, and managed an attack that was precisely on target. Indeed, his first strike tapped a reservoir of widespread resentment against Bauër that had been building for several years. As the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre's director Lugné-Poe's described it, Fouquier's onslaught "knocked him [Bauër] off his feet, and the mediocrities of the commercial theatre went in for the kill."<sup>547</sup> In addition to the more minor lights who participated in the blood-hunt, several writers who were quite

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<sup>545</sup> See Cerf, 79.

<sup>546</sup> Some of Bauër's problematic literarily anarchistic attributes included: the advancement of his own personal/political agenda through overtly (and sometimes inappropriately) radical interpretations of dramas; the use of his influence to cause certain plays to be produced or certain performers to be cast; and the direction of the bullying behavior of his cabal among the audiences at theatrical events. All of which had been more tolerable prior to 1894, when anarchistic propaganda was fashionable among the avant-garde.

<sup>547</sup> Lugné-Poe, 182-183.



**Figure 4.4: Caricatures of Henry Bauër that played a role in the press campaign against him at the time of the *Ubu Roi* affair. Both were drawn by Ernest Lajeunesse.<sup>548</sup>**

well-known at the time — Léon Daudet, J.-H. Rosny (the elder), Ernest Lajeunesse, and André Gide — also distinguished themselves.<sup>549</sup>

It is this campaign against Henry Bauër that should be remember as having been the true battle of *Ubu Roi*. At the actual performance of the play, the ruckus that developed was an unfocused free-for-all. There was no consensus to it. There were not two opposing sides, there were several — and the combatants all seem to have been shouting for different reasons. Much of their shouting may even have been celebratory,

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<sup>548</sup> The image at the left is reproduced from Cerf, 78. The one at the right is from a satirical anthology by André Ibels, *Talentiens, ballades libres* (Paris: Bibliothèque d'Art de *La Critique*, 1899), 34.

<sup>549</sup> See Cerf, 89.

as Bauër maintained. Even in the initial press, critical opinions were more confused than divided. Some reviewers complained of hoaxing or of profanity, some welcomed the innovation of Ubu as a new type of theatrical character, some lauded and others condemned the behavior of the audience, and there were other diverse reactions as well. Like the clamor in the theatre, there was no clear center to the journalistic discourse.

Fouquier's role in this aftermath was to surmount this dispersion of opinion, unite the hostile press, and guide it toward a clear target: the long-standing radical nuisance, Henry Bauër. Once the quarry was established, the charge that this highly conventional, bourgeois, and governmental critic then led against his anti-establishment anarchist rival proved to be overwhelming. There was, after all, no pragmatic value for the conservative press in attacking impossible targets, such as bad language or hoaxing, nor was there any use in attacking figures of no real social standing, such as Jarry or Lugné-Poe. These youngsters could not experience a downfall because they did not possess positions of any real importance.<sup>550</sup> But the influential and enduring critic of the *Écho de Paris* was of a different stature entirely. As noted earlier, his overthrow would be a significant loss for leftist art in general.

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<sup>550</sup> In this regard any publicity at all, whether positive or negative, could only serve to increase the celebrity/notoriety of these youths. This is why Fouquier's equally conservative colleague, Francisque Sarcey, drama critic for *Le Temps*, urged him to "say no word at all of hoaxes such as this, and rather than arranging some counter-plot, let us give a judgment of silence" (qtd. in Fouquier, 11 Dec., 85). Obviously Fouquier decided to pursue a different course, but Sarcey kept to his own advice. In his review of *Ubu Roi* he reported "it is a filthy scam that deserves only the silence of contempt," and left it at that (*Le Temps* 14 Dec. 1896, rpt. in Robillot, "La Presse," 75).

Seen from this point of view, the 1896 *Théâtre de l'Oeuvre* production of *Ubu Roi* was neither a pie in the face of the bourgeois critical establishment of the *fin de siècle*, nor was it the triumphant launch of a bold new type of performance, nor was it some sort of literary or theatrical version of an anarchist *attentat*. Rather, the event was a major victory for the forces of political and artistic conservatism. Consider the contemporary sociopolitical results: soon after that night the troublesome, crusading and radical critic, Henry Bauër, was no longer able to exercise his decade-long “literary tyranny”; the director Aurélien Lugné-Poe renounced the aesthetics of Symbolism in general; and the *Théâtre de l'Oeuvre* began actively to court a less bohemian following.<sup>551</sup> Even though the audience outbursts that took place during the tedious performance of this under-rehearsed farce were later re-written and sanctified by Rachilde, Shattuck, and others, it is undeniable that the most immediately palpable effect of the evening was a considerable loss of status and for the most progressive avant-garde theatre in France. In the long-view of history the avant-garde apologists may, retroactively, have won the ideological war of Ubu — but in the historical context of the *fin de siècle*, the proponents of the conservative *status quo* most definitely won the battle.

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<sup>551</sup> As a direct result of the loss of his theatre’s main pillar of critical support (Bauër) and the subsequent censure of his theatre by other powerful critics, Lugné-Poe decided to abandon his Symbolist audience entirely. Before the 1896/97 season was even over, he had published a revised manifesto for his company — one which formally repudiated any future association between the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre and the Symbolist movement. The new manifesto appeared in *Le Figaro* of all places (stronghold of Fouquier). In it Lugné-Poe claims that his past association with Symbolism was a “misunderstanding,” and that this new declaration of new artistic values is “intended to correct” that error. The director quoted a carefully edited selection from this new manifesto in his memoirs which shows him in the best possible light (Lugné-Poe, 203-204). But when the new manifesto is read in full — as it can be in the 21 June 1897 issue of *Le Figaro* — it is quite clear that the director is attempting to recruit a wealthier bourgeois audience from among the readers of *Le Figaro*.

### Rival Theories of the Avant-Garde Theatre

Several aspects of the real battle of *Ubu Roi* are now clear. It is clear that the contest was fought mainly between two influential theatre critics, the radical former Commune Henry Bauër and the conservative bourgeois former Prefect Henri Fouquier, who had an established personal, professional, and political rivalry between them. It is clear that Bauër had, during the past decade, overstepped the ordinary bounds of journalism on a number of occasions, urging particular artistic choices on avant-garde theatre managers, and engineering demonstrations at performances. It is clear that, through such practices, (however well-intentioned they may have been), the radical critic had managed to acquire enemies both on the political right and on the political left. It is clear that by 1896 the Parisian zeitgeist had become intolerant of his methods, and that *Ubu Roi* provided the occasion when he was finally overthrown by his enemies. And it is also clear that this result had some lingering consequences for the avant-garde theatre of the era.

At the same time, although it is perfectly clear what happened in the actual battle, it is not yet apparent why that battle was important, culturally speaking. What was it that the principal combatants, Bauër and Fouquier, stood to gain or to lose by this contest? Was any issue beyond their own egos at stake? Why did *they* believe that the outcome of their journalistic duel over Jarry's childish play mattered to Parisian society at the time?

By answering these queries it will be possible to illuminate the true, in-the-moment, cultural significance that belonged to this curious episode of the avant-garde theatrical past.

Fortunately, both critics left several clues behind that help to fill the blanks opened by these questions. Between them, Bauër and Fouquier wrote five feature-length newspaper articles (each being nearly two thousand words long) concerning the first performance of *Ubu Roi*. Several excerpts from these very articles have, in fact, already been examined in this chapter. By returning again to this source material — and filtering out the basic descriptive comments on the play and the interpersonal potshots — one sees that both critics provided their readers with substantial data concerning their rival philosophies of what the avant-garde theatre ought to be (and what it ought to achieve). Through comparison of these rival theories, it is possible to understand each critic's personal investment in the matter of *Ubu Roi*. One sees, then, that what the two critics are actually fighting over is the right to define the avant-garde theatre. They are fighting for the privilege to specify exactly what this representational tool is supposed to be, exactly how it is supposed to interact with contemporary mainstream culture and politics, and whether it should ravage or rejuvenate the established culture. At the time of *Ubu Roi* this “right to say” was Bauër's to lose, and Fouquier's to win. And it appears that the ownership of this right was the principal motivating factor behind the actions of both men.

This analysis is now moving beyond and above the domain of biography and into that of aesthetic philosophy. The different theories of art that were embraced by the two critics are much “larger” — that is, the theories are more expansive and more enduring — than the individual critics themselves. In the winter of 1896, the theatrical avant-garde of Paris had, for several years, been traveling a philosophical path that was advocated by Bauër. But at this particular juncture of *Ubu Roi* there would be a change in ideological direction.

To clarify this shift, one may begin by examining the theory of avant-garde performance that was expressed by Henri Fouquier. This critic wrote two long articles for *Le Figaro* on the subject of the Theatre de l’Oeuvre’s production of *Ubu Roi*, and in these he applied himself to three main tasks. Firstly, he reviewed/ridiculed the play itself. Secondly, he launched his campaign against Henry Bauër. But he also used his two articles as an opportunity to moralize more generally on the value of Paris’s *théâtres à côté*: the avant-garde “fringe” theaters that had sprung up in the capital during the past decade. These small companies had vigorously experimented with innovations of *mise-en-scène*, dramatic construction, and acting style, each according to its own aesthetic program. Most of them operated as members-and-invitees-only clubs, and were closed to general audiences. There was the Théâtre Mixte, the Théâtre d’Art, the Cercle des Escholiers, the Théâtre de la Rose-Croix, and a handful of others, but the best known

were André Antoine's Théâtre Libre and Aurélien Lugné-Poe's Théâtre de l'Oeuvre.<sup>552</sup>

The performances of these tiny companies were technically "private," but important critics were always invited as VIP guests of the house.

Fouquier considered it his duty to attend their productions. As an established critic he felt that it was his job to keep readers apprised of new developments in drama, and he applied himself to the task conscientiously. His attitude toward the fledgling efforts of these fringe companies was paternalistic — benevolently so, if the artists did not tamper with "two or three essential requirements of theater" which he does not name.<sup>553</sup> For him these experimental theatres did play an important role in Parisian culture. Their stages gave début acting opportunities to young performers, performers who were then able to be "noticed," and then to graduate to commercial houses, thereby investing the Boulevard with fresh talent. As he values them: "out of these fringe theatres have come at least a dozen artists whose talent, readily seen today on the regular stages, is beyond question."<sup>554</sup> These theatres also provide a similar gateway for young writers. The critic acknowledges that some of their innovative plays are "of very high value" and continue "to inspire debate even now."<sup>555</sup> *Ubu Roi*, however, was definitely

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<sup>552</sup> Since the mid 1880s these theatres had been producing an eclectic mix of aesthetically experimental work — sometimes the work of new French writers, sometimes translations and adaptations of the works of contemporary foreign writers, or of works imported from the far East, sometimes revivals of works from previous centuries — with each company producing, with their limited and largely amateur resources, according to its own particular aesthetic agenda.

<sup>553</sup> Fouquier, 13 Dec., 86.

<sup>554</sup> Fouquier, 11 Dec., 85.

<sup>555</sup> *Ibid.*

not one of those valuable works. Fouquier condemned this play as filthy and inexcusable nonsense. Yet, in his first article written against it, he makes this condemnation only after taking pains to clarify that he is opposed neither to progress, nor to innovation, nor to the avant-garde theatres in general.

Ultimately, what Fouquier's analysis amounts to is a particular theory of the relationship between the avant-garde theatre and the mainstream theatre. The small experimental companies serve as a kind of research and development laboratory wherein new ideas and new artists can be tried out on stage. The most successful endeavors supply new personnel and new techniques for the established mainstream theaters. This movement from fringe to center — this acceptance of an innovation by the mainstream — is the one and only proof of the artistic soundness of an avant-garde idea. Thus, the only social utility of the experimental theatre is to reinforce and re-supply the bourgeois culture of the status quo.

This idea, however, is completely anathema to Henry Bauër, who theorizes the relationship between avant-garde and mainstream theatre in an entirely different manner. For Bauër, the role of the avant-garde should be to undermine the old order of the bourgeois world. In his three articles on Jarry's play he sneers at the "babbling senilities of the aging theatre," inciting the public to "tear down the traditional considerations" in order that "the new and the beautiful" may "emerge" onto the stage. Fringe theatres are the key to this revolution, for they give the new art its toehold in Parisian culture.

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Witness, says Bauër, the grand battles recently fought (and won) on behalf of Ibsen. And now “from this enormous and strangely evocative character of Ubu, blows the wind of destruction.” The irresistible windbag/tornado, clears the detritus of obsolescence from the path of the avant-garde. “In this transformation,” crows Bauër, there has been — and will continue to be — much “desecration of customs.” Yet it is a desecration that one should be “proud to have participated in,” for through it one will “have contributed to the liberation of the dramatic arts.”<sup>556</sup>

Obviously, Bauër did not consider the purpose of the avant-garde theater as being to re-supply and to uphold the regular (bourgeois) theater. Rather, for Bauër, it was vital that the work of the fringe theaters should revolutionize the visions of reality seen on Parisian stages. Whether this was achieved with the mythic potency of Wagner, the poetic silences and repetitions of Maeterlinck, the unblinking grit of Ibsen, or the satire of Jarry which was capable of “tearing the masks from the hideous faces [of the institutions],” are merely variations on the same theme.<sup>557</sup> Bauër theorizes the avant-garde as an aesthetics of demolition, entirely opposed to the theatre of the status quo which Fouquier would uphold. For this radical critic, then, the social utility of the avant-garde is to attack oppressive institutions — including and especially the bourgeois theatre — to pull them down, to expose their hypocrisy, and to revolutionize aesthetics.

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<sup>556</sup> Bauër, 19 Dec., 1. All the quotations in this paragraph are drawn from this third article of Bauër’s — the one in which he responded to his attackers.

<sup>557</sup> Bauër, 23 Nov., 1.

The core, then, of the journalistic duel between the two critics is ideological. As such, it lies much deeper than the personal animosity they felt toward one another. Their energy of mutual loathing undoubtedly helped to fuel the conflict, but their essential and omnipresent struggle arose from their irreconcilable political/theoretical positions. Indeed, the dramatic interpretations written by both men were clear extensions of their political values. Both critics perfectly understood the potential of the avant-garde theatre as a means to wield political agency. They sensed that this new art had the power to change the social world, and they knew that control over that power was well worth the fight. Both critics felt that some sort of transformation of the contemporary French theatre was necessary. For Fouquier the change should come through the gradual and revitalizing process of aesthetic evolution that he proposes. For Bauër all the cultural clutter of the past did not need to be revitalized, it needed to be put to rest, and replaced with something new. The two ideas are utterly incompatible.

Even Fouquier, the defender of bourgeois culture, believes that the established French theatre is ailing and irrelevant to contemporary life. Like his radical rival, he too perceives that the greatest hope for cultural salvation lies with the experiments of the fringe theatres. “For the theatre,” he explains, “it is a good condition that, if everyone is sick, then nobody thinks of opposing the search for the cure.”<sup>558</sup> As he sees it, in the earliest days of the fringe theatres the experimentation went quite well. And “all would have turned out for the best, according to the law of progress,” as he writes, but then “a

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<sup>558</sup> Fouquier, 13 Dec., 86-87.

sect of literary revolutionaries arrived among us.”<sup>559</sup> We already know whom he means, of course.

Fouquier goes on to insist that, if the fringe theatre movement is ever going to fulfill its noble mission, then responsible critics, and all those citizens who care about French culture, must unite to protect it. “It is our duty to prevent it [fringe theatre] from being run by practical jokers, certifiable lunatics, or wicked, self-interested, pretentious snobs,” he admonishes, for “in every field, every true friend of progress must guard it against those who ruin it.”<sup>560</sup> Therefore, because of the momentous importance of the larger cause (the preservation of the nursery that will revitalize French theatrical culture), it is Fouquier’s patriotic duty to topple this fearsome enemy of (bourgeois) art and government — the self-interested, pretentious, practical joking, anarchistic, Ubu-like, Robespierre-like tyrant — Henry Bauër. For the sake of the (bourgeois) nation, then, it was necessary for the two critics to do battle. Indeed, for the sake of the (bourgeois) nation, it was necessary for Fouquier to win.

### **The Silencing of a Radical Critic**

Today, the actual political tremor generated by the 1896 Théâtre de l’Oeuvre production of *Ubu Roi* is badly understood. This situation is an unfortunate historiographic byproduct of the *Merdre* Myth. That charismatic anecdote led a number of twentieth-century theatre historians to misconstrue the play’s début performance as a

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<sup>559</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>560</sup> Fouquier, 11 Dec., 85.

deliberate insult offered by (supposedly) politically radical artists to a (supposedly) conservative and bourgeois audience whom they (supposedly) despised. Over time, a later generation of historians escalated this initial misconception into more overtly political terms by viewing the theatrical event as an extension of the terrorist program followed by certain Parisian anarchists of the early 1890s. In this way the performance of Jarry's play became the aesthetic equivalent of an anarchist bomb attack; the artists who were responsible for mounting it were transformed into anarchists; their purported intent was to infuriate or to damage the audience in some way; and openly anarchistic political purposes are said to have motivated the entire enterprise. The concise characterization given to this idea by Günter Berghaus in his 2005 study of *Theatre, Performance, and the Historical Avant-Garde* may be cited as typical. As he put it, the premiere of *Ubu Roi* "was designed to function as a dynamite thrown into the audience."<sup>561</sup>

But this particular construction — the likening of *Ubu Roi* to an anarchist *attentat* — is a disservice to the social history of modern theatre in general because it makes a false connection: one which not only fails to correlate the play with the real contemporary political forces that were active in Paris in December 1896, but which also actively obscures the true relationship. The real chronicle that historians should be reporting about the interconnection of *fin-de-siècle* Parisian anarchism and the production

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<sup>561</sup> Günter Berghaus, *Theatre, Performance, and the Historical Avant-Garde* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 48. Other, more elaborated, variations on this interpretation of the play as an anarchist attack — as expressed by Damerval, by Sonn, and by Hyman — are cited earlier in this chapter. The same idea is also presented implicitly by many others. See notes 482, 489, 490, and 491, above.

of *Ubu Roi* is not a tale of the glorification of anarchism, but of its erasure. It is the story of a hostile first-strike that was carried out by smug (but paranoid) agents of anti-counter-cultural bourgeoisness.<sup>562</sup> The truth of this claim can be seen most clearly when

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<sup>562</sup> A substantial essay could be written chronicling the aggressive, paranoid, preemptive, and often ridiculous measures launched by Parisian authorities in their crackdown on anarchism during this era. A significant part of the campaign involved the active and collaborative participation of the conservative Parisian press. Several bourgeois-targeted newspapers, for instance, inaugurated a regular column during this era called “La Dynamite,” which delivered sensational news, rumors, and gossip pertaining to the official war on anarchism — always in a way that glorified the police and vilified the disfranchised. The campaign against Bauër described in this chapter seems to be one particular manifestation of this larger (and by 1896 well-established) cultural practice.

To contextualize this a bit: the most spectacular single narrative of the super-mediatised official repression of anarchism of the era was the coverage of the infamous Trial of the Thirty Anarchists (which took place throughout the spring and summer of 1894). In this legal proceeding, nineteen allegedly anarchist writers, artists, and philosophers were indicted together along with eleven common thieves and thugs (for a total of thirty co-defendants). Collectively, these thirty individuals were said to be the cohesive core of that vast anarchist plot to bring down the Third Republic. The prosecution of all of them together, as a group, was meant to provide ultimate proof to the general public that the (imaginary) universal anarchist plot really did exist. The (presumed) conviction of these thirty political criminals would then retroactively justify the extraordinary measures of repression that had been undertaken during the preceding months.

The bill of indictment against the Thirty is quoted by Joan Halperin in *Félix Fénéon: Aesthete and Anarchist in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 287-288. In it one easily hears the prosecution straining for some sort of conspiracy:

The accused belong to a sect which establishes among its followers bonds of comradeship, with the purpose of destroying society as a whole, by means of theft, pillage, arson, and murder. In this sect each member contributes to the final purpose according to his temperament and abilities, one by committing crime, the others by aiding and abetting him . . .

The bill goes on to charge secret relationships among the various defendants, four of whom were female. One of the female defendants is said to be the mistress of one of the male defendants. Another of the male defendants slept with the widow of so-and-so who did not survive long enough to reach trial. Overall, the “sect” was united through their foreign connections and cosmopolitanism. This defendant is the son of a Mexican and of a Pole, that defendant is reported to be the intimate friend of notorious German criminals, *etc.* With such thin connections among the defendants, it seems remarkable that the government prosecutors even attempted to formally prove that these thirty made up the core of a universal conspiracy. They were apparently banking on public paranoia outweighing a logical consideration of the evidence (a tactic which worked well in the 1894 espionage case against Captain Alfred Dreyfus).

Much to the authorities’ surprise, though, all nineteen of the intellectuals, and all but three of the common criminals were acquitted in this particular case. This unexpected result was due to an almost total lack of evidence of any conspiracy among the accused. The three defendants who were convicted, were convicted of theft only — and one of these was a butcher’s apprentice who, for his part in the diabolical plot, had stolen a pork chop from his employer. But despite the fact that the trial was a failure as a conspiracy prosecution, the overall project of repression that led up to it must still be regarded as a success from the government’s point of view. History attests that the “age of the *attental*” ended with this trial in August 1894. The anarchist press had been shut down. The decade-long call to individualist anarchist

examining the immediately post-production media campaign that was directed against the established and politically radical theatre critic Henry Bauër, who had been so conspicuous in his support for the show. The illumination of this particular point has been the essence of the little-known history presented all throughout this chapter. The following summary reviews the main points of the corrective narrative.

The amended story of anarchism and *Ubu* as presented in this chapter began with the critic Bauër at his zenith. He was an influential and crusading journalist who was important to the avant-garde community; but he was also self-important, a bully, and had made a large number of enemies during the course of his journalistic career. His efforts in 1896 on behalf of *Ubu Roi* happened to give his detractors a substantial opportunity to indict him as an “anarchist of art” — an accusation they were able to bring at a time when any sort of association with anarchism was extremely damning. Specifically, Bauër was charged by them with being the head of a conspiracy to dominate and to weaponize the avant-garde theatre as a tool of radical politics, which, if unchecked, would eventually and inevitably lead to the overthrow of the bourgeois government. “These anarchists,” as his principal attacker, Henri Fouquier, wrote of Bauër and his followers, “reenact in

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revolution had been silenced. The true French anarchists (those who were trying to bring about real political change) were now reassessing their methods and ideology. They now turned their praxis away from its propagandistic and extreme individualist orientation to concentrate instead on the realities of union organizing.

In this context, Henry Bauër had failed to change his personal political practices with the new zeitgeist, and had become one of the important voices of dissent that was silenced by the official war on anarchy. Though Bauër is not specifically mentioned in it, the larger story of the social role played by The Trial of The Thirty is told most depthfully by Jean Maitron in his chapter “*Le Procès des Trente*,” pages 231-241. A more succinct account, in English, is presented by Richard D. Sonn, pages 18-26.

the literary world the same things that I, with my own sorry eyes, witnessed during the Commune.”<sup>563</sup>

But Fouquier, the conservative and bourgeois critic (and a dyed-in-the-wool government man), is careful to use the term “anarchist” only when describing the behavior of Bauër and his cronies. He specifically does not make any accusation of anarchism with regard to the artistic intent of the play, *Ubu Roi*. Nor does any other contemporary critic. The purpose of Fouquier’s charge was to stigmatize the insufferable Bauër with the criminality that the label “anarchist” carried in the winter of 1896.<sup>564</sup>

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<sup>563</sup> Fouquier, 13 Dec., 87. It is somewhat doubtful whether Fouquier witnessed any of the actual events of the Commune “with [his] own sorry eyes” as he was serving as an important *fonctionnaire* in his native Marseille during the entirety of 1871.

<sup>564</sup> The accusations against Bauër are actually the *only* contemporary discourse pertaining to anarchism that can be associated with the historical premier of *Ubu Roi* at all. There simply is nothing else. The quotations that are so often cited to demonstrate the anarchism of the production are actually comments about Bauër that have been taken deliberately out of context, and made to seem as though they refer to Jarry and the actors of the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre. “These anarchists of art . . . [who] re-enact in the literary world . . .” is the most common example. But when read in the full context of Fouquier’s diatribe, it is perfectly clear that the statements are not meant to be applied to the performers or the production at all. To judge the matter directly, please refer to Fouquier’s articles that are reproduced in full in Appendix B of this dissertation.

Furthermore, if we exclude the articles written by Bauër and Fouquier, only two of the thirty known reviews of the 1896 production of *Ubu Roi* mention anarchism in any context whatsoever — and even when they do refer to this topic, their implications are of no real political substance. One of these appears in the 12 December review by Catulle Mendès, published in *Le Journal*. In it Mendès attempts to describe the character of Père Ubu for his readers as a fusion of contradictory elements. “Ubu,” as he puts it, is “made up of . . . an assassin and a President of the Republic, of a Catholic and a Jew, of a police officer and the *anarchist* Vaillant, . . .” (rpd. in Rachilde, 85). Obviously, this reference is far from suggesting that the play advocates anarchism.

The only other mention of anarchism in relation to the production was published in the 20 December issue of *La Critique* in a review written by “Criticus,” who appears to belong to a middle-aged generation. Throughout his review Criticus derides the “present generation,” who flock to the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre. He portrays them as anarchist, Ibsenist, homosexuals: “deluded by idealized sensualism . . . , enfevered by *anarchic* blood, their brains either empty or filled with vague dreamings, these spoiled children, exalted by hypocritical and cowardly double-meanings, have nothing in their innards except what Oscar Wilde may have left there” (rpd. in Robillot, 79). (And Criticus seems to think that Jarry writes in poor taste!) But let us note that Criticus — like Fouquier, whom he quotes approvingly — is not

Three years previously anarchism had been quite a fashionable doctrine among the Parisian avant-garde arts community — but by the time of the production of *Ubu Roi*, due to the new and draconian legislation which criminalized any sort of overt sympathy for anarchism, it had become anathema. Fouquier’s focusing of public scrutiny on Bauër’s literary anarchism (at this particular time and in relation to this particular production) effectively transformed the powerful progressive critic into a liability for the experimental arts. Following *Ubu Roi*, the tide of public opinion turned against this “musketeer of the pen,” making him into a pariah among those for whom he advocated.

Bauër’s biographer, Marcel Cerf, notes that several prominent writers all joined the attack against him at this juncture.<sup>565</sup> Lugne-Poé’s memoirs affirm that Bauër’s enemies emerged from the woodwork to take part in the frenzy.<sup>566</sup> Even Bauër’s own newspaper turned against him. In a letter recalling his experience of the premiere of *Ubu Roi*, the famous Willy [Henry Gauthier-Villars], an audacious literary man-about-town of the era (featured earlier in this study for his hat-waving during the *générale*), particularly remembers “the fierce joy of the editors of the *Écho de Paris* of the anti-Bauër clan,” who complained loudly and publicly to one another that “this is very bad for the paper, these

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commenting on the play itself, but rather is describing the disposition of a certain faction of the audience. It is clear that he does not like either them or anarchism, but his comment tells us little more than that.

<sup>565</sup> Cerf, 89.

<sup>566</sup> Lugné-Poe, 182-183.

excesses of Bauër's."<sup>567</sup> The dust of the matter had barely settled when the critic's downfall was resurrected as a ballad in a satirical magazine of February 1897. Its mocking tale of "Ubu, who said '*merdre*' to Bauër," eventually concludes by regretting "for Bauër's sake," that "people no longer work with jackasses."<sup>568</sup> In this way — through the public discourse that took place in the Parisian press — the influence of a crusading journalist was undermined and ended. It is this silencing of a radical theatre critic that is the real story historians should be telling about anarchism in relation to *Ubu Roi*.

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<sup>567</sup> Willy [Henry Gauthier-Villars], "Document 9: Lettre de Willy à Rachilde," in "Dossier: Jarry à L'Oeuvre," *L'Étoile-Absinthe* 4 (December 1979): 19. See also the section of Chapter 3 of this dissertation titled "Rachilde, Man of Letters," footnote 439.

<sup>568</sup> André Ibels, *Talentiers, ballades libres* (Paris: Bibliothèque d'Art de La Critique, 1899), 36. The ballads comprising this book are republications of topical satires originally printed in the 1890s avant-garde journal *L'Aube*, whose title means both "The Dawn" and "The Paddle." Ibels's poem about the downfall of Bauër appeared there in February 1897.

## Conclusion:

### The Battle for Custody of *Ubu Roi*

These concluding thoughts on the method, structure, and overall significance of *Ubu's Moment: Four Resurrected Histories of the 1896 Premiere of Alfred Jarry's Ubu Roi* are divided into in three main categories: (1) reflections on the subjective truth(s) *vs* the objective Truth of history; (2) reflections on battles for moral/interpretive/narrative/historiographic “custody” of events; and (3) reflections on the ways in which historical events transform during their journey through time.

In the first perspective — Truth *vs* truth(s) — it is the different historical witnesses featured in this study who are of particular interest: Jarry, Antoine, Rachilde, Bauër, Fouquier. These individuals all encountered the same shared reality (of the production of *Ubu Roi*), and yet they each experienced something completely different. Consequently, each of their stories creates a different, and not necessarily compatible, vision of what it is that actually happened on that famous occasion. Yet all of their evocations are completely true insofar as each individual is concerned. This idea of *Ubu Roi* is a triumph for Jarry; that one is the downfall of Bauer; a third is an opportunity for

Antoine to perform discourse. At the same time — even though the descriptions of the event head off in several different directions — one singular, finite, and objective reality of *Ubu Roi* surely did exist. The historiographic question is whether there is any way that its Truth can ever be recovered and made known to a reader of history. For, self-evidently, no information about occurrences during a historical event can come from outside of the event . . . yet all possible “inside” narrators are only able to perceive the situation subjectively, according to their own limited point of view. None can possibly comprehend the full reality of the social discourse in which they are participating. Indeed, there will always be more narratives that can be told; more interpretations that can be presented.

For this study, the story of the premiere performance of *Ubu Roi* might have been told in other ways and from several additional perspectives. It could, for instance, have been told from the point of view of Aurélien Lugné-Poe, the director of the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre. Lugné-Poe never fully supported Jarry’s play at his theatre and spent the majority of the show’s brief rehearsal period out of the country, visiting London. In his memoirs the director complains of the excessive expense of mounting *Ubu Roi* and, shortly after it, he announced a formal break between his theatre and Symbolism as a literary and dramatic movement. Or the story of this production could be told from the point of view of Paul Masson (better known as Lemice-Terrieux), spiritual father of all Parisian grand-scale *mystificateurs* (practical jokers) of the *fin de*

*siècle*.<sup>569</sup> (He was a sort of Parisian Banksy of the 1890s). Masson died in October 1896, but he and his practical jokes are mentioned in several reviews of *Ubu Roi*. It is worth taking seriously the assertion that the production was an elaborate practical joke and analyzing the way it operated within a contemporary discourse of grand-scale Parisian mystifications. Or it might be analyzed from the perspective of Firmin Gémier, the actor who played the central role in the show. Gémier had had a long history with the experimental Parisian avant-garde theatres of the 1890s, but in 1896 he was a well-established performer of quality, now employed by the Odéon, and merely “on-loan” to the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre from that more prestigious state-sponsored company. His struggles with the role of Ubu and also his triumph in performing it are both evident in the documentary record. What impact did the episode have on his career? These are just a few examples, but several additional first-hand perspectives that would illuminate other aspects of the show are recoverable. It is only a matter of sifting the archive and organizing the data into narrative. Indeed, compositing many small, clearly seen, individual pieces of reconstructed history together into a larger multi-perspective “cubistic” approximation of the more complex whole may be as close as it will ever be possible to come to a recreation of what “really” happened. In other words: the collage-

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<sup>569</sup> Lemice-Terrieux is a homophone for *Le Mystérieux* [The Mysterious]. There are several French books and articles concerning the escapades of this celebrated *mystificateur* [practical joker]. One of the most depthful explorations of his career can be found in François Caradec’s *La Farce et le Sacré: Fêtes et Farceurs, Mythes et Mystificateurs* (Paris: Casterman, 1977). A small sampling of the sort of “mystifications” Masson was known for: causing the very formal delivery of several coffins to an official government banquet-in-progress; causing several celebrities to arrive in full costume for a non-existent masked ball; publishing an entirely fictitious “autobiographical” memoir of the youth of the German Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck. For several critics, the production of *Ubu Roi* seemed to be a practical joke of this ilk.

portrait must, necessarily, stand in that place that one would like, ideally, to reserve for the full, “objective,” historical Truth.

In accepting that objective historical Truth is impossible, one comes to the second course in this menu of epilogues: the *contest for ascendancy* that existed among *Ubu*'s contemporary narrators. Ordinarily, in historical narratives, meaning is streamlined and unified. As Hayden White, Clifford Geertz, and Thomas Postlewait have emphasized, the role of the historian — and, I would add, also of the critic, biographer, ethnographer, and journalist — is to distill and select data points from real world events and narrate them in a way that tells a story, provides closure, and delivers some sort of moral point.<sup>570</sup> In the case of the historiography of *Ubu Roi*, one finds, in the early days, multiple narrators all striving to assert the ultimate rightness of their different, and sometimes antithetical, moral viewpoints on the play. Truth be damned: they were competing for narrative dominance in the contemporary marketplace of ideas.

I have argued that the focal figures of the various chapters of this dissertation are all vying with one another for custody of this episode of historical theatre: for the right to define what happened and what it means. At the moment when *Ubu Roi* first appeared on the Parisian stage it defined the “now” of avant-garde performance; the latest direction taken by dramatic art. The play's *début* impacted its audience in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons, animating diverse groups of spectators for different causes. Some of the animations were idealistic in their celebration of the work (the

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<sup>570</sup> See this study's Introduction, pages 30-37.

triumph of a new aesthetic), others were petty (the downfall of an important critic), but undeniably the show garnered an enormous response in social energy — energy that each of the figures who were focused on in this study then sought to harness for the advancement of their own personal agendas. By shaping their different interpretations of the occasion of *Ubu Roi*, these individuals engaged in a discursive battle for ownership, or “custody,” of the energy of the event. The prize that each sought, though, was not merely discursive ownership of this event in particular, but the larger right to name and define the direction of the contemporary Parisian avant-garde more generally. This is a fleeting privilege which also brings a certain degree of political agency to effect social transformations. All are seeking to “own” an influential narrative in order to benefit themselves.

After some decades, the “*merdre riot*”/attack-on-the-audience anecdote proved victorious in the marketplace of ideas. That particular idea gained traction, developed, and was gradually made more exciting according to the genealogy of exaggeration detailed in this study’s Introduction, ultimately eclipsing the other, more valid contemporary interpretations of the play.<sup>571</sup> They, in turn, became smothered, asphyxiated, “killed off.” While none of those alternative narratives — Jarry’s, Antoine’s, Bauer’s — hold the complete truth of *Ubu Roi*, each of them contains a more valid fragment of it than the story that is well known. It is mainly for these fragments that

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<sup>571</sup> From Jarry’s perspective the production was not an attack on the audience, but the reward at the end of an arduous journey; from Antoine’s it was a “perfectly ordinary” avant-garde premiere; from Bauer’s it was a tale of the triumph of conservatism.

those asphyxiated histories have been “resurrected” throughout this study. Partly for their own individual perspectives, but more for the collective enterprise: so that they might replay their forgotten parts in the original contest for custodianship over the meaning of *Ubu Roi*; so that they might aid in the reconstruction of its historiographic *moment* (in both senses).

The fact that Jarry’s contemporaries could not agree on the significance of the debut of his now-famous play, in the view of this study, *is* the source of its significance. And this is the factor that makes the 1896 Théâtre de l’Oeuvre production of *Ubu Roi* a complex and important watershed event, worthy of ongoing study. Worthy specifically because this contest highlights the realpolitik of how history is made, erased, simplified, and remade in the marketplace of ideas. It demonstrates a sort of historiographic Darwinism. . . and *that* new concept ushers in a third and different optic of this conclusionary reflection on *Ubu’s Moment*.

That final perspective concerns the longer trans-temporal evolution of the story of *Ubu Roi’s* premiere as it has been represented over time. The *Idea* of this play’s debut performance has been reinvented, recycled, tweaked, augmented, and repeated many times in many different eras. It has branched out, and now exists in multiple versions, several of which were evoked in the earlier pages of this study. Some of its evolutions have been roughly linear. The Irish poet, William Butler Yeats, for example, who was present at the famous performance, saw spectators who “shake their fists at one

another.”<sup>572</sup> But Rachilde, publishing her account decades after the fact, wrote of “uninitiated commoners” who “hurled abuse” for fifteen minutes “from the balconies to the boxes and back again.”<sup>573</sup> Later, Michael Benedikt, a theatre historian of the 1960s, delivers this as “one of the most violent theatre riots of all time.”<sup>574</sup> This is not merely the snowballing of embellishment, but an ongoing tug-of-war for the right to represent *Ubu* in the way that delivers the most effective moral point for each new narrator. So, it is not lost on me that my own dissertation’s re-imagined historiographies of *Ubu*’s debut are, in one sense, just another bid for narrative “custody” of the moment: the latest evolutionary re-writing of an old tale.

Yet, at the same time, my portrait of the occasion, *Ubu’s Moment*, has certain attributes to recommend it — not merely as the latest — but also as “fittest.” Foremost is its collage-portrait technique, which gives the study a consciously modernist quality that its predecessors lack. The multi-perspective perception that structures this writing grounds it in a “cubistic” technique for understanding a quintessentially modernist theatre event that actively belongs in the modernist thought-world of the historical moment that it is portraying. In other words: the form and philosophy of this study are better suited to the depiction of *Ubu Roi* than the other (single perspective) accounts of this same occasion that have been produced by historians to date. Supplemental to this,

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<sup>572</sup> William Butler Yeats, *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1938), 297.

<sup>573</sup> Rachilde, *Alfred Jarry, ou Le Surmâle de lettres*. (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1928), 80-81.

<sup>574</sup> Michael Benedikt, *Modern French Theatre* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1964), ix.

this dissertation's appendixes of primary documents in translation make it more legibly rooted in archival research than any of its antecedents. For these qualities, *Ubu's Moment* should become preeminent as the most appropriate available portrayal of this play's history.

Ideas about the past, however, are never built on stable ground. "The future of the past is never very sure," as renowned American scholar of modern France, Eugen Weber, observed in his 1986 opus *France, Fin de Siècle*:

The only certainty is that the past will be what we make it, that what we choose to note in the present, to remember about the past, will change as our own concerns change.<sup>575</sup>

Weber has often appeared in this study's footnotes, but here he expresses a key theme of this conclusion so effectively that one dares not paraphrase or augment it. The meaning — and even the events — of *Ubu's* premiere have both been redefined many times since their arrival in the world. My own concern, clearly, has been to remake *Ubu's* past according to values different from those of previous historians; placing more emphasis on the subjective experience of particular persons and less on the simplified morality tale. (This while recalling anthropologist Clifford Geertz's exhortation that, in order to understand a culture, it is first necessary to understand some of its individuals).<sup>576</sup> There is something wonderfully heartening in Weber's assurance that the past is readily transformable . . . and simultaneously sobering in the recognition that any narrative of

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<sup>575</sup> Eugen Weber, *France: Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1986), 235.

<sup>576</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 30.

history is only a finite edifice that will eventually be replaced when present concerns again transform.

In this same vein of dismantling old constructions and changing the past, Jarry's character of Ubu, at one point in his career, makes an observation so germane that it can stand as the final thought of this dissertation. In 1899, three years after his most famous play's premiere, Jarry deployed Ubu again in a new drama, *Ubu Enchaîné* (*Ubu Put-in-Chains* or *Ubu the Slave*), a sequel to *Ubu Roi* (*Ubu the King*) which the young writer composed specifically as an inverted counterpart — a deliberate annihilation — of its predecessor. Everything in the new play, scene-by-scene and character-by-character, is designed to negate the action of *Ubu Roi*. To achieve its existence, the new piece demolishes and consumes its ancestor. On its dedication page, Père Ubu, still using the royal “we,” is quoted as an epigraph. “Hornstrumpot!” he exclaims in a combination of exalted discovery and dismayed resignation:

We shall not have succeeded in demolishing everything unless we demolish the ruins as well. But the only way I can see of doing that is to use them to put up a lot of fine well-designed buildings.<sup>577</sup>

The new play then makes the wreckage of *Ubu Roi* into a new construction. Just as Jarry did with the ruins of his own play, so this study does with the ruins of its myth. The blocks from which the *Merdre* Riot was built have been dismantled and remade into a

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<sup>577</sup> Alfred Jarry, *OCG1*, 427. The epigraphic “quotation,” incidentally, does not exist anywhere else in all Jarry's writing. It was created solely to serve on the title page of *Ubu Enchaîné*. Preceding it, one finds Jarry's personal dedication of the new play: “To the masters who upheld his crown when he was king, *Ubu the Slave* offers the tribute of his irons.” [Aux maîtres qui affermirent sa couronne quand il était roi, *Ubu Enchaîné* offre l'hommage de ses fers].

Custody Battle. This, in full awareness that the new “well-designed building” merely makes *Ubu's Moment* the latest contender in that (still ongoing) battle for custody of this pivotal occasion of the historical avant-garde theatre; the latest applicant for the right to define the moment of *Ubu's* moment. In time, of course, this narrative will also become obsolete when the need for some other truth of *Ubu* arises. But whatever the next evolution may be, it is beyond my present imagining.

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## Appendix A:

### The Three *Ubu* Articles by Henry Bauër

This appendix presents my translations of the three articles written on the subject of *Ubu Roi* by Henry Bauër, the important avant-garde critic and “*journaliste de combat*,” who is a principle subject of Chapter 4 of this dissertation. During the era of the original Théâtre de l’Oeuvre production, he was the play’s most influential supporter.

The first of his three articles, dated Monday, November 23, 1896, appeared in Bauër’s regular opinion column, “Chronique,” which ran several days each week on the front page of the high circulation daily newspaper *L’Echo de Paris*. The exuberant endorsement he wrote for Jarry’s “extraordinary joke” of “rude language” which “spits impudently into the face of tradition” generated a considerable interest in the production that would be given by the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre in two weeks’ time.

The second item, dated Saturday, December 12, 1896, appeared in the paper’s theatre review section under the heading “Les Premières Représentations.” This page three feature was generally handled by Bauër, the main drama critic for *l’Écho*—however, as there was much theatre to be covered each week, other reviewers also contributed

dramatic criticism to this section of the paper. This piece gives Bauër's formal response to the performance of *Ubu Roi* that he had witnessed three days earlier. One detects a note of disappointment in the imagery of the "faded" and "crumpled" butterflies, but on the whole he maintains his enthusiasm for the play and the disturbance that it caused among the audience. His review is also notable among the other critics' for the attention he devotes to the music composed by Claude Terrasse for the occasion.

The third piece is dated Saturday, December 19, 1896, and ran, as did Bauer's first *Ubu*-related article, on the front page of the paper in his "Chronique" column. Here, Bauër is on the defensive as he responds to the many attacks that had been made against him during the week of media frenzy following *Ubu*'s premiere. These attacks, it is worth noting, were not ultimately about Bauër's championing of *Ubu Roi*, but really targeted Bauër himself, and his general status and practice as a critic over the past several years. *Ubu Roi* merely provided an occasion that placed Bauër in a very difficult position. To extricate himself, Bauër attempts to make a mockery of the supposed "literary terror" that he has been accused of creating.<sup>578</sup> He appeals particularly to his readers' memories of past occasions when his own championing of controversial performances had been validated by the later transformation of public opinion.

Though certain excerpts from the first and third of Bauer's articles have become quite well known, their full texts are hardly every reproduced. But when replaced in their proper contexts, the familiar excerpts take on quite a different value, as Bauër clearly

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<sup>578</sup> Bauër is responding most directly to the attacks made in *Le Figaro* by Henri Foquier, who took the lead in the anti-Bauër coalition of opposing critics. See "The Attack of the Figaro" in Appendix B for Foquier's articles.

intended them as details in support of a larger case. As for the second article, the review of 12 December, this is virtually unknown, even in French, and has never been reproduced. To the best of my knowledge none of the three articles that follow have ever been translated into English.

**Article 1: Monday, November 23, 1896:**

**CHRONIQUE: *UBU ROI***

Following *Peer Gynt*, the brilliant dramatic poem of Scandinavian temperament, the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre will, for its next performance, present a piece of a completely different character: *Ubu Roi*, by M. Alfred Jarry.

This work is an extraordinary joke, made of monstrously rude and excessive language, of the most colorful imagination disguising a scathing and aggressive wit, overflowing with the haughty contempt of men and things. It is a politico-philosophic satire whose big mouth spits impudently into the face of the illusion of tradition and of the old masters who were created by people's adoration. It is a contribution to the *Deeds and Gestures of Gargantua and His Son Pantagruel*. It is, ultimately, the thing that one hears most rarely—an original and discordant cry among the chorus of ordinariness. And this cry resounds long and marvelous in the ears of those who have listened. Ah! What violence and disrespect! What a strong flavor! And how I love the young herald capable of stripping the institutions of their facades, of tearing the masks from their hideous faces and proclaiming: Behold!

Ubu is the extreme product of the dynasties of cloddish bungling, begotten by the French Revolution and the nation of civilian and military bourgeoisness. Whether he calls himself Caesar, Bonaparte, Louis-Philippe, Joseph Prudhomme, Chauvin or Napoleon; whether he takes power by *coup d'état*, rioting, or corrupt ballots; he swings, nonetheless, like the giant pendulum of national stupidity, from throne to dung heap, from glory to kicks in the ass, from popularity to infamy. That's him perched on the shoulders of those silly geese cheering in the Capitol: but soon he sails to exile across a tempest of booing.

I give you Père Ubu as a perfect captain of dragoons: a lazy, boorish, greedy pig of a rascal. His mouth defecates filth and vomits profanity; he invents grand obscenities and covets a lucrative situation where he can stuff his belly. His worthy spouse, Mère Ubu, is unsatisfied with her modest lot in life and whispers

the words of Lady Macbeth into the thug's ear: "Ubu, you will be king!" It would be agreeable, of course, to be King of Poland and France, but the old goat fears for his hide. Besides, King Wenceslas, who places great confidence in his captain of dragoons, has no desire to die and legions of children to continue his dynasty.

"What stops you," urges Mère Ubu, "from massacring the whole family and taking their place? You could get infinitely rich, eat sausages all the time, and ride through the streets in a carriage."

She says no more about it for fear of being beaten—this will be enough to get him started. In vain he swears "by his green candle" to prefer being poor as a thin and honest rat over being rich as a fat and wicked rat. But his loyalty, gratitude, and dutifulness do not endure for long. Soon he invites Captain Bordure and his cronies for dinner; he stuffs them with chow and gets them drunk; he proposes his plan to oust the king and all agree . . . so long as there is something in it for themselves. Bordure promises to kill Wenceslas if Ubu will promise, in return, to make him the Duke of Lithuania. It is agreed.

The *coup d'état* is achieved; King Wenceslas and all his family are slain. Only young Buggerlas, together with his mother, the Queen, manages to escape and hide in a cave. The shades of all his family then appear to him, demanding vengeance. Meanwhile, Ubu is crowned and the people impatiently await the gifts of a happy accession: some gold and meat, bread and circuses. But right away the miserly sovereign drags his heels; the idea of such gifts distresses him, it seems to him that this will strip him of his wealth and he agrees to it with great reluctance. He has changed his condition, but not his spirit. He continues to beat his wife and proves to have no gratitude for Captain Bordure: "I pray you, Mère Ubu, speak no more to me of that nincompoop. Now that I no longer need him, he can go jump in a lake, he will not have his dukedom!"

In his capacity as monarch "of the people," he exterminates the aristocracy and the nobility. Slaughtering them, he confiscates their riches and properties. This is the occasion of a scene of the most impetuous buffoonery. He also menaces some magistrates who—and here we are in a complete flight of fancy—refuse to serve his base ferocity. He does not even spare the financiers.

— "Now come on, Père Ubu, what kind of a king are you?" exclaims his wife: "You're massacring everybody."

— "Oh, merdre!"

— "No more judges, no more financiers?!"

— "Fear nothing, my sweet child, I myself will go from village to village and collect the taxes!"

Fiend and scoundrel that he is, Ubu triples the taxes levied on the poor peasants, whom he understands abysmally: "Pay up or I'll put you in my pocket and there'll be torture and chopping off of the neck and the head!"

Oddshornikins,<sup>579</sup> I'm the King, aren't I?" Soon the whole country is in revolt against the tyrant. Captain Bordure escapes from his prison and joins the young Buggerlas, who, with Tsar Alexis of Russia and his army, invades Poland. King Ubu marches off to war across the devastated countryside. He fights, he starves, he eats a bear. A whole lot of people are killed for God, for the Tsar, for Poland, and for Ubu. Jean Sobiesky and Captain Bordure are torn to pieces by Ubu's very own hands. In the end the usurper is defeated, dethroned and pursued. While Buggerlas has himself crowned, Ubu boards a ship and escapes by sea . . . away the galley sails, carrying him to Spain!<sup>580</sup> Already his spirits are recovering, so he prepares some historic words for the occasion to be repeated by future generations. As they approach their new land of refuge, Mère Ubu remarks that the country is quite beautiful:

— “Ah, gentlemen! Beautiful as it may be, it cannot compare to Poland. If there were no Poland, there would be no Poles!”

I have it here, ready to hand on my table, this mini-saga of epic joy wherein a man of letters makes a heroic effort of obscenities and other terms that have been newly-invented by the addition a resonant final R; where, beneath the gigantic flower of farce, a serpent of irony writhes and hisses through its piercing teeth. I pick up this little book each day to savor another slice, and some lingering spirit makes me repeat the oaths of Ubu: “Oddshornikins! By my green candle!”

Masks and grimaces—grotesque visions—dance before my eyes and, with reckless pencil, I delight to set on paper the heroic face of Ubu, with likenesses of Mère Ubu, Captain Bordure, young Buggerlas and the bear, all born under the sign of the Great Swine. I envision the play as performed by gigantic human marionettes and I imagine, for instance, Dailly<sup>581</sup> agreeing to impersonate the hilarious Ubu and a duenna like Mathilde<sup>582</sup> in the habiliments of Mère Ubu.

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<sup>579</sup> This is an oath frequently used by Ubu, “*Cornegidouille*” in French. As the term is nonsense to begin with, there is no precise English equivalent. The French exclamation combines the idea of horns (simultaneously antlers, musical instruments, or “horns of plenty”) with Ubu’s self-named “gidouille” (roughly: his “belly”). Various other translations include: “hornstrumpot,” “hornybelly,” “hornsguts,” “horny cornhole” “horngibolets,” and “cornification.” “Oddshornikins” is a version coined by David Ball for his translation of the text. For further explication of the term see Stillman (44-46).

<sup>580</sup> “Spain” is substitution made by Bauër, perhaps deliberately, perhaps accidentally. At the end of the play Ubu’s ship sails to France, where he intends to become “master of phynance in Paris” (*Ubu Roi*: V, *iv*).

<sup>581</sup> A comic actor of the era who performed mainly in the commercial boulevard theatres.

<sup>582</sup> A *sociétaire* actress in the company of the Comédie-Française.

But, lacking them, Lugné-Poe will find some acolytes to animate by his intelligence and determination. Ah! The evening of raw hilarity! The bizarre and astonishing bonfire that will, by Ubu's green candle, blaze for our entertainment!

HENRY BAUER

**Article 2: Saturday, December 12, 1896:**

**LES PREMIÈRES REPRÉSENTATIONS**

THÉÂTRE DE L'OEUVRE — *Ubu Roi*, fantasy by M. Alfred Jarry;  
music by M. Terrasse.

There was some commotion in the audience.

Some honest serious people got angry. They were awaiting a tragedy from the frozen North and could endure no mockery. Me, I laughed tremendously, especially in the first parts of the discourse of the excellent Ubu and the “sweet child,” Mère Ubu. Captain Bordure, the young prince Buggerlas, and the Muscovite Tsar all brought me great joy, but I shall never find consolation for one disgraceful omission—the scene in which King Ubu meets the bear on the icy steppe of the Russian winter was left out! O why, O Lugné!, did you take away our bear?

Indeed, there was some commotion in the audience . . . Oddshornikins! How is it that some spectators failed to understand that Jarry made fun of himself as well as of us, that he offered a framework where everyone could embroider his own pleasure and collaborate in craziness? “By my green candle!” when it is heroic and childlike, let us give ourselves to the fantasy.

Not long ago I released, here in the wind of my column, the merry and zany butterflies that swirled in my brain following a discussion with Ubu. Perhaps their wings are a bit crumpled and faded from their adventure in the theatre—but they fly still!

Who can resist the force of such dialogue: “You are very ugly this evening Mère Ubu, is it because we have guests?” Thus Pere Ubu addresses his better half. And I did not deny my ineffable satisfaction when Queen Ubu announced that, in order to rejoin the army of the Palotins, she had to swim across the Vistula.<sup>583</sup>

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<sup>583</sup> “Palotins” are special creatures made of rubber who serve Ubu as henchmen. The Vistula is a river in Poland flowing north from the Carpathian Mountains to the gulf of Gdansk.

Savagery! Obscenity! Scatological onomatopoeia! The only thing missing is the “Palotin who explodes!”<sup>584</sup> Yet this Rabelaisian offspring does have a place in an exceptional theatre where, after the pure snows and sublime peaks of Scandinavian drama, there is a duty to give asylum to the orphans of ludicrous farce.

Of course, in an attack of blue language the dictionary is quickly exhausted, and the moment that it ceases to advance, it recedes. This defect is inherent in the genre. But the resistance of the public came from their dependence on a particular formula of laughter. The spectator has permission to be delighted only by a consecrated type of hilarity: light comedy with witty repartee and salacious innuendo.

It pleases me immensely that certain jokers collaborated with the characters in the play, and when the latter attached an extra R to Cambronne’s illustration [“Merd-Re”], the former felt obliged to respond: “Mang-Re”. Thus, what took place on stage was merely a facade, suggesting a theme for willing participants.

There was also a musical score, of charming buffoonery and worthy of the honors of an orchestra, written only at the last moment. This music is by M. Terrasse. Around a week ago a tall thin body appeared at my door, and balanced upon it, rather than attached, was an enormous head of bushy hair:

— Monsieur, three months ago I was in the countryside, organist for a Dominican convent. I came to Paris knowing only M. Alfred Jarry. I am the author of the music for *Ubu Roi*.

— Ah, yes?! Please seat yourself at the piano. It will be a pleasure if you would play this composition for me.

He taps the ivory and I hear a score of astonishing verve, modern and symphonic, with farcical leitmotifs for each character: themes for Ubu, Mère Ubu, Buggerlas and the apparitions, and I note also the grand march of the army, and the song of Giron the Palotin. It is droll, expressive, original, and smartly farcical. This, I assure you, is a very comic young musician—a rare find!

One piano comprises the entire orchestra; the single stage setting shows us simultaneously the palace and the thatched cottage, the tower and the cave, the mountain and the plains. All the actors exert themselves in great leaps, knockabout slapstick, they use masks and special voices, maintaining a kind of pale buffoonery, taken from guignol puppet shows, quack doctors, and vendors of miracle cures. Gémier gives himself to the role of Père Ubu with a fierceness, a mania, a farcical willingness that is wholly fascinating. Madame France cuts a

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<sup>584</sup> In Act 2, scene 2 of *Ubu Roi*, the scene of the assassination of the King Wenceslas by Ubu’s henchmen, one of Jarry’s stage directions reads: “They all attack the king. A Palotin explodes.”

hilarious figure as Mère Ubu, a fairground somnambulist, seller of the rags of a monarch who has lost her fine clothes, with shrieks, hoots, and overblown gestures. All make a tremendous and valiant effort, especially a tall specter with a long white beard, the *deus ex machina*, who traversed the theatre at each scene change in order to hang, at the front of the stage, a white placard indicating the locale.

O the mad and extraordinary evening!

HENRY BAUER

**Article 3: Saturday, December 19, 1896:**

**CHRONIQUE**

After the tumult at the performance of *Ubu Roi* a river of indignation raged against me, flowing from the pens of some honorable writers. They held me to blame for the events of the evening, and the following day they called it a Ninth of Thermidor, an end to “the Terror” which I have used to subjugate dramatic literature for the past ten years.<sup>585</sup>

Am I the new Robespierre . . . ? I would have never supposed so. But the imputation, which is really rather comical, amuses me. It is an agreeable tickling to the ego of a literary man to attribute to him such domination. Long live my tyranny, imposed by a pen wielded only by enthusiasm and sincerity!

Though I can hardly stand to write about myself, they have driven me to do so. In the first place, I had nothing at all to do with the performance given by the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre and I beheld the staging of M. Jarry’s fantastical work at the same time as the public. At that time I had merely read *Ubu Roi* and was extremely amused by it. Its novelty is of great value, bringing a clamor just as outrageous as the babbling senilities of the aging theatre or the murky burblings of eclecticism. And yet, from this enormous and strangely evocative character of Ubu, blows the wind of destruction—an inspiration to contemporary youth, who

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<sup>585</sup> “Ninth of Thermidor” (27 July 1794): On this date, during the second year of the new calendar adopted by the French Revolutionary Convention, the Convention turned against Maximilien Robespierre, outspoken leader of Committee for Public Safety. His position as chairman of that committee, combined with his incorruptible personal asceticism, made the young lawyer the *de facto* tyrant of Revolutionary France. As a policy maker, he was a passionate but impersonal advocate of “the Terror”: a collection of price control and anti-hoarding laws used to condemn the self-serving to death by guillotine, and to frighten everyone else into taking no more than his own share of the very limited resources. (These laws were often abused by people wishing to settle personal grudges through false accusations of hoarding). Fearing denunciation by Robespierre on this date, certain members of the Convention orchestrated the arrest of the “tyrant” to occur before he could begin an important speech to the assembly. By the following evening Robespierre and his followers had been guillotined.

tear down the traditional considerations and age-old prejudices. And this archetype will endure.

If I had played a part in the creation of this gargantuan farce, I'd have tried to clarify the production and to make the meaning more specific. In the first act, he [Ubu] should wear a mask presenting the incorruptible Maximilien;<sup>586</sup> in the second, his head should be encircled with the lilies of legitimate royalty;<sup>587</sup> in the third, his visage should express the bliss of Father Pearhead<sup>588</sup> and the July Monarchy; finally, in the ship transporting him to exile [. . .], the fellow should wear a little hat, with an eagle on the shoulder of his grey overcoat.<sup>589</sup> Thus I envision the four-headed Chimera of *Ubu Roi*.

Nevertheless, it achieved renown amid the mockery, booing and whistles, and I acknowledge my share of delight in this extraordinary and comic sketch, sprung from the mind of an eighteen-year-old author.

“Scatology, profanity, excrement!” shoots the gendarme Merda<sup>590</sup> at the tyrant! Ah, how well I understand the indignation of purists, those whose bizarre admiration recently lighted upon such refined comedy as *The Carillon*, for instance, in which the most beautiful gesture was a squirt of diarrhoea, the essential devise being an aphrodisiac umbrella, stimulant for the intermittent spasms of the beast with two backs.

The great rage against *Ubu* was long simmered by an automatic hatred of any audacious or original work, whether old or new. Excellent, my good

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<sup>586</sup> “The incorruptible Maximilien”: Maximilien Robespierre (1758–1794), see previous note.

<sup>587</sup> “The lilies of legitimate royalty”: White lilies were a symbol of the Bourbon dynasty, whose final monarch was Charles X (1757–1836). Charles was a younger brother to Kings Louis XVI and Louis XVIII. He succeeded the latter and ruled as King of France from 1824-1830. His reign was ended in 1830 by the July Revolution, which deposed Charles and installed his cousin Louis Philippe, Duke of Orléans, as King of the French in his place.

<sup>588</sup> “Father Pearhead”: Satirical nickname for Louis-Philippe I (1773–1850), who reigned as King of the French during the period known as the July Monarchy (1830-1848). An economic crisis in 1847 led to the 1848 Revolutions, and Louis-Philippe's abdication. He was the last king to rule France, though Napoleon III, styled as an emperor, would serve as its last monarch.

<sup>589</sup> “. . . eagle on the shoulder of his grey overcoat”: This describes the usual appearance of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte (1808–1873), nephew and heir of Napoleon I, who used his position as first President of the Second French Republic (1848-1851) to overthrow the Republic and install himself as Napoleon III, ruler of the Second French Empire. He reigned as such from 1851-1870. His reign ended with his disastrous military defeat at Sedan in 1870, after which he abdicated and the Third French Republic was proclaimed.

<sup>590</sup> Charles-André Merda (1770 - 1812): the gendarme who, during the arrest of Robespierre on the Ninth of Thermidor, purportedly fired the famous pistol shot which broke Robespierre's jaw.

colleagues, so the crudeness of the word shocks you: “My sister, cover this bosom that I cannot endure to see!”<sup>591</sup>

But explain, then, the welcome that you recently bestowed upon other works in this same theatre, performances of high-minded and austere dramas of the strictest linguistic propriety. Presented with such established contemporary masterpieces as *An Enemy of the People*, or *Rosmersholm*, the same hostile incomprehension arose to discourage the public . . . who proudly exceeded such microbial bounds.

Thus this poor public ceases to have the approval of its masters to think. At the moment when it first repudiated the masters’ prejudices, choosing instead to form its own personal and unbiased opinion, the public was transformed into a herd of snobs. Yes, a snob is anyone who loves the new and the beautiful, anyone who rejoices in artistic spectacle. I invite you to be one.

Who, then, are the followers and flatterers: those who realize the value of a work at its first appearance, or those who support it only after it has triumphed?

But, the blusterer declares: “the public is terrorized and the terror is you! You, the Robespierre of theatre people!” Here he wants laughter, and I shall not ask to which party of the Convention he belongs, though it is clearly indicated. But how came this situation?! There is the Comédie-Française which stagnates, the Odéon which thrashes about, the Vaudeville and the Gymnase; there is the Porte-Saint-Martin, the Variétés, the Palais-Royal, the Nouveautés, etc., which operate according to their own interests; there is Sardou, Lavedan, Donnay and ten others; there is Mendès, and Sarcey, and Céard, and Fouquier, and Léon Kerst, there is Lemaître at the *Revue* and Faguet at the *Journal*; and from the stage of a small fringe theatre—where Lugné-Poe is the absolute monarch—I somehow tyrannize the Republic of letters!

Truly, such classification should give me a swollen head if I lacked one.

And what of this: could my violent pen, excessive in its capacity for sincerity and frankness, wish to impose itself and to sow terror? Its only value lay in an unceasing devotion to works of art and literature, for it has profited through their achievements and reputation. Never has it been “fearsome to the weak,” nor has it ever attacked the defenseless, nor persecuted a woman in order to wound a man. Thus may I regard its free iron with such pride as a knight of old, let it be Don Quixote, once kissed the pure blade of his sword.

Certainly, there has been a literary terror, if, by this term, one means the spirited courage and clear-sightedness of those who enabled *Lobengrin* to triumph over the marmitons,<sup>592</sup> who enabled M. Antoine and the Théâtre Libre to

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<sup>591</sup> Molière, *Tartuffe*, III, ii.

<sup>592</sup> “Marmitons,” in the context of late nineteenth-century Paris, refers to a gastronomic social club for wealthy gentlemen dedicated to exquisite food and wine. Bauër uses the term here to differentiate

complete their course, who enabled the performances of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre to reveal Ibsen and to affirm the theatre of ideas, who enabled the French stage to emerge from the baseness of sniveling comedy and vaudeville by the worship of truth and the conception of the Ideal. If, in this transformation, there was some desecration of customs, I am proud to have participated in it, to have contributed to the liberation of the dramatic arts, and I do not hide my satisfaction that all artists of letters, my contemporaries, have found me wholeheartedly at their service.

No literary issues or social crises, none of life's small details, find me indifferent. No matter whether I have a special affection for a thing or whether I am annoyed about it, I intervene in the debate and throw myself willingly into the height of the fray. I understand to what extent this temperament can astonish, or even offend, the dilettantes who love nothing, who are never seized by great passions, and who only vegetate in their empty existence. They will not cure me of my curiosity, of my need for action, of the fever for renewal, of the taste for all that is new, audacious and original.

This is why I bend my grey head towards the youth, the inexhaustable source of fresh beauty and of pure truth. Having climbed up the hard path, and already with one foot on the opposite side of the mountain, I am happy to offer my hand to young pilgrims, to help them assend the abrupt slopes more easily.

HENRY BAUER

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the sort of people who belong to this club—in Bauër's view: wealthy, conventional, unimaginative, mindlessly patriotic, bourgeois, and fat—from the champions of "true art" who supported the 1891 Parisian performance of Richard Wagner's opera *Lobengrin* at the (French government funded) Garnier Opera Palace. In spite of intense and jingoistic anti-German protests, the opera was presented on 16 September of that year, and became an enormous success, giving over a hundred performances by the time of the premiere of *Ubu Roi*. Bauër is reminding us that he was one of the principal advocates in favor of the presentation of the opera during the media frenzy leading up to it.

## Appendix B:

### The Reviews of *Ubu Roi*

This appendix presents my translation of “La Presse d’*Ubu Roi*” [The Press of *Ubu Roi*], an archive/article published in Paris in 1951<sup>593</sup> by the Collège de ‘Pataphysique.<sup>594</sup> In its essence, this material is a curated collection reproducing the

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<sup>593</sup> Many scholars who cite “La Presse d’*Ubu Roi*” in their own studies misdate the article’s publication by a year in either direction. This is undoubtedly because the Collège de ‘Pataphysique follows its own private calendar, stating all dates in terms of the “*Ere pataphysique*” [the Pataphysical Era], which commenced on September 8, 1873, the birth date of Alfred Jarry. Like a “vulgate” year, a ‘pataphysical year also has 365 days, but these days are distributed into thirteen months: twelve with twenty-eight days and one having twenty-nine. In their proper order, these months are: Absolu, Haha, As, Sable, Décervelage, Gueules, Pédale, Clinamen, Palotin, Merdre, Gidouille (twenty-nine days), Tatane, and Phalle. With regard to the date of “La Presse d’*Ubu Roi*”: the cover of issue 3-4 of the *CCP* declares its date of publication to have been 22 Haha 79. This equates to 27 October 1951 on our more familiar calendar, but the conversion is not easily worked out if there is no ‘pataphysical calendar on hand for ready reference.

<sup>594</sup> *Pataphysics* is a science—or pseudo-science—that functions in a realm of pure thought. It devises imaginary solutions based on the premise that any object’s true qualities derive from an idea of reality that is suggested by the object’s most prominently apparent features. The unusual name of this science was coined by Alfred Jarry, who, in Book II of his *Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll*, *‘Pataphysician* (1897), defined the doctor’s discipline, somewhat more opaquely, as “the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments” (Jarry 1965: 193).

Much ink has been spilled in the service of providing a clear explication of the methods, principles, and limits of this science—which is also a faith, a cult, a point of view and a hoax—but it is, indeed, practiced quite seriously and sincerely by its adherents. The best Anglophone introduction to its tenets can be found in the “Superliminal Note” written by Roger Shattuck in 1960 for a special issue of the *Evergreen Review* (volume 4, issue 13) which bears the issue title “What is ‘Pataphysics?’”

It is also possible to approach the term *‘pataphysics* through its etymology. Jarry was well-read in Greek, and the name that he invented for this science is, as he explains (in *Faustroll*), a contraction of the

printed responses of over twenty-five journalists of 1896 to the production of Jarry's play as performed by the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in December of that year.

The constituent documents of “La Presse d’*Ubu Roi*” were prepared, edited, and presented by Henri Robillot in issue number 3-4 of the Collège’s journal, the *Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique (CCP)*.<sup>595</sup> Robillot was, at that time, the general editor of the *Cahiers* [notebooks]. In fact, the entirety of issue 3-4 of the *CCP* was dedicated to “The Problem

Greek term τὰ ἐπὶ τὰ μετὰφυσικά. This phrase is a humorous variation on the title of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* when stated in Greek: “τὰ μετὰ τὰ φυσικά.” Literally, this means “that which is after physics,” and signifies “the works written by Aristotle after he wrote *Physics*.” Thus—and again, literally—‘*pataphysics*’ means “that which is above that which is after physics.”

Jarry specified that the term should be written as ‘*pataphysics*, that is: “preceded by an apostrophe to avoid a simple pun” (Jarry 1965: 192). The apostrophe changes neither the meaning nor the pronunciation of the word. In French it reads as ‘*pataphysique*. But notwithstanding the apostrophe, several simple puns immediately suggest themselves: “*patte à physique*” [leg of physics], “*pas ta physique*” [not your physics], and “*pâte à physique*” (physics dough).

As for the *Collège de Pataphysique*: this organization was founded in 1948, in Paris, by a group of artists and writers who were interested in conducting a rigorous exploration of the philosophy of ‘*pataphysics*. Today the collège is still quite active, and has grown into a significant international organization. Although its members recognize Jarry as the inventor of their discipline, and though they often have reason to refer to his writings in their own publications, the collège is emphatically *not* a Society for the Appreciation of Alfred Jarry. Their foremost aims are the promotion and practice of ‘*pataphysics*. More information concerning the collège’s activities is available at its website: <[www.college-de-pataphysique.fr/presentation\\_en.html](http://www.college-de-pataphysique.fr/presentation_en.html)>.

<sup>595</sup> To be precise: the *Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique* is actually only the subtitle of the first series of Collège’s journal, the main title of which is *Viridis Candela* [Green Candle]. After twenty-eight issues the first series of this journal, the *Cahiers* [notebooks], ceased publication and the subtitle was changed to the *Dossiers* [files] *du Collège de Pataphysique*. When this second series of the journal ran its course the subtitle was again changed to *Subsidia Pataphysica* [‘pataphysical supplements]. The changes in subtitle all correspond to significant administrative changes within the college.

In 1975 the college went into a planned twenty-five year period of “occultation,” during which time it ceased all public activities. Nonetheless, limited publications continued to appear under the authority of a subsidiary organization, the Cymbalum ‘Pataphysicum [the ‘pataphysical zither], and three more series of ‘pataphysical journals were published during these years: the *Organographes* [organizational writings] *du Cymbalum Pataphysicum*, *Monitoires* [training exercises] *du Cymbalum Pataphysicum* and *L’Expectateur* [the expectorator of uncertainty] *du Cymbalum Pataphysicum*.

When the Collège de ‘Pataphysique emerged from its occultation in 2000, it also resumed publishing its journal, now with the new subtitle of *Carnets Trimestriels* [quarterly reports] *du Collège de Pataphysique*, which has since evolved into the current series, *Le Correspondancier* [registrar of correspondences] *du Collège de Pataphysique*.

of Ubu” and contains several treatises on various aspects of the 1890s publication and production of the play. Yet among all these materials, no other article is so thoroughly necessary for the study of *Ubu*’s premiere as this one.

Curiously, despite the fact that “La Presse de *Ubu Roi*” is an obligatory reference for any serious treatment of the *Ubu*’s premiere, the article is also rather difficult to acquire. As of the present date, it does not exist in any electronic archive, and there appear to be only three libraries in the United States that own copies of this issue of the *CCP*, and these libraries do not allow it to circulate. Eventually, I was able to view a very degraded microfilm version of it, degraded often to the threshold of illegibility, and this seems to have been one of the only means to access it—for even though any study of *Ubu*’s premiere must quote from or otherwise refer to this archive/article, it has never been translated into English.

The specific basis of “La Presse d’*Ubu Roi*” is a scrapbook of press clippings that was carefully assembled, pasted together, and annotated in 1896/97 by Jarry himself. By 1951, however, this notebook was the property of Jean Loize, the proprietor of a specialized Parisian bookstore who had collected many personal items that once belonged to Jarry. Loize lent the artifact to Robillot, who reproduced the press clippings in thematic groupings according to their overall attitude toward the performance of the play (enthusiastic, hostile, descriptive, etc.). To this material, Robillot added some additional reviews of 1896/97 that had not been collected by Jarry, and also provided introductory and contextual commentary. Most especially helpful are his brief remarks

immediately prior to each clipping, which provide information concerning the circulation, frequency, and contemporary political orientation (in 1896/97) of each of the newspapers from which the clippings were cut.

With regard to the formatting of the translation that follows: to approximate the typographical conventions of “*La Presse d’Ubu Roi*” that are used in the *CCP* is a bit challenging in the context of a dissertation appendix. Partly this is due to the playfully illustrated and quirky overall design of the ‘pataphysical journal—which does not particularly lend itself to imitation here—but the typographical challenges also derive from the multiple sorts of information that the layout of the archive strives to signify visually. There, the clippings that are reproduced from Jarry’s scrapbook are given different visual characteristics than the other clippings that have been added in by Robillot. In addition to this, the editor’s own introductions to each item are typographically distinguished from both of the preceding—and his general thematic commentary, which appears at intervals throughout, is made to stand out against all of them by the use of still other formatting conventions. Sidebars, internal quotations within the clippings, varying column widths, section breaks, and illustrations also distinguish themselves.

In attempting to approximate this, I have adopted the following conventions for my translation: Any commentary written by Robillot is set in italics and is double-spaced. Any reproduction of a newspaper or journal clipping—regardless of whether it was included in Jarry’s scrapbook—is indented and set in single-spaced Roman type. Any

internal quotation within the clippings is further indented and set in slightly smaller single-spaced Roman type. Section breaks and the use of block capital letters reproduce what appears in the *CCP* archive/article. However, the discursive annotations that appear throughout the material are my own clarifications and additions. As for the internal thematic organization of “La Presse d’*Ubu Roi*”: that is self-explanatory.

### **La Presse d’*Ubu Roi***

#### **1: The Apologists**

*Whenever one speaks of the press concerning Ubu Roi, the same names are always cited. These are the critics whom Jarry himself thanked in his introductory lecture: Armand Silvestre, Aurélien Scholl, Jean Lorrain, Catulle Mendès and Henni Bauër. All five of these, the last two most effectively, defended and protected the efforts of the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre.*

*The article by Mendès, in Le Journal of 11 December, (the day following the répétition générale),<sup>596</sup> is well known since Rachilde included a large extract in the Surmâle*

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<sup>596</sup> “*Répétition Générale*”: “Dress Rehearsal” is the best English equivalent for this term. During the Third Republic the custom was for the press, special guests, big wigs, & co. to attend the *répétition général* rather than the *première*, which was the official opening for the regular public. In this case Robillot (the editor of this article in the *Cahiers*) has the date wrong. The *général* actually took place on Wednesday, 9 December 1896. It is true that Mendès article was printed on Friday, 11 December 1896, but the contemporary practice was for critics to attend the *général* and not publish a review until two days later—after the official opening. This was done mainly for two reasons. First is the matter of the logistics of newspaper deadlines: after a performance concluded (around midnight) the review needed to be written, delivered to the newspaper, edited, typeset and printed in time for the morning edition. Obviously the

des Lettres.<sup>597</sup> *It evokes the tumult of the famous evening with an eloquent violence and some artistic license, but also with several bold strokes, notoriously: “Père Ubu exists!” But what follows is less auspicious:*

Made up of Pulcinella and Polichinelle, of Punch and Karagheuz, of an assassin and a President of the Republic, of a Catholic and a Jew, of a police officer and the anarchist Vaillant, an enormous unsavory parody of Macbeth, of Napoleon, and of a pimp turned King, . . .

*At least, by multiplying the landmarks, Mendès succeeds in not overly narrowing the subject. In that, his interpretation is a bit less “political” than those of his contemporaries.*

*The critic at L’ÉCHO DE PARIS, who came to sacrifice so much for Ubu, did not avoid this danger. None can doubt that Henry Bauër possessed the reckless courage to fully commit himself—and all of his considerable authority—to the glorification of the play of this literary newcomer. In three lavish articles, one prior to the performance (23 November) and two after (12 and 19 December), he made himself the panegyrist of the “young herald” and his creation. Also none can doubt his excellent insight in writing:*

How is it that some spectators failed to understand that Jarry made fun of himself as well as of us?<sup>598</sup>

*But he reduces the whole play to one overly-simple anarchist theme:*

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delay of one day could make this process significantly more manageable. Secondly, it was simply a matter of professional courtesy not to publish a review until after the official opening.

<sup>597</sup> Although Rachilde reproduces a significant portion of this review in *Le Surréalisme des Lettres* (82-86), her quotation from it does not comprise the entire document. To read the full text of Mendès’s response to the production, entitled “*Ubu Roi*: Comédie Guignolesque,” it is necessary to consult the volume of *L’Art au Théâtre* for 1896 (Paris: E. Fasquelle, 1897: 438-440), this being a published collection of all of Mendès’s theatre reviews for that year.

<sup>598</sup> Henry Bauër, “Les Premières Représentations,” *L’Écho de Paris* 12 Dec. 1896, 3. See Appendix A of this dissertation to read this passage in context.

It is a politico-philosophic satire whose big mouth spits impudently into the face of the illusion of tradition and of the old masters who were created by people's adoration.<sup>599</sup>

*He even specifies, after the battle:*

If I had played a part in the creation of this gargantuan farce, I'd have tried to clarify the production and to make the meaning more specific. In the first act, he [Ubu] should wear a mask presenting the incorruptible Maximilien; in the second, his head should be encircled with the lilies of legitimate royalty; in the third, his visage should express the bliss of Father Pearhead and the July Monarchy; finally, in the ship transporting him to exile [. . .], the fellow should wear a little hat, with an eagle on the shoulder of his grey overcoat . . .<sup>600</sup>

*One shudders to think that Jarry, if he had not known exactly what he wanted, might have made the production comply with this preaching of social history!*

*Nevertheless it is necessary to acknowledge that Bauër tried to say to his contemporaries what he believed would make a success of the intolerable Ubu Roi. In the end, though, neither his loquacity nor his credit reached to that point—and it is this that can cause us, today, to be unjustly harsh to his efforts. When rereading these long pages, where he governed neither the quantity nor the virulence, one is struck by their inanity and their total failure to understand the play. They reveal nothing about Ubu Roi, barely something of the atmosphere of the room, and demonstrate only the profound isolation of Jarry. Bauër, selflessly and bravely,*

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<sup>599</sup> Henry Bauër, “Chronique,” *L’Écho de Paris* 23 Nov. 1896, 1. See Appendix A to read this passage in its original context.

<sup>600</sup> Henry Bauër, “Chronique,” *L’Écho de Paris* 19 Dec. 1896, 3. For explication of “the incorruptible Maximilien,” “the lilies of legitimate royalty,” “Father Pearhead,” and “an eagle on the shoulder of his grey overcoat”—as well as to read the quotation in its original context—see Appendix A of this dissertation.

*sacrificed his influential position, not to Ubu Roi, but to the conventions of the literary anarchism of the time.*

*Somewhat more sensible, the *Mercure de France* and *La Critique* simply gave the page to Jarry, by publishing as reviews both of the texts written by Jarry in regard to *Ubu Roi*. His piece in *La Critique* (20 December 1896), which had been completely forgotten and left out of all reissues and collections, sees the light of day again for the first time in this issue of the *Cahiers*. In *Le Mercure* (January 1897) one finds the address that was delivered by Jarry in a dress coat before a coal sack tablecloth, whose manuscript came to be reproduced in *Vers et Prose of April-May-June 1910*. However, to this text that has become famous and is now reproduced everywhere, A. Ferdinand Hérold<sup>601</sup> added the following comment:*

This short and spiritual lecture is, it seems to us, the finest criticism that one can make of *Ubu Roi*. I want to add, however, that this extraordinary fantasia, by which some people pretend to be scandalized, is the most truly disrespectful work that anyone has written for a long time; of all the prejudices existing today, there is not one that is not mocked herein; and Monsieur Jarry will have had the rare honor of creating a new type: genus Ubu. Do we not, barely a few days after the performance, already have an article in which Monsieur Rochefort,<sup>602</sup> wanting to express all the contempt that he has for the present ministry, compares Monsieur Méline<sup>603</sup> and his colleagues to Père Ubu? And, in short, is not Ubu, whether professor or politician, a man of the government?

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<sup>601</sup> André-Ferdinand Hérold (1865-1940): French writer, inclined toward the Symbolist school, and closely associated with the crowd that gathered around Rachilde and the *Mercure de France* during the 1890s. He also frequently collaborated with the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, usually as a translator, but made himself generally helpful to the company. For instance: he operated a spot light and worked the trap doors for the 1896 production of *Ubu Roi*. He was a fairly close friend of Jarry.

<sup>602</sup> Henri Rochefort (1830-1913): French politician and journalist, also Marquis de Rochefort-Luçay. His politics leaned toward Radical Socialism. Due to his aristocratic name was known as “the prince of the gutter press” (“*le Prince des polémistes*”).

<sup>603</sup> Jules Méline (1838–1925): Prime minister of France from 1896 to 1898.

To the well-deserved praise that Monsieur Jarry gave, in his lecture, to Monsieur Gémier, we will attach our own praise of Madames [Louise] France and Irma Perrot; and we will thank Monsieur Lugné-Poe for having dared the presentation of *Ubu Roi*.

*In the same issue of the REVUE BLANCHE (1 January 1897) where Jarry published "Questions of Theatre," Roman Coolus (pseudonym of René Weil)—who later came to be played by the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre—also gave the page to Jarry . . . but for a fictitious speech! The article finished with some reservations, contrary, one must say in Coolus's defense, to those made from all other quarters, but tending to push Jarry into the wake of Rabelais or the Symbolists, the masters of neologism :*

Ah! The première of *Ubu Roi*, now that was an excellent night out—and historic! Ever since that night literature, art and politics have been pregnant with Ubu. Everywhere it smells of Ubu. We fight for Ubu and for Ubu we tear each other's guts out. [At the theatre that night] it was raining formidable Paris bigshots, determined to crush the Infamous. And the Infamous, for their part, thrashed about like demons in a fountain of holy water—but what a fountain! This was an incomparable hour, whose like we won't know again any time soon. Let us savor this exquisite event; and let us thank Providence who so rarely gifts us with such excellent entertainments—this time she arranged things well.

Monsieur Jarry has been loudly scolded and thoroughly spanked by the press. In this very issue he defends himself still, and I refer to you his discourse. But will he allow me to say that he himself is a bit responsible for the hullabaloo unleashed by his *Ubu*? It would have been quite simple for him to prevent the public from misunderstanding, since he had decided to personally introduce his work to the audience. It seems to me that the evening would have gone by without any hurly-burly at all if, when he stood at the coal sack that served as his oratorical carpet, he had lectured in this fashion:

“Mesdames, Messieurs, I take the precaution to warn you, and in the case in point it is not a useless precaution. You imagine perhaps that you are

about to witness an artistic feat intended to revolutionize the aesthetics of theatre for thousands of years. This opinion would be very detrimental to *Ubu* and I plead that you to leave it in the cloakroom. Here is the point: I have an enduring passion for Guignol farces and knock-about puppet shows. I suspect that you do as well: for puppets are beings one thousand times more expressive than living figures, mechanical men who evoke the eternal motions of humanity. I have therefore amused myself by putting on stage some grotesque puppets, hugely distorted from reality, who do not aspire to any truth, but who may, nevertheless, signify something to an inventive mind. So you must look to your respective imaginations; me I have contented myself to dress-up some fine fellows and to cause their words to agree with their block-heads and fat stomachs.

“Nevertheless, I will explain something about the tale of Père Ubu. He is neither Monsieur Thiers, nor the essential Bourgeois, nor General Boulanger, nor Fransisque Sarcey, nor you, nor me, nor anybody. He is Père Ubu, that is to say: a bogeyman intended to frighten little boys. For it is very amusing to scare people who come to see a performance of *guignol* puppets, and indeed, people are somewhat delighted when they have been frightened to the point of dishonoring the seats of their trousers. It is therefore necessary that Père Ubu, who is all the more terrible because he is ridiculous, must not possess a psychology more complex than even the most simpleminded viewer; for even the most obtuse need to be able to entertain and alarm themselves somewhat. Thus he will have, like all children, passions that are very simple and very violent: gluttony (he will stuff his face like four men and eat the entire feast by himself); ferociousness (he will tear people in two, force small bits of wood into their ears, twist noses and decervalate); greed (he will kill everyone to have their phynance, and this word will not cease to sound from his vile lips); and, finally, he will have a taste for vulgarity (he will shout abuse at some, tell others off, and spew filth over the the whole world). He is loathsome, cowardly, boastful, a complete idiot, and he makes stupid puns. He is therefore the hero of every *guignol* puppet show: you recognize him because you have seen him dozens of times. He is particularly violent here and of an exceptional brutality, but this is because our farce addresses itself to children who are slightly older and whose digestive indifference needs to be shaken up a bit.

“I want to stress one last point. Père Ubu, like all schoolboys, loves to say the cambronnesque word. He excretes it in regard to everything and nothing. It has no importance, and I urge you not to see in this uninterrupted verbal defecation the slightest provocation. This manner of speaking does not aspire to be funny. Where any man of the world might say: “*Nom de Dieu!*” M. Ubu exclaims: “M\*\*\*\*\*!” This proves only that he has not frequented the home of Madam Aubusson. Besides, he enlarges the heroic exclamation with an additional R, because he finds an infantile pleasure in distorting the most basic words. So do not laugh at the first M\*\*\*\*\*, you might hiss at the fifteenth. Rather, accept this natural manner of cursing in a fat greedy buffoon made of wood and pasteboard, who, thanks to this, comes as near as possible to a primitive nature and universal substance.

“I shall add that, as my *guignol* farce is meant to sadden no one, the delicates among you—being people who are readily unhappy—are requested at this time to exit to the reservation office where they will receive in exchange

[for their departure] a voucher to the Théâtre Blanc of the venerable Madame Samary.”<sup>604</sup>

M. Jarry, however, probably would not agree to one word of this lecture. Still, I imagine that it would have discouraged certain interpretations and prevented some viewers from taking Ubu for Falstaff and invoking Shakespeare. But let that be as it may, for on that evening we were extremely entertained—and have been ever since! Certainly, M. Jarry has some right to our recognition.

Nevertheless, I love *Ubu Roi* only half-way, and here is why: I would have liked more passion and unexpectedness in this fantasia; the genre allows for the total freedom that the author gave himself, but it does not seem to me that he drew on all the possibilities. In the epic scene of the second act, when Père Ubu exclaims “I have an idea!” I am certain that he will run to get his toilet brush to smear and splatter the ugly mugs [around the table]. Far from reproaching M. Jarry for excess, I am tempted to complain that he has not pushed the excessiveness up to its utmost extremity. In a word, he has the fault, in my view, of not disconcerting us violently enough.

Additionally, the language he gives to his characters could be extravagant, raging with an entirely Rabelaisienne vividness and earthiness. I found it to be too classical, too proper, and too sensible. It would have pleased me had he employed neologisms and verbal distortions more interesting than the substitution of “earens” for “ears.” From every viewpoint, lyricism is lacking in this work, and this criticism contains all the others.

However it is certain that—at this unique and exceptional performance—*Ubu Roi* was a very unusual show, though it was given a rather foolish welcome. There was a sense of disappointment, as though Jarry had promised everyone the Gospel of future art. But this is unfair to him, and certainly no fault of his. To my knowledge, he has never claimed that his piece was an inauguration and that in four years the universal theatre, French and foreign, would be rejuvenated by his turns of phrase. And so?

Gémier, with this furious will to create that we so admire in him, has made of Père Ubu an unforgettable type. He found some uses of voice, of gesture, of bearing, and of contradictions of hands and feet that

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<sup>604</sup> “Théâtre Blanc of the venerable Madame Samary”: in 1896 the actress Marie Samary (of the Odéon) founded a theatre for *jeunes filles* [teenaged girls], to offer the sort of “clean” programming that was deemed appropriate to the pure and virginal sensibilities of its clientele. The endeavor was housed at 55 rue de Ponthieu and was named the Théâtre Blanc.

were truly extraordinary. I do not know of any actor who could have presented this horrific figure with the same depth. For Mère Ubu, Madame France showed herself—especially toward the end—to be a worthy female, indeed, the necessary female, of the fat Père. The character of Queen Rosemonde brought out the Auvergnate qualities of Madam Irma Perrot. As for Captain Bordure, he was simply terrible.

Certain particularly happy details of the staging, however, are worth mentioning. The unchanging scenery served to evoke, rather than to present literally, the many places where the action developed; for more direct information it was possible to consult several signs that suggested what could not be shown. Also, certain actions that were done in a miniaturized form—the running, the climbing of the hill, the battle—very eloquently conveyed the larger picture. These constitute a new manner of theatrical language, which may be discussed at a later time.

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*When examining the file that was kept by Jarry, and which Jean Loize<sup>605</sup> forwarded to the College, one is immediately struck by the fact that none of these laudatory articles are included. Among all the newspaper clippings sent to us, Jarry had saved—in a collection annotated by his own hand and very ingeniously glued to some of the blue and pink pages of an old guide to second-hand merchandise prices—only the other reports. Should we conclude that he was not fond of the pompous and verbose celebrations of his supporters? In any case, we must note that the attacks are much more significant than the celebratory writings, and that they give us better information about what took place and about the play itself. Here one is faced with the*

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<sup>605</sup> Jean Loize: proprietor of a Parisian bookstore/gallery (the “Librarie Jean Loize”) who is often mentioned in official publications of the Collège de Pataphysique as being the owner of various Jarry artifacts. In fact, issue number 10 of the College’s *Cahiers*—which bears the issue title of “Expojarrysition”—is devoted to cataloging his collection of these. The actual exposition referred to in that title took place in Loize’s bookstore/gallery in 1953.

*average spectator (with a journalistic level of intelligence). And among these impartial or vaguely amused observers, one occasionally finds spirits who are more perceptive than the “grand protectors.”*

## 2: The Indignants

*The theatre column in LE TEMPS, kept by “Our Uncle,” whom Allais referred to as Sarcisque Francey (among other names) was quite formal.<sup>606</sup> It testified, particularly by its ending, that Jarry had a full and true success (14 December 1896).*

At the Comédie-Française, *l’Evasion [The Escape]*, comedy in three acts, by M. Brieux. At the Palais-Royal, *Ferdinand le Noceur [Ferdinand the Reveller]* (reprise), by M. Léon Gandillot. At l’Oeuvre *Ubu Roi* (sic: author’s name missing). At La Scala, *A nous les femmes [Bring On the Girls]*, revue by M. de Flers.

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Shall I speak of *Ubu Roi* that was presented to us by l’Oeuvre with an incredible fanfare of publicity? It is a filthy scam that deserves only the silence of contempt. I saw with pleasure that the public (a public who is, incidentally, quite particular to the soirées of the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre) finally rebelled against this excess of inanity and rudeness. Even in spite of the skeptical indulgence that is given to these performances, it has been hissed sharply.

This is the beginning of the end. These pranksters have made fun of us for far too long. The limit has been reached.

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<sup>606</sup> To be clear: “Our Uncle” was the famous fin-de-siècle critic Francisque Sarcey (1827-1899). “Allais” is Alphonse Allais (1854-1905), a French writer and humorist who is particularly remembered for inventing a type of verse known as holorhyme, in which entire consecutive lines are composed of near rhyming homophones.

At *La Scala* we have seen *A nous les femmes* [*Bring On the Girls*], a new revue in two acts by M. de Flers [. . .]

*THE SUN*, “liberal conservative newspaper, founded by [Edouard] Hervé, was the first major political daily available for 5 centimes. It is the newspaper of all who remain faithful to the constitutional monarchy” (*Advertisement in the 1897 Hachette Almanac*). In this paper, on 11 December, Louis Claveau disgorges thus:

It is absolutely useless to give an account of the stupidity played yesterday evening at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre under the title of *Ubu Roi*. The author, M. Alfred Jarry, undoubtedly wanted to play a grand practical joke on the public. It is unfortunate that the manager of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, M. Lugné-Poe, lent a hand and wasted his time with this hoax that has nothing artistic about it.

M. Gémier and Mme. France spent themselves in epileptic shouting and foul exclamations. The public—after having hissed the work and enlivening it with jeering—applauded the artists. In former days we would not have allowed the show to finish. Perhaps our fathers’ had the right idea—but perhaps they also had more energy than we do.

In Gambetta's newspaper, *LA REPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE* (two editions daily)—then managed by “politician, literary and marketing man” Jules Méline<sup>607</sup>—the following appeared under the signature Robert Vallier (December 12):

A beardless young man, his black hair parted in the middle and pasted down, seats himself at a table placed before the prompter's niche and covered by a rough packing cloth. In a blank voice he reads a

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<sup>607</sup> Who also happened to be the Prime Minister of France at the time.

statement, of which, by intervals, only a few sentences reach the ears of the public. I believe he informs us that the play—his play—which we will be able to applaud quite soon, takes place in Poland, which is to say nowhere, as Poland no longer exists.

The curtain rises. The decor, if I believe the reader whom we have just heard, represents an indeterminate place, which is called “everywhere.” To the left one takes note of a bed draped with yellow curtains that do not hide a certain rather private accessory. Over the bed there is a terrible snowstorm. Nearby, a gallows in the countryside bears the skeleton of a hanged man. Across the stage, a colossal boa constrictor winds itself around a palm tree. At the back, a window—on which some owls perch—stands out above undulating hills. Exactly in the center there is a chimney, its mantle ornaments in artful zinc, but this chimney has the peculiarity of opening in the middle and acting as door.

It is this that allows Père Ubu and Mère Ubu to enter. A venerable old man—whom we will see performing the same service again between each scene—comes to hang a large placard on a rack, thus informing us that the stage represents, for the moment, the home of Monsieur and Madam Ubu. Monsieur Gémier (of the Odéon) and Madame France, portrayed these two characters: the first wore a pear-shaped mask with a prominent nose and burly mustaches; the second has adopted the special manner of speaking and the angular gestures appropriate to marionnettes. We are therefore, unquestionably, at a puppet show. The author seems to have intended to make his Ubu into a Macbeth-Caliban, uniting in him all cynicism, all baseness, all brutality, and all appetites. Driven by his wife, and thanks to the assistance of Captain Bordure, this Ubu slaughters the [Polish] king, Wenceslas, and installs himself in his place. A monstrous eruption of brutal desires thus triumphs over the fancy routines of yesterday, trampling under foot all justice, all legality, and putting to pillage the terrorized country . . . all lasting until the instant when Ubu is finally driven away by the Tsar, his suzerain [the polish heir], and the people. He then passes into a neighboring country to become Minister of Finance there.

In actual fact, I dare not guarantee the strict accuracy of this summary. I was not able to hear a third of the play. From all parts of the audience arose a flood of protests, a tumult which consisted of shouting, whistling, yowling, howling and barking, and which found endless pretext to renew itself in the ignominious crudeness of nearly every line of the dialogue.

Obviously, Monsieur Jarry had aspired to give us a Karagheuz show; but such stories succeed only with puppets and Chinese shadows, and not at all on a stage with artistic pretensions. The piece also lacked in

wit, and I found no real humor in *Ubu Roi*, except in one or two retorts. What imagination it did show, in spite of all its colorful filth, was slight and labored. To me nearly everything in the play seemed more childish and pretentious than smutty and shocking.

*LA PAIX* was a daily paper: republican, liberal, progressive. During Grévy's presidency,<sup>608</sup> it established itself as champion of the Elysée.<sup>609</sup> It was, therefore, fairly expert on these matters.<sup>610</sup> On December 11, in the regular column titled "The Parisian Soirée," a witty critic, who calls himself "The Fireman on Duty" [le Pompier de Service], writes:

Le Roi Ubu  
 Qui s'avance . . . bu  
 Et Monsieur Jarry  
 Qui s'avance gris . . .<sup>611</sup>

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<sup>608</sup> Jules Grevy: President of the Republic, 1879-1887, forced to resign after a sensational scandal.

<sup>609</sup> Elysée Palace: official residence of the President of the Republic, similar to saying "The White House" in American idiom.

<sup>610</sup> "These matters": presumably scandals, Ubu-esque politics, corruption, & co.

<sup>611</sup> This short and silly rhyme derives from (and parodies, in a way) the very popular "Marche et Couplets Des Rois" ["The March and Couplets of the Kings"], a musical number in the first act of *La Belle Hélène*, Jacques Offenbach's (1819-1880) comic opera smash of 1864. The most recent Paris stage revival of that complete work had taken place in 1886, but this particular musical number was perennially popular and was often performed on its own in the city's many *cafés-concerts* throughout the 1890s. Though the music is by Offenbach, the operetta's book and lyrics were composed by Henri Meilhac (1831-1897) and Ludovic Halévy (1834-1908), both of whom, as it happens, were members of the Académie Française at the time of the premiere of *Ubu Roi*.

To understand the lyrical parody that is being used here (by the reviewer) in relation to *Ubu Roi*, one needs some knowledge of the repetition and syncopation that is involved in the song's performance. The song itself comically heralds the entrance of five Greek kings. When Agamemnon, for instance, makes his entrance, the chorus sings "le roi barbu qui s'avance . . .," and a part of the ensemble echoes "bu qui s'avance, bu qui s'avance bu." The significance is that King Agamemnon has a beard (he is "barbu"), but the echo carries the added implication that he is also drunk ("bu"). The song operates in this punning manner for the entrances of all of the Greek kings.

But so far as *Ubu Roi* is concerned, the song was probably brought to the reviewer's mind by three factors. Firstly, *Ubu Roi* seems to employ many of the stock characters and stock situations of comic

[King Ubu and Monsieur Jarry] . . . have presented at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre a harebrained play that would be spurned by the lunatics of Charenton. Here one finds nothing but a continuous explosion of Cambronne's word.<sup>612</sup> According to the young Jarry, though, that word no longer has five letters— it now has six of them. Something like “flut-re,” instead of “flute.” Remove this term from the five acts and there is no longer any *Ubu Roi*.

A similar addition makes this avant-garde theatre “avant-garde-robe,”<sup>613</sup> and its director, of course, is Lugué-Poe . . . de Chambre.<sup>614</sup> A toilet brush might have tidied-up the music of those extra “r”s, but had they all been scrubbed away for upsetting the play, then the play itself could have, without difficulty, been scrubbed for upsetting reason.

What was the scenery like? Would you believe it was a toilet? No, not quite. It was an infantile nightmare, where this poor man Gémier, whose playing is meant for greater things, and Madame France, whose talent deserves better, ran around foolishly. The decor was a great success, though, for a character with a long white beard whose purpose was to change the placards indicating the locales of the different scenes.

Hisses and whistles dominated the hall, for intelligence had not completely lost its rights among the spectators. Indeed, all this ruckus was entirely necessary to remunerate those who were absent from the stage.

Yuck! Let us burn some incense to cover the stench of this thing that we have been wafting around. And let us block our noses and “carens” . . . for M. Jarry says “carens.” Little prankster: go away!

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opera in general; secondly Ubu is a king; and thirdly, the final syllable of his name happens to be “*bu*.” Thus, use of this bit of song lyric would, for the contemporary reader, force an association of ideas about comic opera and about drunkenness in relation to Jarry's play. The message seems to be that the people who put on this production were drunk during every step of the production process. As for the use of Jarry's own name in the song, its final syllable at least rhymes with “*gris*,” which also signifies intoxication.

<sup>612</sup> “Cambronne's word”: Cambronne was one of Napoléons generals at Warterloo. Upon learning that his company was surrounded, his heroic response was “merde” [“shit”].

<sup>613</sup> “Avant-garde-robe.” Roughly translated: in front of the toilet. “Avant-garde” is readily understood, and a “garde-robe” is a primitive toilet in a castle, like an indoor outhouse.

<sup>614</sup> “Poé . . . de Chambre”: a homophone for “*pot de chambre*.” In English: “chamber pot.”

*In the same issue of LA PAIX—but in the “Premières” column—a serious-minded symbolist author, Georges Vanor, well-aware of the duties of an elder, also weighed in on Jarry's piece. Vanor would never have believed that, fifty years further on, people (even the most devoted “classics”) would care much more about Jarry than about himself.*

Monsieur Alfred Jarry, who is doubtless a grandchild of Lemice-Terrieux,<sup>615</sup> left the breast of his wet nurse yesterday in order to play a poor joke on the critics who had—before the fact—spoken somewhat about his dramatic work, and also in order to deceive the hundreds of people who came to hear *Ubu Roi*.

In a voice that sounded as though its possessor still needed to be burped after his porridge, the author lisped out some preliminary explanations. This was a totally useless precaution and something to which people generally pay no attention, especially not on the open-air trestle stages of the village fairs where M. Jarry must have sucked some dramatic milk. Oh, but how much I prefer the shoddy village wares of Lesage.<sup>616</sup>

I will not attempt to disentangle anything from the midst of this bedlam, nor extricate some symbol from the scatological adventures that the performers stammered out in Auvergnate dialect—which they did, undoubtedly, because they were Poles.

One regrets only that M. Gémier agreed to profane his established talent by embodying such an enormous imbecility. The more lamentable fact, though, is that any general interest which might have been inspired by the efforts of Lugné-Poé has now been completely overshadowed by this affair; it has terminated itself in the well-deserved booing of a public that does not enjoy such harsh treatment. If he had wished to test the degree of indulgence that can be asked of his audience, then the founder of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre must presently be well-

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<sup>615</sup> Lemice-Terrieux: homophone for “*Le Mystérieux*” [The Mysterious] and pseudonym of Paul Masson (1849-1897), who was renowned for playing large-scale practical jokes on Parisian society. He was particularly active from 1894-1896.

<sup>616</sup> Lesage: Alain-René Lesage (1668-1747), novelist and playwright of the Ancien Regime 1668-1747. Particularly noted for having written over a hundred pieces for the Théâtre de la Foire [fairground theatres], in various styles and of varying quality.

enlightened—though it would be prudent of him not to repeat the experiment.

At one point people were saying that M. Alfred Jarry was not responsible for the faithfulness of the performance for which he was being blamed, but that the players had suddenly been struck with madness when they came onto the stage.

Happily for the latter, unfortunately for the former, this talk came to nothing. The critics had been summoned and a segment of Paris had been affronted because one naughty joker had had the idea of reissuing the word of Cambronne—in a manner that was not even new—more than twenty times in a single scene.

Such performances hardly favor the rebirth of drama; nor imply the death of the Boulevard.

No, my dear Lugué, one plays this childishness only before the miserable brats who scribble in such Belgo-stupid magazines as *Le Coq-Rouge* [*The Red Rooster*], but one does not attempt to cause it to be taken seriously by the fervent and faithful admirers of l'Oeuvre.

*We know the terms in which Léon Bloy spoke of GIL BLAS, the paper to which he contributed: "The stinking and menacing managers of Gil Blas, . . . one of the three thug-managers of this whorehouse . . . where I am ashamed to belong, . . . the eunuchs of Gil Blas . . . will I never be freed from this job of endless vomiting? . . . this lavish disgrace, etc . . ." On December 11, this fashionable center-left newspaper printed the following account under the signature L.-B.-D.:*

Théâtre de l'Oeuvre—*Ubu Roi*, five-act dramatic comedy in prose, by Alfred Jarry.

I have often said that performances at private theatre clubs are incapable of being reviewed fairly and ethically—therefore there is no need to say this again. But if I now restate the impossibility of ever giving my opinion on this type of show, it is because the one presented yesterday to the guests of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre truly possessed everything necessary to deserve the loathing of even the least prudish

critic, he who believes that freedoms should be unlimited, even if they are disreputable.

In this particular case, though, I cannot be allowed my customary escape for delicate circumstances, namely, limiting myself to a summary of the play without judging it. It would misrepresent the author if I did not quote from his text some of the phrases he gives to his characters, phrases that he, himself, considers to be the essential characteristic of the work. But, I must confess, such citation is beyond my generosity for this reason: to treat the text of *Ubu Roi* with such respect, would be to treat my readers with great disrespect. Think as ill as you please of this cowardliness, describe it as idiotic, say that it is worthy of the basest villain, of the gauchest bourgeois. I cannot avoid it.

Yet to me it is something of a consolation that the reaction of many of my co-guests shows that I was not the only one un-charmed by the taste of ordure. They hissed, meowed, barked and blew whistles so continuously and with such energy that my [present] silence has a double excuse, for I find that, ultimately, I was able to hear only a few fragments of *Ubu Roi*.

One only needs to know that this King Ubu is a lowlife who, flanked by his equally villainous wife, spends all his time collecting enormous taxes for the sole purpose of reminding us, unless I am mistaken, that in politics every party is invariably steered and exploited by the worst scoundrels. And, again unless I am mistaken, it is in only the most colorful and merciless irony that the author pretends to work.

The guests at last night's show seemed, in general, to believe that M. Jarry was amusing himself at their expense and that he felt himself to be immune to these pranks that he played on his public. The word "fraud" was on nearly everyone's lips.

A less numerous faction of the audience, however, insisted that we take this author and his play seriously. They even went so far as to invoke Shakespeare and Rabelais in regard to *Ubu Roi*. But that is nonsense! Those authors would have been much more depthful.

*Edited by M. Bailby, LA PRESS, an evening paper (delivered by carrier pigeons)*

*whose "literary page mingles all the young authors most loved by the public." On December 12,*

*"A Spectator" notes:*

A few days ago we condemned the excessive zeal of the claque in certain theatres.

Yesterday, at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, the audience itself failed to give us an example of restraint and good manners. It is true that the play was in progress, but isn't the most natural and the most dignified protest simply to get up and walk out?

It is always regrettable to be present at such spectacles as the one that took place yesterday both on stage and especially among the audience.

*L'ÉVENEMENT* described itself as a "an important morning political and literary paper, one of the most widely circulated . . . keeping its readers up to date on art, literature, society and sports." Its name derived from V. Hugo. In it one "Sarcisque," a worthy emulator of Sarcey, wrote on 11 December:

Despite the late hour, I have just showered—an indispensable precaution after such a show. O my head! My head!

There is nothing to be said about this "comedy drama"—as M. Jarry's cambronnesque madness calls itself in the program—other than that the spectators were as flooded by the two syllables of Waterloo as Cambronne himself was by the European alliance.

One detail however: though Cambronne contented himself with five letters, M. Jarry has put six into the same word. In *Ubu Roi* the second syllable is "dre." But try as M. Jarry might to "air" [that is: to "r"] out the word, it still did not smell good.

M. Lugné-Poé was a very naughty boy on the day when he decided to produce this insanity. If one did not look to the bright side, the whole thing would have been nauseating. But the audience exercised its wit with such frequent interjections that enduring the evening was not too "beastly."

King Ubu was played by M. Gemier. I feel sorry for him. Whyever did he accept this nasty job? Undoubtedly it was the same reason that compelled him to leave the Ambigu. He explained: "The battle is at the Odéon . . . so I will go there." Yesterday the battle was at

the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre—and so was M. Gemier—but [this time] without abandoning the second Théâtre Français for its sake. Thus, when it is a question of playing a rather intoxicated king of Poland, M. Gémier is simultaneously of the Odéon and of the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre. This is the talent of being Ubu-iquitous.

I should describe for you some of the splendors of the scenery. It was of a Shakespearean simplicity. A single background came to represent, successively, anyplace that one wanted, according to the indications of a placard declaring to the spectators the specific locale. In the decor one finds, all at the same time: an owl, an elephant, a bat, a boa constrictor, some palm trees, a dog, a bed and a chamber pot . . . to mention only a few of the most important

Among the crowd someone was pleased enough to ennoble M. Lugné-Poe, by magnificently naming him “M. Lugné-*Pot-de-Chambre* [Chamber-Pot], nobility of the garde-robe!”<sup>617</sup> Another evening in the taste of this one and the subscribers of the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre will shout to him “mer . . . cy!”

*In “Petits Lendemain,”*<sup>618</sup> a regular column of *PARIS*, mouthpiece of “the republican union,” written by “C’ of N.” (sic), one reads the following:

A joke in very poor taste. There is no other word to characterize this performance by the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre.

If the author had intended to write something of any significance whatsoever, one must feel sorry for him—dementia and madness await him, and idiocy already has him in its grasp.

*Ubu Roi* is a type of pastiche of *Macbeth* but it is not even a parody. This is because the first necessity for writing in a parodic style is

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<sup>617</sup> “Nobility of the garde-robe.” Literally: “nobility of the castle toilet [*garde-robe*]” . . . but it is a pun on the French phrase “Nobility of the Robe” [*noblesse de robe*], a designation applied to certain aristocracy whose rank came from their appointment to particular administrative or judicial posts. In French culture this nobility is distinct from the “Nobility of the Sword” [*noblesse de épée*], which is based on inherited feudal estates (possession of land).

<sup>618</sup> “*Petits Lendemain*” translates roughly into English as “Mornings After.”

to have some wit. In what was shown to us yesterday, though, this was entirely lacking.

As for gaiety, it is replaced with a large dose of vulgarity. Cambronne's word . . . augmented with an extra R . . . is repeated an immeasurable number of times. And when, above the general clamor, one fellow was heard to shout "*à bas Lugné-Poé . . . de Chambre*"<sup>619</sup> the approval was nearly unanimous.

The author, who had introduced his play with a pre-show lecture, confessed at the end that he was pleased that nobody punched him in the face.

*LE PETIT PARISIEN*, the newspaper of concierges and "the most widely circulated newspaper in the world"—which supplied Jarry with a quotation on which he would comment in "*Questions of Theatre*"—printed the following on 11 December:

The administration of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre must be listening to bad advice. It could open its doors to some genuine authors, thereby making itself a useful institution. It prefers instead to house depravities that seem to have been written for occupants of a mental hospital.

Out of respect for our readers we would not even mention *Ubu Roi* had yesterday's performance not been marked by scandal. It has been a long while since such commotion was heard in a Parisian auditorium. The public protested with unusual violence while listening to this succession of sentences in which obscenity vied with incoherence.

This play—which was apparently intended to symbolize large social problems—is ultimately only a lamentable schoolboy prank. One might excuse it if the dialogue were not so particularly repugnant. One gains some idea of what has been dared by knowing that King Ubu, when at table with his dinner guests, serves to them the usual meal of people who enjoy eating excrement. And this dinner takes place on stage!

The whole is without a single word of wit!

Let us feel sorry for M. Gémier and his colleagues for having been required to interpret this insanity that is so enamored of filth.

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<sup>619</sup> "*À bas Lugne Poé . . . de Chambre*": "Down with Lugné Chamber-Pot!"

Just who do they think that they're kidding at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre ?

*The 20 December issue of LA CRITIQUE contained, as mentioned above, Jarry's introduction for Ubu Roi as well as the lithograph that he made for the program. Immediately after his article (and the contrast must have been deliberate) follows this extraordinary diatribe by "Criticus," which is included here in its entirety even though it does not appear in the press file kept by Jarry (he likely saved the issue itself). One imagines that it did not displease him to see this neighboring his own prose:*

During this unforgettable and tumultuous performance of *Ubu Roi* by the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, an astute and penetrating observation was made: "It is a literary Ninth of Thermidor."

The wretched comedy-drama of M. Alfred Jarry has therefore procured a historic evening for us, and it is strictly in this way that we want to regard it.

Idiocy has boundaries; the indecency of practical jokes has limits; and an entire era of symbols (more or less Ibsenesque) has led to this obscene and scatological alluvium against which the public has erected a levee of common sense.

Here is the plain unarguable fact. It is necessary to return to a previous era, it is necessary to abandon the symbolism that plays no part in the French genius; it is necessary to resume the halted march toward dignified realism; above all it is necessary to give voice to the deepest source of all emotion and of all truth by blending fine irony, that solaces and uplifts after long sorrows, with extreme passions in which arrogance can only laugh at its own maniacal intensification. The ideal or the reality, men as they should be or men as they are, but no symbols! Such, in short, is the feeling that so urgently manifests itself in the public today. Before responding to it, we must recall Musset's beautiful verse: *Ab! strike upon the heart, 'tis there that genius lies!*

But so many among the present generation have hearts lacking genius. They have not suffered enough, and they do not yet understand much [of anything].

Deluded by the idealized sensualism of Péladan,<sup>620</sup> enfevered by anarchic blood, their brains either empty or filled with vague dreamings, these spoiled children, exalted by hypocritical and cowardly double-meanings, have nothing in their innards except what Oscar Wilde may have left there. This conclusion of their mystico-symbolist attack is the most shameful chapter in our literary history. But the ending is a poetic justice. Let us remember the words of Pascal: “*Man is neither angel nor beast; the misfortune is that he who would act the angel acts the beast.*” The childishness of *Ubu Roi*—which the public, finally indignant and exasperated, has hissed so whole-heartedly a few evening ago—is merely the drop of water that has overflowed the vase. Yet this alone is a revolution.

As a plea for “extenuating circumstances” it has been said that this was only a Guignol show, a type of imitation of the *Pupazzis* [Italian puppets] who had such success a few years ago, and whose political allusions besmirched the Prefect of Rhône, who had them banned from Lyons.

But it is one thing for puppets to behave as men, it is another for men to behave as puppets. The distortion of human nature is painful enough, but what happens when one adds to it a distortion of the spirit? There is no relation between this deranged and miserable play and the excellent parodies of the Lyons puppets. Whether this turn-about is in order to save face or to hide it, the evening was a failure either way, for the anagram of Ubu is Ubu.

*The next review in this same issue of LA CRITIQUE was of [a revival of] Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's La Révolte (1870).<sup>621</sup> The reviewer, André Serph, could not stop himself from also speaking about Ubu:*

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<sup>620</sup> Péladan: Joséphin Péladan (1858 – 1918) French novelist, mystic, and occult scholar. From 1886 he was a leader of the effort to rebuild the Rosicrucian Brotherhood in France.

<sup>621</sup> Incidentally this production of *La Révolte* was being performed at the Odéon, it starred Firmin Gémier, and was directed by André Antoine. It is this very production that Gémier was “on loan” from so that he could play the role of Ubu at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre.

Fat hedonist bankers, and you, you blind children who fill the galleries of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, go and see *La Révolte*: it will restore your health; it will show you true devotion. The persuasion of “our Don Quixotes of mystery, long haired, flea-ridden, and ethereal” is emphasized . . . and also “the economical packing cloth and the suppression of luxury that M. Alfred Jarry suggested to the *Commission des Beaux-Arts*” is evoked. And, cryptically enough, someone declaimed: “There are symbols and there are symbols. I've grasped everything up until *Ubu* (why didn't it remain as clear as its beginning?). Ultimately everything depends on tone, on the clarity of expression. In the drawing of the imaginary the author must bring conscientiousness to equal the attention of the spectator.”

*A recent collaborator of Lugné-Poe, Camille Mauclair, while condemning the play from a conventional and bourgeois viewpoint, was more polite and almost subtle in his pomposity, with a tone of mildly protective and advisory amiability; his article appeared in the REVUE ENCYCLOPEDIQUE, number 172, tome VI. (This document is not included in the file kept by Jarry; it was received from René Druart.):*

There had been some buzz in advance of *Ubu Roi*: the performance took place, and was a disappointment. It was boring. Nothing is so lethal as failing to live up to expectations. To be fair, *Ubu Roi* did succeed in a few places, but it went on for much too long. We laughed for the first ten minutes, yawned after half an hour, and, after an hour, we hissed.

M. Alfred Jarry is a very young man, intelligent, well-read, and enamored of a difficult literature. He has published some opaque and mysterious excerpts in literary magazines, as any young fellow might. By unanimous consent, *Ubu Roi* is the work he has written with the greatest clarity and success. It is a satirical joke that he composed in school at around the age of seventeen. But after becoming a literary man, M. Jarry

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remembered this joke, took it up again, revised it, published it and the *Théâtre de l'Oeuvre* agreed to perform it. This was not such a good idea.

*Ubu Roi* is a Guignol farce, and on the trestle-stages of the Champs-Élysées or the Luxembourg Garden it might have amused the children; on a large stage, the effect is different. In the painting studios of olden days they used to invent similar farces, or unending laments that were told collectively while drawing with charcoal. There were some extremely comic episodes, but the painters never aspired to transport these to the stage and call them “dramatic-comedies.” Today one must be more thrifty with his wit, allowing nothing to go to waste. M. Jarry has proved that one does not always gain by this.

*Ubu Roi* is an allegory of the idiotic and ferocious bourgeois, and there really are some highly amusing scenes and stingingly incisive passages in the published text. But that all disappeared in performance; all of the subtleties—for there were some in this carnival!—were no longer perceptible; and all this business of fake-noses, speaking in vaudeville English or a gibberish of Belgian or Auvergniat has made a very poor showing, a complete miss. M. Jarry made every effort to be lavish with the ridiculous scenery, the huge signs placed beside the curtain to indicate the changes of locale, the abrupt shifts of subject and the word of Cambronne—for it was used in abundance—yet his play was a disappointment: was it talked about too much beforehand, or was it just not worthy of such attention? To be honest, I really don't know.

Nor can I explain *Ubu Roi* in brief. “The action,” as M. Jarry drolly informs us, “takes place in Poland, that is to say nowhere.” In twenty ludicrous episodes one sees M. Ubu and his wife quarrelling, dethroning the [Polish] king Wenceslas, pronouncing important legal judgments, oppressing the people, struggling against the Tsar who strives to avenge the dispossessed [Polish] prince, and fleeing across the Baltic Sea. One recognizes a series of Shakespearean parodies, Macbeth and Julius Caesar especially. And all this illustrated with ragged and comical supernumeraries and highly improbable props; but how to convey the details of so bewildering a work? I can say only this:

When read *Ubu Roi* was really quite funny, with interesting turns of phrase and a unique wit. It delighted some esteemed men of letters. In performance, though, the overgrown puppet-show was no longer “guignol” enough—but it was not quite “theatre” either—and they did not recognize their Ubu. If Villiers de l'Isle-Adam had made *Tribulat Bonhomet* into a drama I do not know what he would have made it, but I have the idea that one would nonetheless be able to recognize Villiers de l'Isle-Adam—this man who one journalist recently called “half a genius” and who was, if I may say so, “by God definitely a whole genius!” But the author of *Tribulat* knew that it is not easy to make anything whatsoever, not even a joke. One day, perhaps, M. Jarry will know this also,

and I wish it for him, for he lacks neither talent nor wit. He has been too hasty, though, and so has M. Lugué-Poe—and their evening has been too slow for the taste of the audience.

One might do some interesting things with the behaviors of guignol puppets, and the experiment was worth the trouble, though I believe that theatre of this type is better suited to English tastes than to our own. In London, minstrels mime and sing some extremely comical playlets in the bars and the music halls. *Ubu Roi* is merely a test of loyalty . . . and it has been loyally and royally hissed. The author took up his part with gusto; but something else might have been done with the idea. Only, after this evening, who will dare?

Fundamentally we are neither naïve nor lighthearted. It is not easy to move us by means of burlesque—and burlesque gets old so quickly! It seems that Scarron<sup>622</sup> was once very amusing; his contemporaries [in the 17<sup>th</sup> c.] thought so anyway, but today we begin to yawn if one speaks to us of [one so recent as] Paul de Kock<sup>623</sup> [1840s] and we would die of boredom if made to listen anew to Paulus<sup>624</sup> in his repertoire of two years ago. Last year's cabaret warble “*Z'homards*”<sup>625</sup> seems antediluvian to the today's boulevardier, for it is quite true that whoever follows fashion also fades with it. *Ubu Roi* is probably as successful as any joke. Chance recently led us to *l'Oeil crevé*<sup>626</sup> by Hervé: this too is quite successful for its type, however neither the one piece nor the other inspires anything other than boredom. This is not necessarily some failing in M. Lugué-Poe or in M. Jarry, who had wanted to make us laugh; but let us not think of this again until the next beautiful piece [done by the *Théâtre de l'Oeuvre*].

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<sup>622</sup> Paul Scarron (1610-1660): French poet, novelist, dramatist and pioneer in the genre of burlesque. His popularity was greatest from appx. 1645-1655.

<sup>623</sup> Charles Paul de Kock (1793-1871): French novelist, librettist, and dramatist. The majority of his writing is comic or burlesque. He was at the height of his popularity during the July Monarchy (1830-1848).

<sup>624</sup> Paulus (Jean-Paul Habans, 1845-1908): Comic singer particularly known for his satirical songs in the Parisian *cafés-concerts* of the 1880s and 1890s.

<sup>625</sup> “*Z'homards*” [The Lobsters]: a nonsense song introduced by the café-singer Dufor at the Moulin Rouge in 1895. It became overwhelmingly popular for a short period.

<sup>626</sup> *L'Oeil crevé* [The Pierced Eye]: 1867 comic operetta by Hervé, (Louis Auguste Florimond Ronger, 1825-1892), pioneer of the genre and forerunner to Jacques Offenbach

M. Gémier and Mme France championed their roles of Père and Mère Ubu with a fortitude and talent that comes as no surprise from these two excellent artists. For the others, a program as carnival-like as the play mixed all the names together without order: I must give up the idea of individually complimenting the tsar, the king Wenceslas, his son Bougrelas and the Polish soldiers, in addition to all those behind the scenes, who comported themselves valiantly. The evening was not a happy one for the *Théâtre de l'Oeuvre*: but Ibsen has spoiled us, and one cannot play such marvels at every performance. After a promising start *Ubu Roi* ended quite feebly—it simply fizzled out—it was an attempted experiment, and, all in all, let us congratulate M. Jarry for having attempted it so audaciously. And let us remind ourselves that if the author did not amuse us in the fashion that he intended, it undoubtedly amused him to have bothered the official critics (and so large a crowd) in order to bring them, dumbfounded, to his puppet show: and when the author rejoices, this is already something.

*Publishing the date as 22 Frimaire 105 (the manner of the true Republican)—this being 12 December in the old calendar—LA LANTERNE, which had just come under the direction of Aristide Briand and Emile Cornudet, together with such (ultra-progressive) radical-socialists as Pelletan and Viviani, solemnly excuses this avant-garde theatre, while admonishing it (in a brotherly fashion) not to spoil its reputation for serving Republican institutions (to which the editors' were unshakably devoted) and social progress. (Six months later Briand would be, with L. Bailby, a witness for Lugné-Poe in his duel with Mendès).*

Is this *Ubu Roi* that the *Théâtre de l'Oeuvre* performed yesterday evening a comedy-drama as some people have called it, or is it a puppet-show, as it has also been billed? The author seems inclined toward the second definition, if one may judge by the modest lecture that he offered to the public just before the start of the show.

The curtain being up, Ubu launches the first word. It is the famous word of Cambronne. And there you have it: the public is

forewarned. After this Ubu can allow himself whatever he likes, it being clear that his travels are plainspoken and “duty-free” [*en franchise*].

### **A (rough) analysis of the play**

Frankly, it is not Ubu’s bad manners that shock me, nor even the overall incoherence [of the play], rather it is the emptiness of these tiny scenes which succeed one another so rapidly without presenting any worthy ideas. The droll notions of the scenario—which were striking to those who had read it—produce almost no effect whatsoever. Most often these are clothed in barely a shred of dialogue, and, in truth, their comic value comes solely from the efforts of the performers.

I know that someone will say to me: this bareness is by design; king Ubu is a Guignol, he is a new Polichinelle, he needs only the prestige of legend in order to bring as much laughter to these overgrown children as the puppets bring to the little ones; it is a kind of pre-Raphealite jest sketched in lines that are intentionally sparse; only lightly did the author exhale when this creation escaped his innocently comic soul. Such cannot be the case here, however, for the author has, in many places, attempted to display wit and amusing irony—but of what exactly should his play’s hybrid style be accused if an un-enriched play is still preferable?

Has this play successfully deceived all those who read it in advance, as well as all those who wrote the promotional publicity? So I believe. And tomorrow’s opinions will be just as divided as yesterday evening’s audience: tumultuous, combative, curious, exploding with applause and protests, the laughter and whistling blended with bravos.

The actor Gémier has made of this king Ubu—of this sack of excrement and wine, of this little Polish Falstaff—an impressive creation, using all that the text allowed him and then some. The performers wore masks to play the piece, but let us lift M. Gémier’s to commend him.

These masks, if I have understood it correctly, were not meant to conceal the actors’ personality, but rather to create a harmony between the players and the play [which was] originally intended, it seems, to be done by puppets.

This evidently is what enticed the *Théâtre de l’Oeuvre* to produce the play—which it dealt with in a rather odd way, thinking that such treatment would create novel effects. We must accept this effort as an intermezzo in the series of important works that this daring and inquisitive theatre has already given—and will continue to give—to us during the course of the season.

*But in the evening paper LA PATRIE, “absolutely independent in political viewpoint and placing the defense of French interests above all else,” Henry de Gorsse involuntarily paid Jarry the nicest of tributes by elevating him beyond the (then) famous Lemice-Terrieux (Paul Masson). The word “pitifully” at the end betrays this critic’s lack of thought, which might otherwise remain in doubt.*

Finally, last night, *Ubu Roi* was performed by the *Théâtre de l’Oeuvre*—and this is wonderful because now, I hope, we will no longer have to hear about this guignolesque comedy by M. Alfred Jarry, which, for more than two months, has assaulted our ears incessantly.

Whether it was sublime or not—and, personally, I believe that it is just a big fraud—I will not attempt to describe (an impossible thing) nor discuss (an absurd thing) this madhouse of a “Shakespearean” effort which, if it were the brainchild of this sad fellow Lemice-Terrieux, would have been his most brilliant creation.

I do not believe it is possible to mock the public in a more lunatic or excessive manner than this; and, so far as it concerns me, from now on I refuse to give M. Jarry any credibility whatsoever as an author.

But this is enough said of a work in which the actors performed—and failed pitifully—as emotionless puppets (as advertised) in the midst of jeering and booing.

### 3: The Observers

*There were however some journalists who had a good time and dared to say so, or at least they allowed this to be understood, or at the very least they did not protest. Some of them*

may have been closer to *Ubu* than Bauër himself. And all gave their reviews while seeming (and being) entirely superficial or indifferent.

In the column “Théâtres à Soirée Parisienne” [Parisian Evenings at the Theatre], a regular feature of *LA PATRIE*, the quill of Coquerico gives us:

If you have experienced profound pleasure while riffling through the 1565 edition of the comical dreams of master Alcofribas Nasier,<sup>627</sup> edited by Richard Breton<sup>628</sup> of the *Ecrevisse d'Argent* [The Silver Crayfish], rue Saint-Jacques, then *Ubu Roi* will delight you. If, on the contrary, O friend of the honorable art of quai Malaquais,<sup>629</sup> you have experienced only contempt for the doodles of this happy drinker, then M. Alfred Jarry's play will be of no worth to you whatsoever.

It was a wild and eventful evening. After a short lecture given by the author, the curtain is raised. Decor by Serusiez. Stage left, in a sweltering landscape, some palm trees, a snake winds itself around one of them. At the back, facing the public, a hilly terrain adorned with a few thin trees; in the azure sky it is snowing; in the very center, a chimney; over this, a pendulum flanked by candelabrum. The chimney and pendulum, cut precisely down the middle, function as a door of two hinged sections. Above, silhouetted against a red disc—the sun of winter—an elephant in profile. Stage right, a bed and its indispensable nocturnal vase . . .

— Ah, the illustrious chamber pot, this signifies . . .

— We continue. This singular decor will serve for the entire performance. As in the time of Shakespeare, an underling will arrive to

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<sup>627</sup> Alcofribas Nasier: anagram and *nom de plume* of the Renaissance writer François Rabelais (1494–1553), known as a writer of fantasy, satire, the grotesque, and bawdy jokes and songs. He was a particular favorite of Jarry.

<sup>628</sup> Richard Breton (1520-1572): a sixteenth century printer, whose shop was located on the rue Saint-Jacques

<sup>629</sup> Quai Malaquais: a very short street along the bank of the Seine in the quartier of Saint Germain in the sixth arrondissement of Paris. The entrance to the *L'École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts* is located here.

present a placard indicating the place—forest, sea, palace, cavern—where the action unfolds.

— Pardon, but is this serious?

— Music: zing, zing, badazing, boum boum! The characters appear: the first word that we hear is . . . the word that Cambronne once said and that Hugo has glorified. Astonishment, stupor, hilarity. They continue: Monsieur Ubu and madam Ubu behave in the manner of puppets. The public wonders whether this is a challenge. Yes? No? Does the play mock them? Is it sincere? Gémier, under the pear-shaped mask of Ubu, is entirely good; Madame France, laughing at the storm, is excellent. The short scenes follow one another quite quickly. The actors speak with the accents of Belgium, of the Auvergne, of Alsace . . . and the first word of the play returns again every other minute. The public becomes angry and shouts it back. The players come and go, they run all over the stage. The audience applauds, hisses, laughs. They call out to the artists: Bravo! This is shameful! Superb! Idiot! You would not understand Shakespeare either! *etc.* . . . And *Ubu Roi*, in the midst of this general racket, manages (with numerous interruptions) to be performed. If the author had dreamed of a raucous debut, he must be well-pleased.

*On 12 December in LE JOUR, "Intérim" presented this ponderous but even-*

*handed essay:*

M. Jarry is going to see a flood of ink concerning his play: detractors and admirers will fight it out in a very undignified manner, particularly if they have collected some of that sludge which oozed from the work to the point of splattering the audience.

Be assured that it is not the intrinsic value or the philosophical range that will be debated; rather, it is the brutally free use of vulgarity, the willfully childish framework that discards any symbolic thought while emphasizing a formal intent to break with all traditions by creating a new type of art.

The main point, then, is to know if art can adapt itself to this shocking obscenity in which the filthy word erupts again and again and is synonymous with the act of negation, in which the exclamation of a half-wit beast stirs everything to mud. One wonders if the creation of a work—if not a lifelike work then at least an artistic work—can be

achieved by cramming together all the atrocities of vicious appetites and shaping them into a unique character.

In actual fact, herein lies no obstacle to the creation of art. If one were to cut himself off from natural politeness and respectful habits, then he would not know how to withhold from his brainchild—inspired by observation, enhanced by theorization, developed and invigorated by imagination—the animating breath needed to form a new type. Without question, whole worlds lay between the Père Ubu of M. Jarry and the immortal characters who received flesh and spirit from such potent geniuses as Cervantès, Rabelais, and Molière; but, given its proper proportion, one cannot deny that M. Jarry has created an entity who, though not a paragon, nonetheless introduces a new something-or-other that lives and struggles furiously during its short existence.

Thus, it is entirely unfair to argue that there is no worth at all in M. Jarry's new play, and to deliberately refuse any serious consideration of it. It is similarly out of proportion to push the opposite extreme, to make of it a panacea to remedy all the ills of society; for, compared to a pamphlet or a satire, it cannot have nearly so potent an effect

With axe in hand this bad-mannered crackpot of a Père Ubu hits the road, smashing traditions and greedily stuffing himself with the remains; brutal destroyer of all order, he wallows in the filth amassed by his savage and unfathomable self-interest; in his beefheadedness he rebuilds nothing on the ruins for which he exerts himself so fiercely and unrelentingly; his cowardice suddenly appears when his female, Mère Ubu, urges him to kill King Wenceslas and put himself on the throne; he fears for his verminous skin and finds it more prudent to charge Captain Bordure and his thugs with this daring deed; to encourage them he gets them drunk and, diabolic madman, sprinkles them with a toilet brush. Wenceslas is slaughtered and Père Ubu, side by side with his female, pollute the royal throne.

No longer constrained, he passionately devotes himself to his unappeased bestial appetites: with the nobles executed, he takes all their riches; the magistrates being done away with, he acts according to the law of his own mental disorder; whatever his belly covets it consumes, shamelessly, through killing and killing again.

— “Now come on, Père Ubu, what kind of a king are you?” his wife exclaims, “you’re massacring everybody.”

— “Oh, merdre!”

— “No more judges!? No more financiers!?”

— “Fear nothing, my sweet child! I myself will go from village to village and collect the taxes!”

And he does just as he says. Only he triples the taxes, demanding harshly of the terrified peasants: “Pay up! Or I’ll put you in my sack with torture and decapitation of the neck and head! Oddshornikins! I am the king, aren’t I?”

Bled dry, the peasants have no recourse but to rebel, to declare Bougreas, son of Wenceslas, as their king, and, with the aid of the king of the Muscovites, to overthrow the usurper.

Deposed and hunted, Ubu boards a ship and arrives at Spanish shores. There he will end his days, an honest bourgeois in a lavishly overpaid sinecure—and his carcass will not rot away in some mass grave that would be forever disgraced by it. Nevertheless, because of Ubu’s indomitable personality, one hopes that a statue in the place Cambronne will commemorate him after his death.

Although the author’s view is that the actors should be impersonal puppets who struggle frantically in a setting representative of “Nowhere,” it is fitting, nevertheless, to congratulate M. Gémier and Madame France on their clever characterizations and on the considerable exertions they made to meet the demands of such a performance.

*The 11 December issue of LE SOIR, however, did not make a tragedy of the thing:*

The *répétition générale* of *Ubu Roi* at the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre was quite rowdy. There was howling, whistling, and hissing. Cries of “Bravo!” were mingled with cries of “This way to the exit!” often delaying the show for quite a while. Some of the scenes had to be cut, including that of the bear, which certain spectators demanded vociferously.

This play—which must have Cambronne rejoicing in his grave—stirred up some unprecedented protests, and tonight’s performance promises to be equally festive.

*In the 12 December issue of LE NATIONAL (not the paper founded by M.*

*Thiers, but a homonym),<sup>630</sup> Max Maurey wrote:*

If it really brings good luck, the author is a truly fortunate man. Never since the *Le marchand de merde*<sup>631</sup> was performed way back in the Renaissance has this stuff been talked about on stage. Yesterday they literally rolled around in it—and joyously so. M. Jarry’s play could well have been subtitled “*A Drama Based on Merde.*”

The scenery depicting the land of “Nowhere” is quite preposterous and would be perfectly suited to the most incoherent of Hervé’s operettas. To the left is a large bed with symbolic night-vase beneath; to the right, painted on the wall, are a gallows, views of the sea and of the wooded countryside; at the back is a chimney with pendulum and candelabrum, the chimney, however, opens down the middle to serve as a door.

This room—or rather this latrine, as the matter discussed here is so very fragrant—is, by turns, the home of Père Ubu, the palace of the King, a cave in Lithuania, a battlefield, a forest, a-whatever-it-is that permits the vision of Ubu fleeing from the forest, and a boat. A placard hung at the fore-stage announces all of these changes as they arrive. This is, of course, quite Shakespearian.

The music accentuating the entrances and exits of the characters is—as one might have expected—exactly the sort that is heard at the fair.

Père Ubu, Mère Ubu, Bougrelas, Captain Bordure, the (truly incoherent) Tsar, etc., etc., spend these five acts shouting and gesticulating, fantastical puppets giving the sense of an incredible apparition.

In the hall, the spectators applaud and hiss, they laugh and get angry.

— “It comes from Shakespeare,” say some.

— “From Lugne-Chamber-Pot,” reply others.

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<sup>630</sup> The original NATIONAL was a daily paper founded in 1830 by Adolphe Thiers, Armand Carrel, and François-Auguste Mignet as the mouthpiece of the liberal opposition to the Second Restoration. Over the next two decades its politics shifted toward Republicanism and Socialism. It was outlawed in 1851.

<sup>631</sup> *Le marchand de merde* [The Shit Merchant]: an early eighteenth century French fairground play by Thomas Simon Gueullette (1683-1766).

The hall becomes more and more unruly. No matter how loudly Père Ubu shouts the word of Cambronne—which, in this case, is clearly the right word for the situation—a real effort is required to hear him.

The role of Père Ubu was done by Gémier. Whatever this play may be, whatever the intent of the author may have been—whether he had wanted to put a symbol of hostility to society on the stage or, more simply, to make fun of the audience—it is impossible to overly congratulate Gémier, the extraordinary and marvelous artist. Thanks to him, with his gestures and voice of a puppet, Père Ubu is a remarkable monster in his hideous unthinking ferocity.

Mère Ubu as created by Madame France was perfect; Messieurs Lugné-Poé and Hollot, and Madame Irma Perrot also contributed to the gaiety of the performance.

*In the December 11 issue of LE MATIN, Henry Céard gave a fairly good*

*description:*

“Puppet-inspired comedy” [*comédie guignolesque*], said the text of *Ubu Roi*, printed in sixteenth century characters, somewhat in the manner of the pranks published long ago by the vendors of popular books in the city of Troy.

“Puppet-inspired comedy,” repeated the program distributed at the theatre. The scenery, in turn, accentuated the village-fair spirit of the three acts, since, with a deliberate bias toward nonsense, it represented a bedroom in which some trees were flourishing. Beside these a hanged man grimaced at the end of his gallows rope; and the chimney at the rear opened brazenly, made practical as a double door to allow the actors to come and go.

Performed herein was a kind of *Macbeth* turned into farce. Citizen Ubu, together with his wife, kills the King of Poland, seizes the throne, commits all sorts of excesses, makes war on the Russians, and is, in his turn, conquered and booted from power. A placard, often upside down or misspelled, announced the many changes of location; and the living interpreters imitated the gestures of wooden actors, including the phony dramatic intonation given by the impresario who dances them at the end of a string. Also they spoke from beneath masks. Thus the audience

found itself watching a parody of the type of puppet show encountered at a village market or a local celebration.

One might question the author's extravagance of regressing dramatic art to so crude a form. This, however, was not the issue over which the quarrel started. The subscribers of the *Théâtre de l'Oeuvre*—always questing after symbols and certain that, at this theatre, only the most sublime things are performed—sought to discover in the author's joke a deep meaning and a philosophical weight that he did not choose to provide. After some minutes of patience, they became annoyed to have found nothing . . . and since everything was wanting, they began to demonstrate their disappointment with violence.

Some others, even more contemplative, feigned to understand nevertheless. They claimed that the story—schematic by design and rather similar to some tale of Mother Goose—was Shakespearean. Busy with their tasks of admiration and of diligently trying to discover absent beauties, they felt themselves to be insulted by the protests of their neighbors. They therefore counter-protested in the name of grand Art in peril. Wherefrom the final third of the audience, delighted by this manner of reproducing the violent spectacles of the fairground theatres, experienced an intensification of merriment. The three-way conflict resulted in a tremendous racket. Last night's performance will undoubtedly remain legendary in the annals of troubled nights at the theatre, and in the history of famous hoaxes.

M. Alfred Jarry must have laughed heartily at the performance that inspired the spectators to rage and roar with indignation, enthusiasm, or maniacal laughter. The real show was performed by the audience, and it would have passed for first-rate comedy had it been briefer. In the midst of all the tumult the actors bustled about with wonderfully puppet-like movements. M. Gémier and Madame France formed a royal couple of comic perfection; while the many small parts were played with deliberate barbarousness and simplicity, thereby creating some sense of the rough-hewn performance of satires and mystery plays of the Middle Ages.

*In a brief article in the 5 December issue of LE FIGARO, Raitif de la Bretonne—*

*a pseudonym for Jean Lorrain, whose writing had been performed at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre—*

evokes a discussion of literature occurring in the intermission of Eugène Brieux's *l'Evasion* at the Comédie Française:

At the *répétition générale* of *l'Evasion*,<sup>632</sup> after the first act:

- But the play proves nothing.
- Wait for the third act, you're being too hasty.
- You believe they must inherit the parents' fate?
- That depends.
- There are persuasive statistics.
- And there are also others in support of the contrary.
- As many as you like, that speech about the doctors rings true enough.<sup>633</sup>
- Unfortunately, I've heard it before in *The Obstacle*.<sup>634</sup>
- Of course! This piece is nothing but Daudet.
- Both the father and the son: *L'Obstacle*, Alphonse; and *Les Morticoles*,<sup>635</sup> Léon.
- Personally I prefer *Les Revenants*.<sup>636</sup>
- It's already old-fashioned to approve Ibsen.
- You're behind the times, boss,<sup>637</sup> Jarry is the latest thing now.

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<sup>632</sup> *L'Evasion* [*The Escape*]: Didactic 1896 play by Eugène Brieux (1858-1932) satirizing popular misconceptions of heredity.

<sup>633</sup> “. . . that speech about the doctors. . .”: the *raisonneur* [reasoner] character observes that in modern times society has abandoned religious superstition for the sake of a fatalistic and superstitious belief in heredity and medical science. In his view the religious superstition is preferable because it makes for fewer victims.

<sup>634</sup> *L'Obstacle* [*The Impediment*]: An 1890 play by Alphonse Daudet (1840-1897) whose plot depends on a father's acquired mental disorder as an obstacle to his son's marriage. In this play it is presumed that the son will develop the same disorder.

<sup>635</sup> *Les Morticoles* [*The Morticoles*]: An 1894 novel by Léon Daudet (1867-1942), son of Alphonse, a bitter and satirical caricature of the overinflated contemporary medical profession in France. Swiftian in character, the novel is set on the Island of the Morticoles, an insane hypochondriac society who worship doctors.

<sup>636</sup> *Les Revenants* [*Ghosts*]: Henrik Ibsen's (1828-1906) play, written in 1881, was first produced in Paris in 1890 at Antoine's Théâtre Libre. Like *l'Evasion* and *l'Obstacle*, *Les Revenants* takes heredity as a principal subject. It was revived in 1894 at the Théâtre de l'Odéon.

<sup>637</sup> “Boss” [“*Chef*” (*de claque?*)]: This honorific suggests that the speakers of the dialogue are members of the official claque of the Comédie Française: the “*chef*” and an ordinary *claqueur*.

- Personally I find something quite troublesome in the work of M. Brieux: it is too easy to recognize the authors behind it. Octave Feuillet<sup>638</sup> and Henry Becque<sup>639</sup> shaped his *Bienfaiteurs*,<sup>640</sup> today it is Daudet and Ibsen who appear in his play.
- In that case, perhaps, it should be called *L'Invasion*.<sup>641</sup>
- Speaking of that . . . who was so sulky because of Charcot,<sup>642</sup> just when *Suzanne*<sup>643</sup> was being published?
- Oh, so it's the story of . . . ?
- Shh, don't speak, one shouldn't say.
- Ah, of course, just as *l'Astre Noir*<sup>644</sup> was the story of . . .

These novels of which they speak . . . to what family do they belong?<sup>645</sup>

<sup>638</sup> Octave Feuillet (1821-1890): French novelist and dramatist who was at the height of his powers during the 1860s. Elected to the *Académie Française* in 1862.

<sup>639</sup> Henry Becque (1837-1899): French dramatist whose major works were written and performed during the first two decades of the Third Republic.

<sup>640</sup> *Les Bienfaiteurs* [*The Benefactors*]: Satirizing “fashionable charity” and performed earlier in 1896, *Les Bienfaiteurs* is another of Brieux's didactic plays.

<sup>641</sup> *L'Invasion*: In one sense it is the opposite of “*Evasion*” [Escape], the title given by Brieux to his play. “Invasion” in French has many of the same connotations as in English, plus an additional medical implication of “infection” that adds another layer to the pun.

<sup>642</sup> Charcot: Jean-Baptiste Charcot (1867-1936), son of the famous neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893). Jean-Baptiste was a physician and medical researcher until 1898, at which point he turned to a new career in polar exploration. He was also a schoolmate and friend of Léon Daudet, though in 1892 they quarreled and never spoke again. In November 1896 Charcot married Daudet's ex-wife, Jeanne Hugo, granddaughter of Victor Hugo. Around this same time he was also made chief of the Sorbonne medical clinic.

<sup>643</sup> *Suzanne*: A work of erotic fiction by Léon Daudet, which also possesses serious philosophical overtones. It was published in *Le Journal* in serial form during November 1896. *Suzanne* tells of incestuous lovers traveling in Spain and longing to experience something more meaningful than mechanistic quotidian existence. Its publication coincided with the remarriage of Daudet's former spouse Jeanne Hugo, granddaughter of Victor Hugo, to Daudet's former friend Jean-Baptiste Charcot.

<sup>644</sup> *L'Astre Noir* [*The Black Star*]: 1893 Novel by the (then) 26 year old author Léon Daudet. It is a satire on the egotism of genius, and its central character, Malauve, is easily identifiable as Victor Hugo. The publication of this caricature of his wife's beloved grandfather hastened the conclusion of the Daudets' already difficult marriage (they divorced in January 1895).

<sup>645</sup> “. . . to what family . . . ?”: Lorrain is punning here on the word “family.” His dialogue implies that *Suzanne* tells a veiled story of Jeanne Hugo (Daudet's ex-wife) just as *l'Astre Noir* told a veiled story of Victor Hugo. Thus they are novels of the Hugo family. But Lorrain's question also asks to which genre (i.e.

#### 4: The Attack of *Le Figaro*

*There still remain the clippings from LE FIGARO. Long, alas, but quite neatly pasted together by Jarry—with flaps that open and shut! These are the attacks of Henry Fouquier. Born and raised in Marseilles, this committed Parisian, nearing his sixtieth year, was extremely conventional in every way, though he fancied himself as having a hint of eclecticism. At one time he had occupied some important posts in the Ministry of the Interior (1871-1873) and later served briefly as a deputy in the National Assembly (1889), but thereafter he channeled his inexhaustable energy exclusively into journalism. He was particularly appreciated by the bourgeois public for his “common sense” and—though it is difficult to believe—also for the elegance of his style (his readers mistook conventional clichés for witty wordplay). Repulsed by the lack of discipline in any domain whatsoever, and for reasons of personal rivalry, he wanted to cause a downfall for Henry Bauër whom he considered to be an “anarchist.” He therefore took advantage of Bauer’s foolhardy comments regarding Ubu Roi and attacked with a vengeance. The comparison with Ubu (not so incorrect, really: see our comments above) had its effect. Bauër soon lost his position at the ECHO DE PARIS, and Fouquier replaced him there. In spite of the slowness of these texts, we commit to reproduce them*

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“family”) of literature these novels belong, which is to some extent a legitimate question. *Suzanne*, for instance, can be seen as erotic fiction, or philosophy, or satire, or travel literature . . . and such genre crossing did, in fact, raise some contemporary eyebrows.

here, partly for their significant absence of understanding, but most especially because they are at the origin of the myth of the LITERARY TERROR.

On 11 December 1896, in the "Theatres" column:

The day before yesterday, at the end of the *répétition générale* of *Ubu Roi*, during the uproar of indignant hissing and whistling, a fellow critic, one who particularly honors our profession by his talent and by that courteous benevolence which, much more than the sarcasm expressed in "pannings," is the true mark of independence and impartiality, said to me: "We should say no word at all of hoaxes such as this, and rather than arranging some counter-plot, let us give a judgment of silence." Such is not my opinion, however, and I wish to explain my reasons.

During the past fifteen years there has been a definite movement with regard to dramatic art. Even here the thing has been noted and studied a hundred times—quite recently, in fact—and this spirited movement has some good points. It would be lamentable to ignore it, to refuse to participate in it, or to fail to aid it, for it involves some real seriousness and legitimacy. As I like to recall, it was in an article here in *Le Figaro*, that I first spoke of the Théâtre Libre and of the initiatives taken by M. Antoine. It would have been extremely regrettable not to keep the public informed of all the efforts of the so-called "fringe" theatres. Out of these fringe theatres have come at least a dozen artists whose talent—readily seen today on the regular stages—is beyond question. In these theatres we have witnessed some works from abroad whose merits shine through, even in spite of the dark smoke of the censers swung by the heavy hands of incense bearers who are sometimes quite simpleminded. Additionally, from these fringe theatres have come some authors whose works—controversial enough to inspire debate even now—are of very high value.

Even at the price of some like *Ubu Roi*, it is good to have known and to have made the acquaintance of *La Tante Léontine*,<sup>646</sup> *Les Fossiles*,<sup>647</sup>

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<sup>646</sup> *La Tante Léontine* [Aunt Leontine]: Prose comedy by Maurice Boniface and Édouard Bodin, performed at Antoine's Théâtre Libre on 2 May 1890. The story concerns the attempt of a wealthy retired prostitute to purchase respectability.

etc., etc. . . . Therefore there is no reason to exclude these fringe theatres from critical consideration. But if this movement deserves our attention, then it is our duty to prevent it from being run by practical jokers, certifiable lunatics, or wicked, self-interested, pretentious snobs. In every field, every true friend of progress must guard it against those who ruin it—those whose strenuous stupidities create reactionaries. Yesterday, at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, one spectator shouted out “long live Monsieur Scribe!” Will this reproach be understood? I do hope so, as this evening of *Ubu Roi* appears to have a considerable symbolic importance. The meaning, in my opinion, seems quite good: it is the triumph of enlightened and progressive common sense over gross stupidity, of true art over the caricature of art.

Before the raising of the curtain in this overcrowded hall—for, alas!, hearing a rumor that the work was scandalous, the mob rushed to be there—the author explained his comedy to us in a short lecture. Of that lecture, not a single word could be heard. However, it had also been distributed in print.

*[In truth, Fouquier is mistaken: the lecture was very different from the printed text that was distributed, and which appears for the first time in this journal].*

And here are the main points of this explanation:

“Ubu,” says M. Jarry, “often speaks about three things, all equally important in his mind: *physic*, which is nature as contrasted to art, a minimum comprehension as contrasted to a maximum cerebration, the reality that is agreed upon by everybody to the hallucinations of intelligent men, Don Juan to Plato, existing to thinking, scepticism to belief, medicine to alchemy, and the army to a duel—and, parallel to this, *phynance*, which is public acclaim as opposed to the contentment of oneself for oneself alone, exemplified by those who write literature to suit the taste of the ignorant masses as opposed to the discerning understanding of the intelligent—and, parallel to this, *M[erdre]*.”

Ought I to be taken for a fool? (For some this is already the practice, though that is hardly important). I confess that, except for the last term—which is perfectly clear—to me this philosophy seems obscure and the symbolism unsatisfactory. I will, however, try to say something of this ill-formed play, *Ubu Roi*, though I will avoid the nearly bottomless depths that one imagines for it, and which it may seem to possess for

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<sup>647</sup> *Les Fossiles* [The Fossils]: Prose drama by François de Curel, performed at Antoine’s Théâtre Libre on 29 November 1892. The play deals with incest and the aristocracy.

simple people who have not passed through that “debraining machine” which figures in the work. All in all, insofar as the plot is concerned, it is a vulgar parody of *Macbeth*.

### A quick analysis of the play

So here it is: all these fellows whose various guignolesque deformations we witness—and I regret to say that this is the bold innovation promised by M. Jarry—are merely operetta stock characters. We have the idiot King, the prince who plays with a hoop, General Boom<sup>648</sup> . . . in short, we have the entire second-hand store bought at cut rate from the flea market of overused repertoire. Only Ubu himself can claim to be a new caricature. In reality, he is Polichinelle,<sup>649</sup> a greedy pig, a miserly, cowardly and cruel crossbreed of the English character Punch<sup>650</sup> (whose mask the author has borrowed), M. Prud’homme<sup>651</sup> and Mayeux.<sup>652</sup> If you want to find a satire in this nonsensical garbage, take it as a satire of Tyranny. As for the language, it is a superficial pastiche of the language of Rabelais, with the filth especially featured and lovingly repeated. The coarse word—which was turned sublime on one occasion when said by Cambronne into the face of death—is repeated here in regard to everything, making the farce vilely scatological with an uncleanliness that is simply too easy. “Don’t you understand Shakespeare?” said an enthusiast, for Shakespeare is here somewhat. He is evoked by the fact that the scenery has been replaced (quite

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<sup>648</sup> General Boom: As the name implies, Boom is a blustering *miles gloriosus*. He is remembered particularly from Jacques Offenbach’s 1867 operetta *La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein* [The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein].

<sup>649</sup> Polichinelle: the French version of Mr. Punch (see below). One puppet variation of the character appeared in Lyon in the early 19th century under the name “Guignol.”

<sup>650</sup> Mr. Punch: English puppet version of the commedia dell’arte Pulcinella. He has a long beaklike nose and a vicious and crafty temperament. Often he pretends to be too stupid to know what is going on, or else he physically beats other characters.

<sup>651</sup> Joseph Prud’homme: A caricature of bourgeois-ness introduced by Henry Monnier in his 1830 *Scènes de Province*. Prud’homme is fat, foolish, conformist, and moralizing. The character inspired many stories, illustrations and literary works throughout the nineteenth century.

<sup>652</sup> Mayeux: Mayeux is a hunchbacked dwarf. Like Prud’homme, he is a stock figure who was often used by writers and artists in the creation of social satires. This character appeared throughout the nineteenth century, but flourished most during the July monarchy.

economically) by printed signs, and Rabelais is present only through the word about which I have already said too much. But—what might one expect?—upon leaving the theatre, this word was all that could be heard. Perhaps it was the opinion of the spectators, now happily vanishing in the open air . . . Is it necessary to add that the actors, under their masks, have done themselves a real disservice by running around to perform puppet gymnastics in the emptiness of this pretentious rubbish? To me the only name worth mentioning is that of M. Gémier, who was obligingly—and perhaps unwisely—lent by the Odéon for this “artistic effort” . . . for if he takes the aroma of the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre back with him to an official theatre of the nation of France . . . would this, somehow, bring great joy to the Odéon?

Yet in spite of the fatigue of a long and tedious farce, and the revulsion of its incredible filthiness, I say again that last night’s visit to the theatre was, for me, excellent. In spite of the exaggerated applause from an overenthusiastic band of long-haired aesthetes aided by their head-banded *botticellienne* girlfriends, the audience—the real audience—has done justice to the piece. If this was a prank being played on the public, they refused to go along with it. If they were asked, in all seriousness, to admire a “new art,” they have refused to accept it. On this evening, as it seemed to me, there was a sort of deliverance—a literary Ninth of Thermidor.<sup>653</sup> At the very least, this night has begun the end of the Terror-like condition that has been dominating the literary world. The booing, whistling, and hissing has three-quarters overthrown a certain symbolic tyrant who comes to mind wearing the features of *Ubu Roi*, whom he resembles in several ways. Like Ubu he is fat, fearsome to the weak, full of impudence, greedy for power, grasping for social position, making a terrible noise in the world, and wanting to overthrow everything to take all for himself. This ideal tyrant, by whom many have been subjugated, is a blend of Jocrisse,<sup>654</sup> the idiot servant, and Homais,<sup>655</sup> the over-inflated windbag. Empty of ideas, but stuffed full of

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<sup>653</sup> Ninth of Thermidor (27 July 1794): The date on which the Revolutionary Convention turned against Maximilien Robespierre. For a fuller explanation of the happenings on this date see Appendix A, note 8. For his part, Fouquier sees this moment as the symbolic end of the Reign of Terror, though, in actual fact, the Terror intensified significantly when Robespierre was removed from the equation. Soon after this, though, it burned itself out through sheer intensity and lack of skilled direction.

<sup>654</sup> Jocrisse: a stock character of French comedy since the seventeenth century, Jocrisse is a thoroughly idiotic household servant.

<sup>655</sup> Homais: A character in Flaubert's 1856 novel *Madame Bovary*. He is a small town apothecary. Though poorly educated and of limited intellect, the character is pretentious and has a hugely inflated ego.

his own importance—the same as Ubu’s appetite—this tyrant of the intellect experienced one flash of insight: the realization that it is possible to make an empire for oneself simply by relying on human stupidity. In order to lead a herd of fools it suffices to persuade them that anything new (or said to be so) is superior, that anything crude is strong, that anything obscure is deep, and that anyone who does not understand this is an out-of-date half-witted idiot. Hearing this, the herd obeys, follows, and cheers. And for some years now this abstract, gibberish-spouting, disconnected tyrant—this literary Ubu—has been terrorizing the snob herd, fashioning them into a troop of cronies who have, in turn, been terrorizing the masses. But this time they demanded too much indulgence, depended too much upon the docility of the crowd. The public has become enraged—and it is with great joy that I witnessed the revolt.

*Two days later—this was a Sunday—H. Fouquier dealt with the theme of “Literary Terror”:*

Some lines concerning a question of general interest, those with which I ended my review of the unforgettable *Ubu Roi*, have earned me a number of letters for which I thank my correspondents, both known and unknown. Of these letters, I will save only this one:

I am very happy that a large part of the public is passionate about matters of theatre and it is well known that dramatic literature—being troubled and faltering—is currently traversing an unfortunate crisis. But I have no complaint about this crisis: as all similar crises, it is comparable to those growing pains from which young people come away stronger and more grown-up.

**A summary of well-known things:**

Increasingly, during the past dozen years, the public has aspired to something new. They wish for this and they seek it out. Among the

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He is also cowardly, irresponsible, extremely status conscious, and enthusiastic about anything “progressive.”

critics, those who are called “conservative” by the polite, and “out-of-date” by the rude and unjust—“the ignorant” as they say in Montmartre—are the first to share these sentiments of the public. They experience these same desires as the crowd, with their sole reservation being that some two or three essential requirements of theatre are not forgotten by the innovators.

And for the theatre it is a good condition that, if everyone is sick, then nobody thinks of opposing the search for the cure.

All would have turned out for the best, according to the law of progress, had not a sect of literary revolutionaries arrived among us, who, like all revolutionaries, elected, among the critics, some leaders whom they “force to follow them,” as Ledru-Rollin's melancholy saying goes.<sup>656</sup> Among these revolutionaries can be found some honest folk who have been converted and who are ridiculous with the serenity of a quiet conscience simply because their brains are made this way. But the vast majority of these maniacs consists of the powerless, the envious, and the stupid.

**Development of these three points for those who have not understood:**

Now these anarchists of art—for music has its own, as well as painting, sculpture, and even rigid architecture—these anarchists re-enact in the literary world the same things that I, with my own sorry eyes, witnessed during the Commune, though with less reason or excuse. They are few in number when all are counted, but united in their efforts in spite of hatreds and particular jealousies. They distinguish themselves and recognize each other by their manner of dressing and their slogans, which are sometimes quaint and amusing, sometimes loud and brazen. And they are unconcerned to cause astonishment by their peculiar behaviors. These men, of wild appearance and clever politics, play this game, which is often won by a minority dominating over a majority. They exercise over the public a true terror. Some do this directly, by their menacing zealotry in the theatre auditoriums; others, indirectly, through their newspaper and journal articles. And this special Terror, which is entirely literary, comes from those whose opinions are the most easily imposed. Ever since the days of Voltaire—who was wrong in preferring

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<sup>656</sup> Alexandre Auguste Ledru-Rollin (1807–1874): French politician and advocate for the laboring classes. His “melancholy saying” is as follows: “There go the people. I must follow them, for I am their leader.”

to be regarded as a criminal instead of as a fool—there have been a large number of courageous and decent people ready to confront a danger whole-heartedly, but who do not dare to confront something they believe to be ridiculous. The terrorized people are bored stiff, as at *Ubu Roi*—“a profound boredom” according to M. Catulle Mendès—and at other times they are disgusted, indignant, or revolted. But they do not dare to say so. They are too timid, and fear to be labeled as fools. Naively they even suspect that they might be so, for certain grand pontif-pundits, from the heights of their usurped authority—which is nonetheless consecrated and established by the terror—tell them this.

I would have liked, though, for the public, the good public, to have conducted its mini-Thermidor, to have thrown off the yoke of Robespierre—of a Robespierre intoxicated with the burning incense and the adoring Catherine Théot<sup>657</sup>—with good cheer (for literary Terror is not a tragic thing, but really rather comical) and with no quarreling. I say this as one opposed to brutalities in general, even if they are only harsh and haughty words, for it is always better to speak one’s mind with courtesy and moderation. Nonetheless, I was not too angered by the uproar at *Ubu Roi*, for it seemed to me that this was the passing of the final cart, and that the revolutionary tribunal that oppresses us has, at last, seen its final day.

Good public, take it from a mild and good-natured critic, one who is without envy and who prefers to be thought of as too soft rather than too cruel: think for yourselves. And, when you think something, say it easily and courteously if people are attentive, more forcefully if they challenge you. Do not hesitate to enjoy yourself when you are enjoying yourself, for fear that Monsieur X. will give you dirty looks—and do not cry “genius!” when you are bored and understand nothing, simply because Monsieur Z. beats time for the chorus of crazed admirers. Be indulgent to efforts that are obviously sincere, know how to give credit to talent, or sometimes simply to the enthusiasm of novice performers. But do not fear to say “Stop! Enough!” when you find that you are faced with obvious and presumptuous stupidity. Be, in art, exactly as in politics: respectful of sincere convictions, but severe to the arrogance of those who wish to be our unworthy and narrow-minded masters, severe to the clamors of the ambitious who are unthinking and brutal, and severe to practical jokers, especially when the joke, if taken seriously, is only blustery and contemptuous posturing. Even if it is not your role to tell

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<sup>657</sup> Catherine Théot (1716-1794): A religious visionary of the French Revolution and life-long victim of hallucinations, she led a quasi-Catholic sect who believed Robespierre to be the reincarnation of the redeemer of mankind.

the dramatic arts which way to turn, it is certainly your right and your duty not to follow them everywhere and anywhere. Do not allow yourself to be led into the quagmires of the North, veiled by heavy mists, and take guard against sudden drops when following guides whose lanterns light the way to the cliff's edge.

I know, of course, that it is quite common to believe that the public is, by definition, idiotic.

"How many fools does it take to make the public?"<sup>658</sup> is one quip that comes readily to mind. But this axiom, though serviceable, has the common fault of axioms, for it can be answered by another: *Vox populi, vox Dei*.<sup>659</sup> And if the voice of the people is the voice of God, it can certainly also be the voice of reason. I know the things of which crowds can be accused. They are often wrong, and when they misjudge something they do so with an intensity that is difficult to govern. This is the reason for the critic's existence: sometimes to temper the crowd's "sudden crazes," but always to advise and enlighten them. But this useful work can only be done effectively by those who do not treat the public with scornful arrogance. Nor can it be done by those who offer only empty platitudes. When an artist addresses the people in regard to matters of art—as he does in the theatre—he must know how to make himself understood by them. It would be wrong to flatter their base instincts, but it takes genius to raise them to grand ideas and noble sentiments. Honesty is the attempt to do this. Do you imagine that Aeschylus wrote for some café of the Acropolis, the Montmartre of Athens? . . . "A work of art is inferior if it fails to include everyone." Who said this? Sarcey? No, Diderot, the Diderot that no one dares question, for if anyone were ever the opposite of a bourgeois reactionary, without a doubt it was this daring and magnificent fellow with the disheveled clothes.

What I ask of the public is only this: do not pretend to comprehend the incomprehensible; heed the warnings, make an honest effort to understand, but do not obey slogans and instructions blindly; do not allow the tyranny of admiration to take hold of you; shake off the fear which attempts to subjugate everyone to the domination of avant-

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<sup>658</sup> "How many fools . . .?": The quip is from the maxims, thoughts, reflections and aphorisms of Sebastian-Roch-Nicolas Chamfort (1741-1794), orator and propagandist for the French Revolution, secretary for the Jacobin club, and among the first to enter the Bastille when it was stormed.

<sup>659</sup> "*Vox populi, vox Dei*": "The voice of the people [is] the voice of God" is a very old proverb. It was already an aphorism of common political wisdom by the eighth century, and can be found among the surviving correspondence of Charlemagne.

garde snobs, whose so-called “audacious innovations,” nine times out of ten, are only the stench of an earlier era. The true dramatic poet is someone who knows how to draw an ideal out of those who listen to him, who can uncover its elements in their souls, and, by focusing these and placing them in full light, cause it to illuminate the people. It is necessary—and again it is Diderot who says this—for us to leave the theatre “better,” either better through laughter and forgetting or better through deeply emotional contemplation. Works that fail to bring this result scarcely deserve our approval. And when they embrace obscurity, tediousness and obscenity, it is good that disgust is readily expressed by the people, who will—and today I am certain of it—free themselves from this literary Terror under which we have suffered enough stupidities to equal the number of murderous executions under the political Terror. And that Terror is not said to have been “excessive,” but rather “necessary for progress.” Michelet<sup>660</sup> tells us that France was saved by the Terror. But the Dramatic Arts can achieve their evolution without the headbanded knitting-girls and the extravagantly obscure pontiffs. The actions of Pétrus Borel<sup>661</sup> are not the basis of Victor Hugo’s glory: and if we must be liberated from Scribe<sup>662</sup>—though, in my opinion, he does not seem to bother anyone—*Ubu Roi* is not the thing that will convert us to a new art . . .

*Thus, Henry Fouquier has had at least enough clear-sightedness to understand that his own case was hopeless. As for the whistles and hisses of 10 December 1896—which he chose to hear as unaccompanied by any genuine applause—they have not marked the end of the*

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<sup>660</sup> Jules Michelet (1798-1874): The best known French historian of the nineteenth century. His twenty volume *History of France*—written from a strongly Republican viewpoint—was published in 1867.

<sup>661</sup> Petrus Borel (1809–1859): A minor writer of the French Romantic movement. He trained as an architect, but abandoned this career for a bohemian literary life. During the 1830 *Battles of Hernani*, Borel was one of the principal “combatants.” His role was to shout and applaud nightly in support of Victor Hugo’s new Romantic drama.

<sup>662</sup> Augustin Eugène Scribe (1791–1861): French dramatist and librettist, best known for perfecting the “well-made play” formula that dominated the French stage for more than a century. He wrote primarily for and about the contemporary bourgeoisie. His plays, however, are lacking in social criticism. His complete works fill 76 volumes.

*“terror,” for, if we evoke this forgotten journalist again today and give him some semblance of existence, is this not entirely because Ubu's career has continued in spite of him?*

## 5: Alain's Observations

*Having exhausted Jarry's file of press clippings, we will conclude with some remarks from Alain.<sup>663</sup> These were written at the time of the Chassé Affair<sup>664</sup> and the new edition of Ubu Roi,<sup>665</sup> and were published in the 17 December 1921 issue of the LIBRES PROPOS:*

I like to imagine that the first sculptors worked without a plan, perhaps on some gnarled root or strangely shaped rock, and were astonished when an entirely unlooked-for grimace began to appear in the wood or the stone. There is one story of a painter who became so frustrated by his failure to capture the likeness of frothy spittle on a monster's jaws that he threw his brush at the picture on which he was working . . . and this chance suited the need. It's a nice legend. The difficult thing—true for all artists—is to recognize a good trait and not spoil it with reworking. Goethe said that it is necessary to have practiced a craft for quite a long time in order to be any good at making revisions. Beauty is not pre-planned; and the artist's contemplation, like the spectator's, should be respectful above all else; striving for understanding.

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<sup>663</sup> Alain: The name by which French philosopher and journalist Emile Chartier (1868-1951) is best known.

<sup>664</sup> The Chassé Affair: A year-long critical debate over the true authorship of *Ubu Roi*. The polemic began with the publication of a pamphlet by Charles Chassé in November 1921, in which he claims Jarry is not the author of *Ubu Roi*, but that the play is a collective work by several of Jarry's schoolmates, for which Jarry merely assumed the credit.

<sup>665</sup> New edition of *Ubu Roi*: Published in October 1921, by which time the play had become quite rare as it had not appeared in print since 1900.

These reflections are inspired by *Ubu Roi*. If one examines its ideas, this work is hardly anything at all. Considering the great truths that Gargantua and Pantagruel<sup>666</sup> have shown us, or the depths of meaning in *Liluli*,<sup>667</sup> it is tempting simply to reject *Ubu Roi*, which tells of nothing other than itself. I would have made it, it seems to me, as Machiavelli's *The Prince*, showing the monster in human form at the very beginning, entirely exposed, and clothing him in majesty later on. Thereupon I would write ten acts, or even twenty. But . . . hold on just a moment. For me there seems to be no lack of ideas after all—and I believe they are similarly “not lacking” for anyone. I have clothes for the monster in any color or size; but where is the monster? Where is the gnarled root that I would make into a face? Ubu exists. Each dresses him in his own way. He is a grimacing root who wants some touching up. But be wary of that retouching. I'm willing to bet that it will spoil the force of the rough version. Jarry was an artist in this matter above all else, for even at the age of twenty he knew to add nothing to this work of childhood. So Ubu is living in the same sense that folk tales are living. One can try to understand them, but it is necessary to accept them first. Like the Sphinx; you might attach any idea in the world to it, but in the meanwhile the work exists, waiting.

Ubu has neither any thoughts, nor any plan. Whatever he sees as desirable, he takes; one cannot even say that he “dares”; as soon as things are not great for him, he is afraid; at the same time as he conspires against the king, he thinks of turning-in his accomplices for a reward; but what did I say about that? He doesn't think. These are two simultaneous actions. Ubu is beneath cowardliness, he is beneath treason, beneath cruelty. He would need a bit of caution and even some self-control just to raise himself to that level. Stupidity is even higher-up. Does this rough but powerful satire therefore mean that, as a necessity for kingship, even the worst vices are useless affectations, fine costumes, pointless bits of playacting? With the *Prince's* garments entirely stripped away in this manner—not merely the outermost layers, which are courage, loyalty, and justice, but also the underclothes, which are stupidity, baseness, and ferocity—there still remains the naked force, which suffices. Ubu can wear these political patterns; but they are only clothes. Therefore, whatever truly reigns is beneath the worst of all. At this degree of brazenness there is no longer any satire. But Comedy—with its passions

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<sup>666</sup> Gargantua and Pantagruel: series of four books of satirical fantasy by François Rabelais, originally published between 1532-1552.

<sup>667</sup> *Liluli*: A 1919 novel by Romain Rolland.

stripped of all finery and all the thinking entirely shaken out of it—shows its significance through laughter.

ALAIN

*This potent observation regarding Ubu Roi—among the most astute to have been written—answers the reservations of Romain Coolus, as well as all of the praises and critiques.*

*The only thing lacking, and it is easy to see how it might be included, is a touch of pure pataphysics.*

*Henri ROBILLOT, Editor.*

## Appendix C:

### Excerpt from Rachilde's 1897 review of Jarry's novel *Les Jours et Les Nuits* <sup>668</sup>

This appendix presents my translation of a literary review of Jarry's 1897 novel, *Days and Nights: Novel of a Deserter*. The review was written by Rachilde [*nom de plume* of Marguerite Eymery Vallette], literary editor of the Parisian avant-garde journal *The Mercure de France* and was printed in the August 1897 issue of that magazine. Rachilde was one of Jarry's closest friends. She is a principal subject of Chapter 3 of this study, and was instrumental in getting Aurélien Lugné-Poe, director of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, to commit to producing Jarry's play, *Ubu Roi*.

The production of that play had taken place in December 1896, eight months prior to the review of *Days and Nights* that is translated here. Rachilde did not review of the play at the time when it was performed — she was, after all, a literary and not a drama critic. She makes up for this absence, though, by devoting more than half of her

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<sup>668</sup> Rachilde, review of *Les Jours et les nuits*, *Mercure de France* (Aug. 1897), 143-145.

commentary on Jarry's novel to her recollections of the first performance of his play. To the best of my knowledge, this review has never previously been translated into English.

**Rachilde's Review of *Les Jours et les Nuits* : *Mercure de France*, August, 1897:**

*Days and Nights, Novel of a Deserter*, by Alfred Jarry. A perceptive mind, very enlightened, grasping wonderfully the mysterious connections that exist between things and men, between eras and the Word — I am referring to Marcel Schwob<sup>669</sup> — has said of Alfred Jarry: *He is a sign of the times!* I want to prop myself up with this perception to speak here about a strange book and an even stranger writer.

First, let us dare to remember *Ubu Roi*, the prelude. Spectators piled into in the gloomy auditorium of the Oeuvre, especially dark-seeming that night, fermenting the genesis of exquisite filth, turning blue from the erotic terror of finally hearing *the word* of this social enigma, *Ubu*, of seeing his eternal reason for existence shining under the scope of the X-ray, released for once from his X, and heating to white-hot the notoriety of the author of this special solution to the problem of all the red hatreds of the old towards the young, of the young towards the old, of the young towards the young, of all the kinds of sexes, recently discovered, hoping to elevate themselves thanks to a dawn of more direct obscenities. The women, pretty women, purely impure, all enhaloed with headbands and gemstones, divine clay trembling from the sensuousness of awaiting *the magical word* from the overly deified one who had probably presided at the creation of their clay. A full house, the elite of humanity, of journalism, all came to hear *that* like flies go you know where.

Then, from behind the curtain, a small somber man suddenly appears making the precise gestures of an exceptionally well-managed puppet, who, from the depths of his huge dark eyes, in a religious silence, explains that “the action, which is about to begin, takes place in Poland, that is to say Nowhere.” Prior to this happy turn of phrase, he risked a few interesting illustrations of theatrical geometry, but these did not show on the blackboard of his eyes. We understood nothing. His manner cool, he slipped away, a bit impatient to pull the strings, and the farce began.

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<sup>669</sup> Marcel Schwob (1867-1905): Symbolist author and journalist. He was a particular mentor to Jarry and influential in the publication of *Ubu Roi*. It is to Schwob that Jarry dedicated the play when it was published in July 1896 by the *Mercure de France*.

A farce ferocious, macabre, and terrible in its total lack of cheerfulness, made of infantile and appalling crudeness, hoots of owls in the ruins, a sewer pipe and a good flush, like the commentary of a city cop on a corpse in the river. The brilliant lines went unnoticed while some that were deliberately idiotic met with great success. But *the word*, the famous word, seemed sad, because *there was no sex in the play*. The crowd whistled above all at the lack of real filth. They had thought this Punch of an *Ubu* would function sexually. They demanded a jig. They forced a great artist, the actor Gémier, to dance while he wore that mask of their own cruel bourgeoisness. They whistled so much that Vielé-Griffin,<sup>670</sup> a poet who delights in all facets of life, remarked: “We could believe ourselves in a forest full of shrieking birds.” All the princely critics cried from joy. Ah! they carried the day, the young school! They whistled for a season, for a year, for eternity, but when they stopped whistling there was general discomfort. We all felt complicit in a crime, the collective guilt of having contributed to that forest fixed a date of our history. “A sign of the times!” murmured Schwob, somewhat more prophetic than the others.

Alfred Jarry came out of this unfazed. This youth, a proper hench-puppet [*palotin*] of Providence, returned to his box, caring no more about this affair than about a game of darts. The next day a Jew or Belgian would have been able to sell his story at three sous a line.<sup>671</sup> Neither Jew, nor Belgian, he was merely inept, I think. And so it came to pass that, for his punishment, his Punch of an *Ubu* set out on his own, escaping from his box, disseminating himself throughout everyday speech, revue articles, underground publications, high society, sneaking into the best circles, mixing in with the cosmetics and perfumes of the dressing room literature. He filled Lorrain<sup>672</sup> with enthusiasm and set Mendès<sup>673</sup> to dreaming. The *word* had access everywhere, it took wings, Rochefort<sup>674</sup> glorified it

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<sup>670</sup> Francis Vielé-Griffin (1864–1937): Symbolist poet and supporter of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre.

<sup>671</sup> “Three sous a line” was the standard rate paid for writing published in newspapers in fin-de-siècle Paris.

<sup>672</sup> Jean Lorrain (1855-1906): poet, symbolist novelist, journalist, dandy. He was an openly gay and larger-than-life character in *fin-de-siècle* Paris. Lorrain was one of the five journalists whom Jarry thanked from the stage during his pre-performance lecture at the first showing of *Ubu Roi*.

<sup>673</sup> Catulle Mendès (1841–1909): poet, novelist, man of letters. Mendès was another of the five journalists thanked by Jarry during his pre-show lecture.

<sup>674</sup> Henri Rochefort (1831-1913): aristocrat, journalist, radical politician. He was arrested and exiled several times for his political agitation. Known colloquially as “the prince of the gutter press.” He was present at the premier of *Ubu Roi* and used the figure in comparison with contemporary politicians in his articles in early 1897.

in a political article, the cartoonists Forain<sup>675</sup> and Couturier<sup>676</sup> portrayed him both with and without his mask. The archetype of *Ubu Roi* became legendary. It still is and will remain so . . . despite the author.

Now, let's have a look at this book, the books, *Days and Nights*. [. . .]

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<sup>675</sup> Jean-Louis Forain (1852-1931): caricaturist.

<sup>676</sup> Édouard Couturier, 1869-1903: caricaturist and student of Forain.

## Appendix D:

### An Interview with Firmin Gémier

This appendix presents my translation of a 1921 interview with Firmin Gémier, the French actor who played the role of Père Ubu in the 1896 Theatre de l'Oeuvre production of *Ubu Roi*. The interview focuses primarily on Gémier's personal recollections of that famous production. It was conducted by the journalist Roger Valbelle, who recorded the conversation in the November 4, 1921 issue of the Parisian daily newspaper *Excelsior*. The date of the interview is of particular interest, for it indicates that the document was a part of the sudden cultural craze for all things Jarry that erupted in Paris at this time. In fact, a number of events that are quite important in Jarry studies all unfolded and fueled one another during a four-month period between November 1921 and February 1922. Since the Gémier interview also falls in this timeframe, it is worth taking a moment to situate its publication along the larger timeline of those events. However, I will note here only three of the most significant of them.

The first event that should be remarked is the October 1921 publication of a new edition of *Ubu Roi*. The play had been out of print since 1900, and copies of it were, by

this time, quite rare. As discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, the young men of the post World War I Parisian avant-garde felt a particular kinship with Jarry, and the demand for a new edition of *Ubu Roi* began to make itself felt. Obliging, one was soon offered by the publisher Eugène Fasquelle. His 1921 text was attractively printed and illustrated with drawings of Ubu that had been made by Jarry and Bonnard<sup>677</sup> for the earlier editions (1896, 1897, 1900) and for some of Ubu's other press appearances. It also included a substantial introduction by Dr. Jean Saltas, one of Jarry's closest friends during the final years of his life. The book received immediate critical acclaim in the press and helped to kindle the currently emerging interest in Jarry. The earliest of the reviews of this book are dated November 1, 1921.

The second of these important events is the so-called "Chassé Affair." Since before the appearance of the Fasquelle edition of *Ubu Roi*, Charles Chassé, a professor of English at the École Navale, had been working on *Sous le Masque de Jarry: Les Sources d'Ubu roi*. This short book hit Jarry-crazed Paris like a bombshell sometime in mid-November — arriving immediately on the heels of the newly available Ubu play. In it, Chassé announced to the public that Jarry was not the author of *Ubu Roi*, and that the play itself was the product of the collaboration of several generations of schoolboys. He supports this point with a good deal of useful and interesting information about Jarry's

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<sup>677</sup> Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947), a French painter of the Nabi group, who were often collaborators in the decors of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre. Bonnard was one of the painters, along with Paul Sérusier, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Paul Ranson, Édouard Vuillard, and Jarry himself who painted the set for the 1896 production of *Ubu Roi*. He and Jarry remained quite close friends, and he provided many of the illustrations for the various almanacs of Père Ubu. Some of these illustrations were used in the 1921 Fasquelle edition of Jarry's Ubu plays.

school days. Yet the main goal of the book is not to discredit Jarry as the author of *Ubu Roi*, but rather to argue that the play's casual composition by unruly schoolchildren must necessarily invalidate it from consideration as a serious work of art.

Chassé's point of view found immediate opponents and inspired a new controversy over *Ubu Roi* that raged in the Parisian press for several months. The pro-*Ubu* opposition pointed out that a work of art has a life of its own. The public, they argued, is free to interpret the work according to its own lights. Therefore the intentions of the work's creator — whether these are lofty, puerile, artistic, or even nonexistent to begin with — are irrelevant. They also note that Jarry never hid the circumstances of the play's composition, nor the fact that it was a collaborative work for which he was only partly responsible. And so far as legitimate authorship was concerned, there could be no denying that it was Jarry who was the principle champion of the play: the one who recognized its potential, who edited it, arranged it, enhanced it, and guided it into publication and production. The director of the 1896 Théâtre de l'Oeuvre production, Aurélien Lugné-Poe, was among those who expressed this view during the Chassé Affair. As he put it: "Whether or not Jarry was the main author of *Ubu Roi* is of no consequence, it is quite certain that the passion and the genius belonged to him alone and to no one else."<sup>678</sup>

This statement by Lugné-Poe's leads quite directly to the third event that deserves mention: his own February 1922 reprise of *Ubu Roi* at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre.

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<sup>678</sup> Lugné-Poe, Aurélien. "Le Semaine Theatrale—À propos d'*Ubu Roi*." *L'Éclair* 10 Jan. 1922: 3.

From a practical point of view, his company desperately needed a financial success at this time, and it had often been the director's practice to exploit any artistic controversy of the moment that might generate greater interest in his company. Clearly, he felt that the time had quite suddenly arrived for a new Parisian production of Jarry's play, and so, equally suddenly, he mounted one. The production proved to be a major disappointment, however. It was neither financially, controversially, nor artistically successful.<sup>679</sup>

But to return to the Gémier interview itself: since it bears the date of November 4, it obviously belongs toward the beginning of the 1921/22 craze over *Ubu Roi*. The new Fasquelle edition of the play had already been published by this date, and was receiving enthusiastic reviews, but the Chassé Affair had not yet exploded. At least that assumption seems safe since Gémier does not comment at all on the authorship question, and Chassé's earliest detractors did not appear in print until November 29. It is quite curious, however, that Gémier should have mentioned the actor René Fauchois in the interview, for Fauchois was destined to play the role of Père Ubu in the new production that would soon be mounted by Lugné-Poe.

As for the modern-day availability of this interview: copies of *Excelsior* from the 1920s are very hard to come by and cannot be obtained on microfilm. This rarity is further enhanced by the fact that the interview has never been reproduced in its entirety, not even in French. Many of Gémier's comments, however, were included in an archive

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<sup>679</sup> For a detailed evaluation of this production see Ruth B. York's article "'Ubu' Revisited: The Reprise of 1922" in *The French Review* 35.4 (February 1962), 408-413.

article (in French) that appeared in a 1981 issue of the literary revue *Europe* (the issue was devoted to Jarry). But the actor's reminiscences are somewhat edited there, and Valbelle's introduction and conclusion are dispensed with entirely. Nonetheless, this article made it possible for certain parts of Gémier's discourse to become reasonably well-known to Francophones, for some of the key paragraphs tend to be re-reproduced among the appendix materials of annotated French "study editions" of Jarry's play.

But for the Anglophone, access to the Gémier interview is quite limited. I am aware of only two partial translations of this important 1,500 word article. One of these appears in Frantisek Deak's *Symbolist Theatre: The Formation of an Avant-Garde* (1993). Here, Deak has translated one of the article's key paragraphs (around 200 words) into English for use in his book's chapter on *Ubu Roi*. The second partial translation can be found in Claude Schumacher's study *Alfred Jarry and Guillaume Apollinaire* (1985). In this work Schumacher cites a more slimmed-down version of this same key paragraph, but also incorporates an English translation of one additional paragraph (around 100 words). Thus, in total only about twenty percent of the article presented below has ever been available previously in any English translation.

Gémier's Interview: *Excelsior*, Friday, November 4, 1921:

TWO SENSATIONAL PERFORMANCES

M. FIRMIN GÉMIER  
TELLS US ABOUT THE DRESS REHEARSAL  
AND THE PREMIERE OF *UBU ROI*

\* \* \* \* \*

*The grand actor, wearing a mask designed by Jarry and a false belly that had been lent to him by Footit,<sup>680</sup> was witness to one of the most formidable uproars ever seen in a theatre.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*Alfred Jarry, who died at the age of thirty-four on 1 November 1907—All Saint's Day—left behind some novels such as Messalina,<sup>681</sup> vast in its scope, and Le Surmâle [The Supermale], which bears only a distant relationship to the Nietzschean superman. But he achieved notoriety, and a type of posthumous glory, thanks to a farce that he had written, with two comrades, during his time as a schoolboy at the lycée in Rennes, long before his pursuit of a literary career. Somehow he put into this piece a great deal more than is ordinarily found in the mind of a fifteen-year-old. That schoolboy farce was Ubu Roi or the Poles.*

*Even those who have neither read nor seen this piece know that it contains a legendary figure: Père Ubu—who inspired many variations, or else metamorphosed himself into them. Ubu the King has become, for instance, the “Ubureau”: and the royal crown has been transformed into the toroidal butt cushion [rond-de-cuir] of the office drone.<sup>682</sup> In this free play of transformations one sees that a character who is very much alive has, by chance, come into existence, and this chance is what one calls genius.*

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<sup>680</sup> George Footit (1864-1921) a starring clown and comic actor of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. His clown character was an English bully with a strong English accent. He is best known for his work in partnership with another clown known as Chocolat. Though Footit spent nearly his entire professional career in France, he was, in fact, English. His real name was Tudor Hall.

<sup>681</sup> Valeria Messalina (c. A.D. 17–A.D. 48), the titular subject of Jarry's novel, was the third wife of the Roman Emperor Claudius. She was also a great-grandniece of the Emperor Augustus. A powerful and influential woman with a reputation for promiscuity, she conspired against her husband and was executed when the plot was discovered. Jarry's novel, however, is much more concerned with an idiosyncratic exploration of mythology and promiscuity than it is with any sort of actual historical occurrences.

<sup>682</sup> “Rond-de-cuir”—literally: “leather circle”—is a pejorative nickname given to sedentary office workers in reference to their usage of a particular style of donut-shaped leather cushion, called a “rond-de-cuir,” intended to ease the discomfort of remaining for a long time in a seated position.

*But such transformation does not happen without deformation. The first of these was attempted by Alfred Jarry himself, who strove to inhabit the skin of his character, to become “Père Ubu” in everyday life—the opposite of a père noble.<sup>683</sup> This is to say that he became a hero of deliberately outrageous spirit, of vivid caricature, and of Rabelaisian tone, hiding his sensitivity beneath a mask and trying to deceive the whole world as to his true nature.*

*Père Ubu is a timid, hesitant, cowardly figure. He became the leader of a conspiracy only because his wife, Mère Ubu, reproached him for wanting to “remain as poor as a rat” and accused him of not being a man. The temptations of power—“to eat sausages all the time,” to get oneself an umbrella and a big fancy cape—merely caused him to recite some nice declarations of loyalty and honesty: “Oh, no! Me, a Captain of Dragoons, slaughter the king of Poland?! I’d rather die”; “Sacred guts! By my green candle, I prefer to be as poor as a skinny, honest rat than as rich as a rotten, fat cat.”*

*This farce, that is often called “brilliant” and that the author put into the form of “a drama in five acts,” was first performed by wooden marionettes in a puppet theatre. Eight years later, it was mounted at the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre, and it was M. Firmin Gémier who played the role of Père Ubu.*

*Yesterday we spoke with this artist in his dressing room at the Théâtre Femina. While he was making himself up in the oriental trappings of Yama, the main character of Sin,<sup>684</sup> M. Gémier cast his mind back a few decades in order to share with us his particular recollections of that Ubu Roi of old.*

### **The Recollections of the Artist**

The premiere took place on 10 December 1896. The Générale had been given the previous day. During that era, there were only those two performances. In those days I was at the Odéon. Lugné-Poe had asked me to play the role and to handle the staging.<sup>685</sup> I remember that everything was very rushed and that there was no time to rehearse. The backdrop for the whole play was a bizarre inside out living room, most everything was left to the imagination of the audience. One of our friends, Tinbo—we called him that because he was listed in

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<sup>683</sup> “Père noble” translates, roughly, into English as “venerable old man.”

<sup>684</sup> In Buddhist, Chinese, Tibetan, Korean, and Japanese mythology Yama is a wrathful god who is often responsible for judging the damned. The title of the play in which Gémier is appearing, *Sin*, has no meaning in French, though it seems to combine the idea of China (“sino-”) with Anglophone connotations of sinfulness.

<sup>685</sup> Ultimately Gémier did not direct the staging of the piece. Rather, this was done by a combination of Jarry and Lugné-Poe. More Jarry than Lugné, though, as the latter was away in England for nearly half of the rehearsal period.

the phone book [*le Bottin*]<sup>686</sup>—came out often with some placards to set each scene.

Before the performance, Jarry gave a lecture intended to explain the play. He was dressed in an improbable outfit: white shirt with an oversized dicky, cravat tied in a big floppy bow, hair parted in the middle and pasted down on his forehead, face covered in powder and entirely white. He had the aura of a starving Pierrot. He spoke in the accent of Ubu, the accent of a Lyonnais guignol puppet, but beneath these exteriors he concealed a great deal of anxiety, emotion, and stage fright. As for his lecture, the audience did not understand a word of it.

### **Jarry “in Real Life”**

What was he like in real life?

Brown hair, dark eyes . . . he was quite young. He seemed to be around thirty years old, but really he was only twenty-three. He looked a bit like Fauchois, but with a rounder head.<sup>687</sup> He was a very charming boy, but sometimes indulged a desire to seem cruel. He made really terrible puns . . . Jean Lorrain devoted several of his “*chroniques*” to *Ubu*,<sup>688</sup> to this schoolboy farce containing so many profound things, and that enraged such people as Courteline.<sup>689</sup>

You know what the first word of the play is? It was well received. The dinner scene amused the audience. Everybody laughed. Some of the laughter was mocking and some of it amounted to applause, but they were all laughing

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<sup>686</sup> A common form of slang in French is to invert the syllabic order of words, thus “*Bottin*”—“phone book”—becomes “*Tinbo*.”

<sup>687</sup> The reference here is to the French actor (and playwright) René Fauchois (1882-1962), who was becoming quite well known during the 1920s, and who would also play the role of Père Ubu in the February 1922 Theatre de l’Oeuvre revival of *Ubu Roi*.

<sup>688</sup> Jean Lorrain, an ostentatious and professional debouchee, was one of the five journalists whom Jarry thanked for their pre-publicity of *Ubu Roi* during his lecture at the beginning of the performance. Lorrain wrote a column for *Le Journal* devoted largely to literary and artistic gossip. Though his columns have been well scoured by researchers, only two passing references to *Ubu Roi* (19 November and 5 December), have been found. It is more likely that Gémier is referring to the three long articles by Henry Bauër included in Appendix A of this study.

<sup>689</sup> Georges Courteline (1858-1929), satirical playwright whose work had previously been produced by the Théâtre-Libre. By 1896 he had become an established commercial playwright. He was present for the *générale* of *Ubu Roi*. Presumably he would have been irritated by the amount of attention lavished by Bauër (or Lorrain, for that matter) on a minor one-off work like *Ubu*, rather than something of more established merit, such as his own work, for example.

nonetheless. The scenes of the messenger, Ubu's house, the King's palace, the parade ground, the massacre, the scene in the cave with the appearance of the ghosts, the one with the nobles and phynanciers in the great hall of the palace, they all went very well—meaning that they went as well as could be hoped. But the hostility erupted abruptly and completely during the scene that takes place in the jail cell of the Thorn fortress.<sup>690</sup> You remember that Père Ubu, who has now been king for five days, goes to see Captain Bordure, whom he has locked in a prison. Instead of a prison door, an actor stood on stage rigidly holding out his left arm. I put the key in his hand as if into a lock. I made a sound for the bolt, “cric-crac,” and then swung aside his arm as if I were opening the door. At that moment the audience, undoubtedly finding that the joking had gone on long enough, began to howl and rage: shouts and insults exploded from everywhere at once, a barrage of booing, hissing, catcalls, and a thousand other noises. In brief, it was an uproar whose like I had never heard of before. It surpassed everything from my previous experience—and I had already had some personal familiarity with poorly received plays of the avant-garde. But never before did I have this sense that the audience would stop everything dead.

### **The Rage on the Stage**

I was encased in the heavy mask designed by Jarry and wearing a false belly that had been leant to me by Footit. Imprisoned in this carcass, I was hot, I was fuming, I was furious. Up to that point I'd always been able to hold the audience, but the feeling of my impotence under this mask made my blood boil. So I threw myself into dancing a jig, both as a reaction and as a way to blow off steam. The audience, who were shouting and booing, then began laughing and applauding, and we were able to continue the play. Thereafter I took every opportunity to “contain” things. At one point I even seated myself on the edge of the stage with my feet dangling in the auditorium. (It wasn't yesterday when I first advised crossing beyond the footlights). Sitting in the first row was Alphonse Franck, who yelled to me: “the exit is through there!” Ah, the hecklers were not at all gentle with us!

After that *générale* we expected that the opening night audience could do any crazy thing at all. I armed myself with a tramway horn, a resounding instrument that is no longer used today, and I said to myself: “If things get heated up, I'll blow on this like Roland at Roncevaux.”<sup>691</sup> I put it to use it only

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<sup>690</sup> Act III, scene v.

<sup>691</sup> In *The Song of Roland (La Chanson de Roland)*, a Medieval epic poem dating from the twelfth century, also the oldest surviving major work of French literature, the hero, Roland, sounds his elephant tusk horn to alert the Emperor Charlemagne to the ambush and destruction of the rear guard of his army

two trifling times. As is always the case, the audience at the opening night was less impassioned than the audience at the *générale*.

Years later I played the role of Ubu again at the Théâtre Antoine [in 1908] for the carnival celebrations.<sup>692</sup> On that occasion, the part of Mère Ubu was done by a man. Harry Baur played the King of Poland really marvelously, and Yvonne Debray was the king's son, Buggerlas.

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*Père Ubu's theatre of rude and clownish farce belongs to an earlier epoch. Who today would hiss his linguistic drolleries? In the time between then and now much progress has been made in theatrical outrages—to invent a new one is a most difficult challenge.*

ROGER VALBELLE

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in a mountain pass through Spain. Roland, already dying at the time of the sounding of his horn, blows the horn so hard that his head explodes. The name of the mountain pass where the ambush occurs is Roncevaux.

<sup>692</sup> The March 1908 revival was initially conceived as a benefit for Jarry, whose health and grasp on reality had been declining for some years, due largely to the author's alcoholism. Jarry, however, died four months before the production could be mounted. In this revival Gemier both played the principle role and directed. The production was neither artistically, commercially, nor scandalously successful, and made no particular impact at the time. Its staging emphasized the child-like wind-up toy aesthetic of the play. For more on this production see Keith Beaumont's critical guide to the text of *Ubu Roi* (64-65).

## Vita

John H. (Sebastian) Trainor is originally from Lowell, Massachusetts. He holds an interdisciplinary B.A. in Humanities from Colgate University, an MFA in Directing for the Stage from The California Institute of the Arts, and a Ph.D. in Theatre History, Theory, and Criticism from the University of Washington. He has directed at several small professional theatres and universities all around the United States and has presented scholarly work at national and international conferences including the American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR), the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE), and the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR). His essays have appeared in the journals *Theatre Symposium*, *Text & Presentation*, and *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre*; and in the edited collections *Women in the Arts in the Belle Epoque* and *Fifty Key Stage Musicals*. He has received three Foreign Language Area Study (FLAS) fellowships, a fellowship to the Mellon School for Theatre and Performance Research at Harvard University, and multiple directing fellowships. While completing his dissertation, Sebastian taught as a Visiting Assistant Professor at St. Lawrence University in Canton, NY; an Assistant Teaching Professor at the Pennsylvania State University (University Park); and is currently an Associate Professor of Instruction at the University of Texas (Arlington).