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 **Étalage complaisant?: The Torments of Christ in French
Passion Plays**

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Étalage complaisant! The Torments of Christ in French Passion Plays Véronique Plesch The study of the mystère de la Passion in France is in fact the study of the extraordinary expansion of the dramatic material, from the earliest plays of the fourteenth century to the cyclical monuments of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries which were performed over several days. This paper aims at showing how the development of sequences of the torments of Christ contributed to the general expansion of French Passion plays—its amplification to use a term from the poetic arts.¹ It will also show how these violent and bloody scenes, so often misunderstood by the modern reader, are in fact far from being an "étalage complaisant des supplices du Christ, avec une fatigante multiplication de détails atroces" ("the pandering display of Christ's

torture, with a tiresome multiplication of atrocious details"), as Alfred Jeanroy called them.² These scenes are certainly not the product of the authors' sadism or even, as has been traditionally considered, aimed at satisfying the vilest and lowest instincts of the rabble.³ We will see that the ways in which these scenes are expanded follow specific guidelines that in turn reveal their meaning. In other words, these scenes are expanded because they are meaningful: the modalities of their expansion are rooted in their meaning. In order to show this, I will first survey the dramatic and textual means used to amplify the scenes, then I will demonstrate that many of their sources can be traced back to exegetical readings and finally conclude by determining the kind of response sought by the texts likewise expanded. I base my analysis on four of the most important French Passion plays of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: two fourteenth-century plays, the *Palatine Passion*⁴ and the *Passion Sainte-Geneviève*;⁵ and two fifteenth-century plays, the *Passion d'Arras*⁶ and the *Passion by Arnoul Greban*.⁷ The scenes of Véronique Plesch's⁸ torture that will be considered take place in the Passion narrative between Christ's arrest and the departure for the way to Calvary, during the different moments of the trial of Christ.⁹ The question of the modalities used for the expansion of the material in French *mystères* has been previously addressed. For example, in her 1959 doctoral dissertation Mary Faith McKean identified five "techniques of dramatic presentation" that allowed the *fatiste* (the playwright) to develop the Gospel account: expansion, conversational realism, explicitation, reiteration, and objectivation of subjective notions.¹⁰ These categories are still valid and can be applied to sequences of torments.¹¹ But scenes of torments in plays are perhaps more than anything else primarily visual sequences. To state the obvious, gesture is fundamental to physical violence. To limit the staging of these scenes to a purely visual evocation—that is, to leave them mute—would give them a status secondary to scenes with words. As a result, the means of the expansion of these particular scenes are of a different order than that which McKean described. Also, gesture needs to be somehow fixed in the text, and, for this, stage directions are not sufficient. The sequences devoted to Christ's Passion before the way to Calvary are developed through an increase in the number of scenes, in the number of actors intervening and of actions performed, and through dramatic dialogue. The four Gospels provide the narrative skeleton of the story and fix the different types of torments: the mocking of Christ, the crowning with thorns, the flagellation. Over time, the Gospel accounts were complemented by scenes that, while not specifically mentioned by the Evangelists, were products of exegetical elaborations. For example, the motif of the *ductio Christi*—the leading of Christ from one place to the other, is an occasion for more torture. The Evangelists use the verbs *duxerunt* or *adduxerunt*—but do not mention the brutalities that are found in *mystères* such as the *Passion Sainte-Geneviève*, the *Passion d'Arras*, and the *Passion of Greban*.¹² Likewise, exegetical elaborations account for tortures occurring during the night following Christ's arrest which do not appear in the Gospels. In the Gospel of John, Christ is simply led...

Étalage complaisant? The Torments of Christ in French Passion Plays

Véronique Plesch

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I base my analysis on four of the most important French Passion plays of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: two fourteenth-century plays, the *Palatine Passion*⁴ and the *Passion Sainte Geneviève*;⁵ and two fifteenth-century plays, the *Passion d’Arras*,⁶ and the *Passion* by Arnoul Greban.⁷ The scenes of





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