

**Proto-Absurdist Strides and Leanings:  
Alfred Jarry's Shakespearean Spirit in *Ubu Roi***

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The medium of drama is confrontational by its very nature. There are no tangible boundaries between actors and the people who view it, besides perhaps that of a raised stage or a set of footlights. But, usually, these small barriers do not impede the experience of sharing a space with the action of a story: the actors breathe the same air as the people in the last row of a cramped theater or stand under the same sky as a crowd attending an open-air production. Characters embodied before an audience continue building or resolving their conflicts as if they were alone, carrying on as if no one beyond the edge of the stage was actually playing voyeur to their problems or joys. We can always get up and leave—that settles that. But certainly, turning our backs to a movie screen, or closing a book for the last time is much easier and performed with much less effrontery than rising from our seats, calling attention to ourselves, and confronting the drama itself by coming out of hiding. If we so much as remove ourselves, we quietly, but obviously, voice our dissatisfaction with the play. So if we find ourselves confronted by a play that assaults our sensibilities or frustrates us with its aesthetics, we are dealt a choice: stay and suffer, exit quietly, or aggravate the situation by interrupting the actors with taunts and continuing our attack afterwards by speaking in an aggressively negative way about the play, the playwright, the director (and perhaps anyone else involved) to anyone who will listen. This last response option is certainly the least usual, and reserved for the most extreme cases.

Performances that speak pointedly to the viewer have the unique power to initiate a confrontation that offends or infringes to such a primal extent that the audience member feels compelled to react in this determinedly vengeful fashion. But seldom does this kind of reaction occur in isolation—the psychology behind mob mentality is a contributing factor between the verbal and physical. Active reaction (say, the difference between calling for a bad actor to get off the stage and throwing rotten fruit) is exacerbated by the feeling of being swept up in a decision larger

than the individual, one that calls for a resounding and immediate bad review. If a play draws its audience to respond with this actively defiant reaction, it must take place without breaking the so-called “fourth wall” between stage and audience, neither through dialogue nor action—the playwright or director need only guide his entertainment to repeatedly strike a singularly abrasive note that insults the collective spectators’ taste.

Taste, and the cultural construction thereof, is an important determining factor for any piece of artistic expression that receives public acceptance and appreciation or not. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, the standards of taste for both the critic and public had already been altered to a considerable degree when decades earlier the consensus had finally been made that Shakespeare was a playwriting talent worthy of the French dramatic world’s attention. Yet in 1896, even most of the progressive Parisian theatergoers in attendance at the debut performance of Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* were still quite unprepared and ill equipped to make sense of Jarry’s play of compounded Shakespearean parodies. Even with *Ubu Roi* having been published months before its debut performance, anyone who had ventured to read the script would have been left wondering how the play could ever reach production. This is so not only because some of Jarry’s stage directions and plot points lingered somewhere between scientifically impossible and downright confusing, but more importantly, because the play violated the already relaxed and expanded confines of French taste (goût).

From a critical standpoint, goût had come to mean more by the late nineteenth century than merely an individual’s preference for one creative decision over others. Goût was a necessary defining condition of works intended for the French stage. An eighteenth-century secretary of the Académie Française, Jean-François Marmontel, said that goût must serve playwrights as the judge, counsel, and guide throughout the writing process (Pemble 23). Many

French critics acknowledged that taste had a cultural and temporal connection that influenced works from previous centuries, and a playwright's lack of goût could be blamed on anything from a lack of proper education to simply living in a nation other than France. But even so, this did not excuse transgressions. For critic François-René Chateaubriand, taste was considered the exclusive domain of those who lived within French borders and French literature was unique in combining taste with natural genius (Pemble 24). But natural genius was a wild and uncouth trait—one that became problematic in the French understanding and approval of someone like Shakespeare.

It took centuries for the English dramatist to join the ranks of favored and revered French writers, as critics were convinced that it was his untamed genius, as well as his Anglo-Saxon and Elizabethan milieu, responsible for his plays' barbarity and inexcusable lack of goût. As the French had very specific thoughts about what could be and should be performed in a public theater, many translators cut, considerably shortened, or changed scenes outright from Shakespeare's plays, both in publication and production. And while the eighteenth-century critical ideals that shaped the translators' and directors' decisions might have waned significantly by the close of the nineteenth century, they had not altogether disappeared. By the time that Jarry's *Ubu Roi* was performed, Shakespeare had been translated numerous times over, and many of his most popular plays had entertained Parisian audiences for years.

Why would *Ubu* and its digressional reworking of *Macbeth* and other Shakespearean works so easily upset the audience? Was *Ubu* offensive to its audience because Jarry had done more than simply flaunt a contemptuous disregard for goût, but rather, completely defied societal norms and mores of public behavior, beyond that which was deemed suitable performance decorum and unobjectionable dramatic language?

Yes, there was most definitely a difference between what was acceptable on a Parisian stage in 1790 and 1890, but not to such a large extent that the disparity would openly allow for the obscenities and heinous acts that take place from *Ubu*'s opening line onward. Jarry's play, emerging in an artistically and politically turbulent Paris, was at odds with the critical ghosts that had established the rules of theater decades before he was born, and in 1896, Jarry was fighting the same battle that previously burdened the French admirers of Shakespeare. Jarry's supporters, like many of Shakespeare's earliest French devotees, considered Jarry a genius. *Ubu Roi*, reworked from Jarry's teenage years and experiences, displayed his revolutionary intentions for the French theater, but also demonstrated his understanding of and connections to the defining works of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theater. Much of his play's action and the style of his production reflect his relationship with the Shakespearean works from which he liberally borrows. But Jarry was French by birth and lived three centuries after Shakespeare: what did he hope to achieve by reverting to foreign, outdated aesthetics of drama, exaggerating some conventions and making a complete joke out of others? In regard to the initial critical and public outcry and subsequent battle over *Ubu Roi*, what excuses could be made for a French native like Jarry who so willingly defied goût and determinately sought to give his creative genius free reign upon the stage, confronting both artistic and social conventions, as well as the hostile section of his audience that felt compelled to riot?

## Shakespeare's French Makeovers and Surgeries

In our age we might find it difficult to fathom that a place and time ever existed in which the work of Shakespeare (regardless of its possible collaborative additions, petty thefts, or even the identity of its “true” authorship) was considered anything less than the pinnacle of poetic, dramatic expression. From the time Shakespeare’s work was introduced to French audiences, his plays had been read in that nation with a strange mixture of tempered appreciation, disappointment, and disgust. The reasons are varied, but tend to concern a dangerous type of playwriting crime: his writing sharply clashes with French laws of drama. In breaking these firmly established rules, Shakespeare’s work had, from the very beginning, the difficulty of being taken seriously—and French tragedy was serious business with no room for comedy, nor for many of his treatments of violent or sexually charged subjects, and the suggestive, unseemly language that accompanied it. These “common” points continually draw in new generations of enthusiasts from all over the world who are roped in not only by the beautiful poetry, engaging wordplay and the accessibility of the humanist themes, but also by the promises of a gory, smutty spectacle: either cannibalism, treason, prostitution, transvestitism, murder, or rape is always a safe bet to appear at some point within the five acts. The fear of such potential displays elicited a heightened response of negativity from scrutinizing French critics who took it upon themselves to defend their pristine national treasure. True tragedy, in the French sense, would never stoop to the Shakespearean level. A French playwright would never consider writing such things, and would certainly never endeavor to bring such improprieties before the public. So how could French critics consider these five-act plays anything more than barbarian entertainments? Differences concerning national conceptions of taste begged the question in French minds: how could Shakespeare possibly represent the finest dramatic writing England had to offer?

Barbarian entertainments were, in fact, the standard fare for leisure activities in London during the sixteenth century. Considering Shakespeare's milieu, one that spawned bear-baiting arenas for the enjoyment of a populace bred on a steady intake of ale throughout the day, it stands to reason that these people would seek the elements of the same lively theatrics when they visited playhouses. The area where Shakespeare was to eventually construct The Globe theater was located in one of the less-respectable neighborhoods, known as the Liberties. Since it fell outside of City jurisdiction, the theaters were able to continue in business free from the strict Puritan laws against their trade; but this positioning outside of London proper was employed by any entertainments trying to steer clear of the Puritan-pressured City Corporation, and as a result, the theaters were physically situated in the same general suburb areas as brothels, gambling houses, taverns, and prisons (McDonald 124). Economics were a serious consideration governing which productions were staged. In order to direct the public's interest, each company of players had the task of competing with nearby sensational blood sports involving bulls, roosters, and dogs, curiosity displays of dead Indians (like the type Trinculo mentions upon seeing Caliban in *The Tempest*), other assorted types of freak shows, and other productions at rival theaters. Watching actors was one of many choices in an expanding city with a rising merchant class looking for something to do with their new wealth. By venturing to produce or write plays that might satisfy the greatest number of the paying audience members (from nobility to the lowliest groundling), Shakespeare's Lord Chamberlain's Men company (and later known as the King's Men company after James I assumed patronage in 1603 [McDonald 33]) was able to appeal to the full strata of society. His awareness of his audience is evident in his plays' representations: the titled, their defenders, their servants, the local tradesmen, and the neighborhood drunks. Reflecting all segments of society in his dramas was a task much easier

achieved in England than France some due to fundamental aspects of the very nature of French theater. The relationship that the London suburb performers had with their environment in the sixteenth century fostered a loose condition quite different from the delicate bond Parisians had with their theater from the latter portion of the seventeenth century onward.

The French of this era built a reputation for dramatic refinement on their tradition of compulsory alexandrine-rhymed tragedies, beginning around the 1670s. The most notable of the understated works first came from Pierre Corneille, but were further developed by contemporaries Molière, and Jean Racine, Corneille's long-time rival. Racine's tragedies sought to emulate the works of Greece and Rome by following classical themes and story lines, frequently concerning a monarch's conflict with his subject for obedience, and ending in tragedy ("Jean Baptiste Racine"). The rules that Racine followed demanded that tragedies eliminate any distractions from one essential crisis, one reasoned struggle. Focusing his plays on the goal of arousing pity through the trials of the tragic character, Racine believed that "inner action," not outward, physical displays (as in the Shakespearean sense), was necessary for eliciting empathy from an audience. To exemplify his point, Claude Abraham relates how Racine prefaced his play *Berenice* by stating, "It is not necessary that there be blood and death in a tragedy: it is enough that its action be elevated, its actors heroic, the passions aroused, and that everything exude this majestic sadness which is at the source of all pleasure in tragedy" (Abraham "Jean Racine"). The preference for a decidedly heightened attention to morality, and a lack of overt theatricality was to become the blueprint for French drama into the nineteenth century, solidifying a genteel, staid national theater.

Before Corneille, Molière, and Racine initiated the reserved manner of French stage decorum, the tendency for most French productions was considerably different. During the late

1500s and early 1600s, French theater was as coarse and meretricious as any produced in England. Abraham describes how writers like Alexandre Hardy produced plays for the Hôtel de Bourgogne (the most renowned acting troupe in Paris) depicting overt physical violence and thematic horror. While Hardy's work may have helped to galvanize French theater to a degree (he claimed to have written over six hundred plays), Hardy's style, and those who worked in a similar fashion, was soon ousted from the stage as the aristocracy and bourgeoisie insisted on tragedies that replicated the growing sophisticated civility of their stabilizing environs. As political and religious upheaval settled, the change in acceptable dramatic style followed. French theater quickly moved away from melodramatic, disjointed works to reserved and psychological plays that adhered to the classical rules of unity, order, clarity, simplicity, and balance. Racine's work was said to be "more classical than the Classics," perfecting the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Seneca (Pemble 32). By making a determined break from its immediate past, French theater was reinvented in the 1600s, looking to distill the classical form into the modest stage representation that the exclusive theater public demanded.

It should be noted that this transformation in dramatic technique was more than simply a shared change of heart. The theater had been a focal point for attacks from the Church and from moralists. Actors were excommunicated from the Church until the 1880s and they were often targeted as political enemies, becoming scapegoats during the Revolution as well (Pemble 33). In order to fend off the possibility of future censure, closure, or worse, the French theater community imposed upon itself a set of stringent laws regarding suitability for the stage. They established three main rules to follow: *vraisemblance*, *convenance*, and *bienséance*. *Vraisemblance*, or verisimilitude, required that plays remain true, or keep an appearance of being true. But in a fictional situation this is an odd preoccupation to have, if not an impossible one to

uphold. Yet dramatic truth was not based on the audience's perception of real feelings or actions versus false ones—it required truth to be considered in terms of reason and morality (Pemble 32). The hope was that on the stage where reason and morality rule, there is no room for the ugliness, irrationality, or lowliness of daily life, which with its indecorous and destructive segments could readily interfere with safeguarding the idea of theater displaying Truth, as an ideal. And because the soliloquy was considered an abnormal method for sharing characters' thoughts, *vraisemblance* dictated that one cast member's singular function was to listen and respond to the confessions of the hero or heroine (32-33). This vision of truth and reason must manifest itself at the conclusion of the play, when the virtuous characters prosper and the depraved ones suffer for their crimes.

Convenience also meant truth, but with an eye for authenticity, as in historically accurate accuracy (Pemble 33). This presented a problem when the historical subject in question behaved immorally. It would have to be avoided, especially in consideration of *vraisemblance*, and to a much greater degree under the law of *bienséance*, or propriety. If the playwrights were to satisfy their royal audience members and the bourgeoisie who were looking up to them as models of refinement, then *bienséance* was the defining characteristic of the French theater guaranteeing its content as family safe, government approved, and as a symbol of taste. Everything from the words characters were able to say, to the number of people allowed on stage at the same time was dictated by *bienséance* (Cuvelier 32). It expelled base language, punning lines, jokes of any type, and laughter from inclusion in performances. It eliminated the mixing of lower class merchants or fools with kings and queens. It forbade any violence, blood, and even categorized eating and drinking as too base a behavior for tragedy (Pemble 33). But the aforementioned concerns were hardly the end of the decorum *bienséance* predetermined. In addition, “to

preserve the dignity of tragic language and behaviour,” a writer could not blend genres in any way—tragedy must remain tragic throughout (Cuvelier 33). Finally, if a tragedy was to satisfy bienséance, it must have topical unity, and in a truly Aristotelian manner, contain no subplots and no tangential pieces detracting from the effect and purpose of the whole. Every play would have to consist of one carefully defined story from beginning to end if it was to ever be produced.

Another reason these laws existed, and playwrights staunchly guarded them was that writers and actors were kept on a considerably short leash by their audiences. They had to regard their clientele with great seriousness if they wanted to maintain and enjoy any success—their audiences came to the theater practically waiting to be insulted. Established by King Louis XIV in 1680, the state-sponsored Comédie-Française theater in Paris was the main venue for tragedy in all of France. Because of its exclusivity and the prosperity of the audience, the spectators held an unusual sway over the proceedings and felt empowered to intervene when the aforementioned laws of French theater were in danger of being broken. The audience was notorious for behaving in direct contrast to the laws they enforced, policing the stage proceedings with repeated mock laughter, whistles, and catcalls (Pemble 33). While this manner of discipline presumably intended to shame the actors and their accompanying playwrights for their oversight against the rules, the practice of calling out at the smallest offense may have served as a type of release for the well-mannered upper echelon of Parisian society.

If France had developed into the sovereign nation of taste, and the Comédie-Française remained its stronghold and living symbol of goût, then its fiercest defender was unquestionably Voltaire. The famed French critic and playwright is often credited with bringing Shakespeare to his countrymen, and while this is partly true, as he did make the first small translations calling

attention to Shakespeare's plays during that era, he eventually became one of Shakespeare's loudest and most livid detractors. But before Voltaire, Shakespeare's plays were in select circulation as early as 1675, and mentioned in passing (usually positively) in a small variety of French publications from the late 1600s into the second decade of the 1700s, before De La Roche directly critiqued *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Richard III*, and *Henry VI* in 1717 (Haines 6). While De La Roche may have delved into some plays' details before Voltaire, he did not do as much to bring the name of Shakespeare fame (or infamy) in France as Voltaire did. J. J. Jusserand explains Voltaire's ability to command attention by saying he possessed a certain gift responsible for his opinions always being heard and read to a greater extent than others of his generation: his "voice is clearer...[and that he writes] as though [his] ink were blacker" (180). Criticism was only part of Voltaire's connection to Shakespeare—he also adopted and translated his plays. In actuality, Shakespeare was introduced into France in his native English through regal subscription. The first documented mention concerns a copy of the Second Folio that appeared in the Royal Library along with a portentous note from the librarian: "This English poet has a beautiful imagination, his thoughts are natural, and his expression fine: but these good qualities are obscured by the filth which he introduces into his comedies" (quoted in Haines 5). This unintentionally prescient commentary foreshadows the attitude of many French critics for nearly three hundred years afterward. As late as 1947, Jean-Louis Barrault insisted of Shakespeare, "Opinions have not changed since Voltaire" (quoted in Pemble 143). Voltaire's estimations would carry great influence in his native land and leave an indelible mark upon the French chapter of the Shakespearean legacy.

As far as the French chapter of Shakespearean history is concerned, Voltaire started it all. Simultaneously interpreting pieces of Shakespeare's tragedies and commenting on their

shortcomings, he stoked the accusatory flames, blaming England for carrying a torch for their unofficial national poet. When his initial discourse on the subject, *Lettres philosophiques ou Lettres sur les Anglais*, was first published in France it was not the only word on the subject, but the timing of its release coincided with a growing interest in English literature, and the criticism was coming from a well-known writer (Jusserand 181). Readers soon learned that Shakespeare “boasted a strong fruitful Genius: He was natural and sublime, but had not so much as a single Spark of good Taste, or knew one Rule of the Drama” (Voltaire 87). The absence of good taste and inattentiveness to vraisemblance, convenance, or bienséance was enough to render his plays unstagable in France.

Voltaire did not totally malign the tragedies, admitting that they contained “beautiful” and “noble” passages, but he also made it a point to focus on the multitude of “dreadful Scenes” amounting to “monstrous Farces” within Shakespeare’s tragedies (87). He listed some exemplary offending passages, beginning with the domestic violence of *Othello*, wherein “a Man strangles his Wife on the stage; and that the poor Woman, whilst she is strangling, cries aloud, that she dies very unjustly,” continuing with the disrespectful comedy of *Hamlet*, which displays “two Grave-Diggers make a Grave, and are all the Time drinking, and singing Ballads, and making humourous Reflexions on the several Skulls they throw up with their Spades,” and also mentioning the unacceptable mixing of classes in *Julius Caesar*, in which the audience is subjected to “the Jokes of the *Roman* Shoemakers and Coblers, who are introduc’d in the same Scene with *Brutus* and *Cassius*” (87-88). Voltaire’s believed Shakespeare’s brilliance was mired by aesthetic norms of his time and national background, but his influence over Voltaire’s contemporary playwrights was what had him worried. Because he saw Shakespeare’s peculiar abilities as flawed, he was disgusted that others like Otway (particularly in his *Venice Preserv’d*)

thought Shakespeare's plays were models worth emulating (88). He believed any genius of Shakespeare's was outweighed by a lack of goût and an ever-present illogical oversight of the classical unities of time and place (Cuvelier 33). Yet Voltaire's largest quarrels with Shakespeare stem from the idea that genius is a wild trait, and a hindrance to reason; he ends his chapter *On Tragedy* saying, "the poetical Genius of the *English* resembles a tufted Tree planted by the Hand of Nature, that throws out a thousand Branches at random, and spreads unequally, but with great Vigour. It dies if you attempt to force its Nature" (Voltaire 92). He also grapples with the knowledge that Shakespeare is of another age, yet he feels he must contextualize his lack of taste (and explain Shakespeare's playwriting failures as a result of the proliferation of English taste in particular) as a kind of innate treason that can only be cured through French interpretation.

Voltaire did translate Shakespeare, often inadequately and incorrectly. In relating the problem of English to French verse translation, poet Yves Bonnefoy calls Voltaire's rewriting of the most famous soliloquy from *Hamlet* "a complete travesty of Shakespeare, and precisely because of that facile and totally unpoetic alexandrine which was the principal cause of the vapidness in the theater" (Bonnefoy 214). In his translation of the "To be or not to be" speech, Voltaire edits his translation as if it were a curiosity "from which the French genius had to be protected" (215). Oddly enough, Voltaire admits the soliloquy is his own interpretation, but warns future translators: "Woe to the Writer who gives a literal Version; who by rendering every Word of his Original, by that very means enervates the Sense, and extinguishes all the Fire of it" (Voltaire 90). Essentially justifying his attempt at capturing Shakespeare's spirit without giving a word-for-word translation, Voltaire excuses any oversights in his vision of the work, while clinging to the standard rhythmic, rhyming pattern that Bonnefoy blames for ruining French

drama; this is the same poetic form Voltaire defends as a necessary resistance to blank verse in French. And while Voltaire acknowledged the difficulty of translation, reminding readers that they are seeing only “a faint Print of a beautiful Picture” (Voltaire 89), he defamed the kind of unrhymed dialogue Shakespeare employs as unbecoming the superior French national theater, contending that blank verse is “born of inability to conquer difficulty, and the urge to finish quickly” (quoted in Pemble 79). Calling Shakespeare lazy is only one of many insults Voltaire issued to the English theater and its most famous writer, knowing well that he was losing the war against slow change to the national dramatic aesthetic.

When Voltaire began his foray into the criticism of English drama by profiling Shakespeare as a man capable of fleeting brilliance but typically burdened by unforgivable errors, it was not the assault he is remembered for: that was to come later in his life. Quite the contrary was true, in fact, as French patriots who were appalled by his willingness to praise a foreign writer, even minutely, shouted down the *Lettres philosophiques* (Haines 13). Yet for all of his shock at Shakespeare’s glaring lapses in bienséance, Voltaire may have been in greater disbelief over Shakespeare’s neglect concerning the unity of action. He deemed this Aristotelian principal of tragedy one of the “fundamental rules of the stage,” that was continually broken by Shakespeare: “he would allow himself to change the place almost at every scene, to heap up thirty or forty actions on one another, to have a dramatic action last twenty-five years” (quoted in Cuvelier 33-34). The public had to take Voltaire’s word for it—there was little else relating the works of Shakespeare until 1745, when Pierre-Antoine de La Place published his *Théâtre anglais*. Upon its release two things happened: firstly, the French were able to read the initial attempt at translating an entire Shakespeare play, and secondly, someone was willing to defend Shakespeare with claims that his talent outweighed his mistakes. His *Théâtre anglais* was the

first differing French voice on Shakespeare worthy of consideration, with La Place offering a more direct translation of the text than previously available through Voltaire's highly subjective writings.

From a quantitative standpoint, *Théâtre anglais* was a more ambitious set of volumes than Voltaire's *Lettres philosophiques* because it tried to encapsulate, or at least give a feeling for, the entire Shakespearean output. Choosing to incorporate a mix of alexandrines and prose to approximate the flow of Shakespearean dialogue, La Place's anthology tackled *Richard III*, partially translated nine works (outlining the missing sections), and quickly summarized the remaining plays in a language that was admittedly rife with "great liberties," and "feeble imitations" (quoted in Pemble 81-82). His main purpose was to instruct the French that theater audiences could be satisfied in ways besides those that they had previously been exposed (Haines 22). La Place explained the merit of the work by its staying power and entertainment value: "Shakespeare's reputation has held good for a hundred and fifty years... Would the modern English go to these plays on purpose to be bored, if admiration and pleasure did not attract them?" (quoted in Jusserand 221). He tried to lessen the crimes against bienséance by shifting the selections he translated so as not to offend his readership. This was the opposite approach of Voltaire, who throughout his career insisted on relating the goriest and most vulgar parts of Shakespeare to discredit the work as uncivilized. And while La Place bowdlerized many of the plays so that they could feed an ever-increasing intellectual Anglophilia in France with as little resistance as possible, he may have gone too far (Cuvelier 36); when expounding the differences in style, he practically justified the use of multiple plots and genres. This was enough to stir up La Place's detractors. In retaliation, Voltaire translated the most scandalous pieces of *Othello* to prove that the French were being tricked (Pemble 82). But La Place was not to be the last

Frenchman to interpret Shakespeare: there was more to come that would further interfere with Voltaire's analysis, as well as his credibility as a translator.

It may have taken years since the publication of *Théâtre anglais*, but Shakespeare was working his way into the consciousness of the French intelligentsia. The skeletal translations that were published were already appreciated by an increasing number of readers. But it was not until Jean-François Ducis' version of *Hamlet* debuted at the Comédie-Française in 1769 that Shakespeare was admitted into the French dramatic world. Previously, the closest the French had come to watching a performance on their own soil was when famed English actor David Garrick offered spontaneous recitals in Parisian salons in 1751 (Pemble 4). And while Voltaire staged plays that lifted plots or devices based on Shakespeare (*Zaïre*, *La Mort de César*, and *Mahomet* were basically Bowdlerized rewrites of *Othello*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Macbeth* respectively, and *Sémiramis* introduced a ghost on stage à la *Hamlet*), he never credited him, never so much as bringing up the Englishman's name (Golder 4). But Ducis gave credit where it was due and then some. Not only was he the first French playwright to formally stage a Shakespeare play in France, he was also the first to retain the original titles and character names, bravely announcing a certain undeniable Englishness about the plays themselves (5). Ducis had continued to reinterpret Shakespeare throughout his life, witnessing the Comédie-Française performances of *Roméo et Juliette*, *Le Roi Léar*, *Macbeth*, and *Othello*. Ducis' versions of the play, while recognizably Shakespearean in their plots and characters, are not based purely on his own hands-on approach to the original material.

Ducis was highly indebted to La Place's *Théâtre anglais* and Pierre Le Tourneur for his exposure to and understanding of Shakespeare. In 1776, Pierre Le Tourneur began releasing the first two volumes of his twenty-volume *Shakespeare, Traduit de l'Anglois*, possible in no small

part to Court subscription; the first ten pages even included a dedication to King Louis XIV (Cuvelier 37). The royal backing helped to quell the aggression of negative (and often xenophobic) critics, ensured the financial success of Le Tourneur's openly augmented translations (again, for the sake of bienséance, but not with the same obvious timidity of the La Place edition), and also proved Shakespeare's worth as a saleable commodity. Le Tourneur's series also guaranteed that Ducis would understand Shakespeare more fully; amazingly, Ducis could not speak or understand any English, and so, as a subscriber to Le Tourneur's twenty volumes he benefited in a manner unlike any one else (Pemble 96). La Place and Le Tourneur had brought Shakespeare further into the public's eye than Voltaire's earlier, widely known introduction, and Ducis raised his tragedies to the French stage. With Ducis' successful stage adaptations, Shakespeare's popularity began to swell to a level bordering on deification, and in the eyes of Voltaire this worship was putting the French theater and its laws in peril.

In the same year that Le Tourneur's *Shakespeare, Traduit de l'Anglois* was published, Voltaire wrote a letter to the Académie Française expressing his outrage. But what or who was he outraged about exactly? Himself, for his principal mistake of trying to explain Shakespeare to France? The public, for accepting other translations and adaptations superseding his earlier *Lettres philosophiques*? La Place and Le Tourneur, for deciding there was a need to explore Shakespeare to a greater extent than he explained in his own writing? To decry the surge in Shakespeare's popularity as an effrontery to his own work?

The evidence suggests that Voltaire was probably angry due to all of the above reasons, and perhaps some others stemming from a complicated amalgamation of jealousy, intolerance, and the onset of senility. If he was jealous, it was because others had cut into his role as Shakespearean scholar and translator; and as a playwright himself, Voltaire's plays were losing

ground to the work of an Englishman dead for well over one hundred years. The fact that his struggle concerned an English writer alone explains the intolerance—the rivalry between the two nations is well documented, and Voltaire’s years of temporary expulsion to England did not fully alter his opinion of the island nation and its people. And although the differences between the sixteenth-century English idea of tragedy and the eighteenth-century French conception of tragedy were still quite different, Voltaire was not content to explain the distinction by time alone—he was convinced that approving of Shakespeare was tantamount to accepting a Trojan horse sent by the grotesque-infatuated English, who were mounting an underhanded attack on fine French culture.

Before addressing the Académie Française directly, Voltaire wrote to his friend and Académie member, d’Argental. In the letter he felt empowered to name names and get everything off his chest—something public decorum would stop him from doing in his upcoming official address to the Académie (Lounsbury 359). His letter displayed considerable anger for Le Tourneur and his repackaging of Shakespeare: “Have you read two volumes of this wretch, in which he wishes to make us look upon Shakespeare as the only model of genuine tragedy?” Voltaire then takes exception with the national differences: “He sacrifices all the French without exception to his idol...He does not even condescend to mention Corneille and Racine...Will you put up with the affront which he has offered to France?” Turning to a kind of conspiratorial paranoia that begins with an introspective fault-finding, Voltaire blames himself, all the while denigrating Shakespeare as best he can: “That which is frightful is that the monster has a party in France; and to fill up the measure of the calamity and horror, it is I who long ago was the first to speak of this Shakespeare. It is I who was the first to show the French some pearls which I had found in his enormous dunghill. I did not then expect that one day I should contribute to trample

under foot the crowns of Corneille and Racine in order to adorn the brow of a barbarian stage-player” (quoted in Lounsbury 360). What Voltaire hoped to achieve may have been some kind of national ban from the Académie Française, halting performance or instruction of Shakespeare. But it was too late—despite the profusion of offenses to *vraisemblance*, *convenance*, and *bienséance*, the French acknowledged the many engaging, insightful, and beautiful aspects of Shakespearean tragedy.

Throughout his life Voltaire continued to indict the mistaken populace across the Channel for their unwarranted bardolatry. Realizing his imagined war was already over, and because he had exposed the Gallic people to the destructive forces of the Anglo-Saxons, he had said later in life, “I’ve seen the end of reason and taste. I shall die leaving France barbaric!” (quoted in Pemble 5).

After Voltaire’s death, Napoleonic era critic Julien-Louis Geoffroy faulted him for weakening French drama and character by whetting the hunger of the French with the proliferation of English stage blood. Geoffroy called Voltaire’s followers “the cruelest enemies of humanity,” and concluded that the French “should leave to the English their scaffolds, their executions, their monstrous horrors” (quoted in Pemble 14). The French never expelled Shakespeare once he was let in and then legitimized in print by Le Tourneur, and on the stage by Ducis. In the nineteenth century, Shakespeare was updated, assuring that Voltaire’s initial “mistake” was given new life. “Reproducing” rather than merely “translating,” François-Victor Hugo’s exhaustive Shakespeare (including all the plays and sonnets) was published between 1857 and 1865 (Pemble 90). It was the first time both *goût* and *bienséance* were completely ignored in favor of creating faithful adaptations. Again, Shakespeare was legitimized, this time to a new generation of French critics, scholars, and dramatic audiences.

*Legitimized Shakespeare vs. Bastardized Shakespeare*

Although the old French suspicion of the English and their cultural ways still exists, there is no denying that Shakespeare has been absorbed into French culture. He was localized and legitimized long ago. But this statement of acceptance and authenticity of the professionally produced show (as product) leads to several questions worthy of examination. What does the legitimization of an author's dramatic work amount to? Do we understand legitimacy solely as the result of a consensus of a particular group (like the opinion of a type of theater and its audience—especially one restricted to performing for a certain social status, or widely regarded as a cultural testing ground) that regards a play worthy enough to stage? Conversely, what does it mean for a work, or an adaptation of a work, to be considered illegitimate?

As theater competes with an ever-increasing plethora of media for an audience's time, attention, and the economic threat of the real estate market, in order to control their own physical space for an extended period of time (from one evening to months or longer), the line between high art and low art, exclusivity and popularity, legitimacy and illegitimacy is getting further blurred. What did it mean in the time of Voltaire?

In connection with Shakespeare's approval in France, legitimacy obviously meant a great deal to those who felt that their culture was erroneous in turning its back on a playwright the rest of Europe already extolled and whose works it performed regularly. All of the previous examples of writers and translators were fighting an establishment that believed Shakespeare was an illegitimate playwright (if not a downright uncivilized one) due to his failure to follow the classical unities and the French rules of decorum. As previously explained, the hard-line refusal eventually slackened due to a reshaping and reimagining of the original plays, and with a necessary boost from the Comédie-Française, Shakespeare became legitimized in France. But

these “valid” written adaptations and performances responsible for the change in perception did not exist as the sole eighteenth-century French visions of Shakespeare.

There were some opera-comiques, musicals of three acts or less based very loosely on Shakespeare after La Place, before Le Tourneur’s publications, and before Ducis’ *Hamlet* debuted. Critics from the time of the performances until today have felt that these adaptations did not warrant any Shakespearean connection whatsoever. Golder describes the plays as “intended for the illegitimate stage,” and not derived “from a Shakespeare tragedy,” and therefore outside “seek[ing] prestigious consideration reserved for full-length, serious works on the legitimate stage” (4). The plays in question are *Georget et Georgette* by Harny de Guerville (1761) and Rachon de Chabannes’ *Hilas et Silvie* (1768), based on scenes from *The Tempest*, and Antoine Bret *Les Deux amies, ou le vieux coquet* (1761), and Sedaine’s *L’Anneau perdu et retrouvé* (1764), derived from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The location of performance and the intended audience—both unsavory in eighteenth-century Paris—were key reasons defining the illegitimacy of these plays. But does this designation come down to the seedy environment in which the performances were staged, or the plays’ actual content?

Any dramatic work that included music would prevent French audiences from categorizing the performance as worthy of the legitimate or serious theater, and this predisposition stems from the shared exacting vision of what constituted proper theater. Conversely, the English theater most probably included music from its inception as an expected part of the theater experience. In performance during his lifetime, it is believed that Shakespeare’s plays usually began with musical interludes and productions staged at the Globe usually concluded with an onstage jig (Gurr 33). Additionally, many Shakespeare plays reflect the inclination toward musical passages and songs directly in the script—Feste in *Twelfth Night*,

Ariel in *The Tempest*, or the Grave-digger/Clown of *Hamlet* are some prime examples (Dent 524). If we consider the perception of music's relationship with drama as a national difference, can we conclude that legitimacy/illegitimacy is simply a cultural conception? And if so, to what do we owe the quick dismissal of the aforementioned opera-comiques from the usual discussion of French Shakespearean history? It would appear that the same thinking behind the formation of a legitimate/illegitimate dichotomy, the same that would categorically decide what drama was worthy of an audience of aristocrats and bourgeoisie, brought about the adherence to the unwritten-yet-immutable laws of French theater.

The conception of a historically unified French national theater may be behind the strict parameters for acceptance or rejection of a work, particularly one attempting any major dramatic variation. This established critical paradigm put Alfred Jarry at odds with his audience during the *Ubu Roi* debut in 1896: although Jarry never explained *Ubu Roi* as an adaptation, an analysis of the drama suggests otherwise. It is readily seen how Jarry draws from *Macbeth*, among other Shakespearean tragedies, but also, and perhaps more importantly, how Jarry adapts Shakespearean devices, staging, and the creative license of someone masterful at the art of constructing language to suit his dramatic purposes. In any case, it is doubtful that promoting *Ubu Roi* as an adaptation (of Shakespeare, no less) would have placated his audience's response to its innovative and intentionally scandalous content. Jarry's wordplay set off a firestorm at the theater, and another immediately followed in the press: critics furiously debated *Ubu Roi*'s worth and legitimacy to the French stage, much like others had with Shakespeare 150 years earlier. And while *Ubu Roi* is both a mixture of Shakespearean tropes and a reworked version of a collaboratively-written schoolboy farce, the pervasive non-serious mood, the historically inaccurate and implausible action, the bawdy songs and indecorously strange verbiage, and the

total disregard for the unities (outdoing Shakespeare by leaps and bounds), suggest that Jarry was attempting to destabilize the bourgeois mentality that clung to goût and to the suffocating conception of legitimate theater.



## **The Son of the Drunkard and the Lunatic Makes a Monster**

Judging by Alfred Jarry's passing reflections on his childhood, French bourgeois mentality was responsible for tearing his family apart. Alfred's father Anselme epitomized the ineffectual yet conventional characteristics that Alfred came to associate with the entire bourgeoisie. Anselme worked as a traveling textile salesman who was as unsuccessful in business as he was keeping his wife Caroline happy. His meek presence became a figure worth rebelling against for Alfred's mother, and indirectly, for Alfred himself.

Caroline left Anselme in 1879, taking six year-old Alfred and his older sister, Caroline-Marie from the claustrophobic, provincial town of Laval to the location of her father's retirement, the coastal village of Saint-Brieuc in Brittany (Lennon 18). Because Jarry identified with his mother's cultured, wealthy, Breton side of the family (and their noble ancestors), he embraced his heritage; he was entranced by the gloomy Breton countryside and became fluent in the Breton language, prohibited by the French government in an attempt to officially unify the language of France (16, 19). During this time Alfred excelled in his studies at the lycée Saint-Brieuc, and felt inspired to produce his first poems, many of which were about the Breton landscape (19). In 1888, the three would leave Saint-Brieuc for Rennes (where schoolboy friendships would have direct bearing on Alfred's later success in drama), and stay there until Alfred's seventeenth year when he relocated to Paris for university preparation.

Once on his own, Alfred Jarry was enveloped by Paris and her artistic community that would recognize his talents and make him a significant figure within it. His life remained ineluctably connected to fin de siècle Paris, where he resided exclusively until 1903. In the following year he relocated south of the city, near the Seine at Coudray, where he became deathly ill; from this time onward he split his time between his sister and caretaker Charlotte in

Laval and his friends in Paris (Lennon 82). He eventually returned to Paris in 1906, only to have his health slowly deteriorate over the course of the following two years. He died on November 3, 1907.

Granted, there are a great many significant details between the arrival of the hopeful scholar and the burial of the famous playwright and poet. But as Justice-Malloy has written: Jarry is known for “his ability to conceal facts about his life and personality” (Justice-Malloy “Alfred Jarry”). Piecing together the dates and the locations of events and has not been the easiest of tasks for biographers—and the reasons for his personal decisions are often speculative at best, and pure fiction at worst.

Alfred Jarry was born on September 8, 1873, in the midst of Anselme and Caroline’s crumbling relationship. For all of the couple’s incompatibilities, they managed to create a son who would be famous either because of or in spite of traits that would later define him in popular society and in literary history: Anselme’s alcoholism and Caroline’s eccentric, nearly insane behavior. During Alfred’s earliest years, Anselme was often hiding from his uncomfortable home life in the taverns of Laval, commiserating with men of the town who were certainly familiar with his extroverted wife (Lennon 17). And while Anselme’s genetics may have predisposed Alfred to an alcohol addiction, it was Caroline’s family’s hereditary insanity, her unconventional habits (which may or may not have been directly related to her mental health), and her strong insistence on education that Alfred internalized and intentionally adopted.

Caroline influenced her son’s behavior in a way that no one else would. She remained the most singularly dominant figure in Alfred’s life until early adulthood when Père Ubu, his own fictional creation, would extend beyond his inventive drive, usurp his personality, and fuse with his father’s dipsomania and his mother’s fiercely independent dramatic psychosis. In conflict

with the prevalent church-centered ways of life of the devout Catholic residents of Laval, Caroline stressed the importance of the arts; she bought a piano for the house (disregarding Anselme's fiscal plight to provide for the family despite his failing business), was an avid reader of books that were not the Bible—an act worthy of suspicion in the highly religious community, and stubbornly played the role of the town attention-grabber (Lennon 17). In addition to publicly berating her husband for his commercial shortcomings, she was often dressed wildly, sometimes in costume, and usually seen wearing exotic hairstyles and makeup (Justice-Malloy "Ubu"). Although her choosing to be clad differently from the Laval citizenry is certainly no proof that she suffered from the same mental illness that afflicted her institutionalized mother and brother, Caroline's behavior supports either an inherited or nurtured trait that manifested itself in Alfred Jarry the showman, the prima donna, and the dangerously unreasonable party guest. By leaving Anselme in 1879, and eventually resettling the remaining family members in Rennes, Caroline tried to positively influence the development of young Alfred's scholarly and artistic qualities in their primary stages, and in doing so, she planted him in the supportive, fertile ground that allowed him to cultivate a personality no less bizarre and conspicuous than her own brazen one.

Caroline's actions and wardrobe may have served as a perpetual middle finger in the face of the traditional, reserved communities she lived, and Alfred became similarly enamored with rebelling against conformity and authority. As a wise child with a chip on his shoulder, he had produced imitations of romantic poetry à la Victor Hugo, but also delighted in derisive satires that parodied the local citizens (Seidel). Alfred was "half brat, half prodigy," and embodied a common French archetype, the *potache*: "a French word for schoolboy [that] connotes mild toleration for the frenzied play acting of adolescence" (Shattuck 189). Jarry would remain the *potache* throughout his life, the role transposing with age so that his smug teen brattiness would

reemerge as a calculated outrageousness in society and art, while his genius would serve him later in the construction of his highly symbolic and frequently impenetrable texts. During the middle of his teenage years his potache persona intensified in Rennes and he seems to have made a habit of acting out, making it very strenuous for his teachers to continually bear.

Since Alfred was such a brilliant student, his behavior was generally overlooked at the Rennes lycée, where he excelled in his classes, winning awards in chemistry, French composition, English, German, Latin, and Greek—all with little effort and leaving him ample time to follow his own interests (Lennon 23). His private reading tastes included studies of the cabala, heraldry, and the writings of Rabelais, Goethe, Coleridge, Poe, the Comte de Lautrèmont, and Shakespeare (Shattuck 193). No evidence remains to tell us if he read Shakespeare in English or in translation, nor whose particular French or German version he preferred. We also do not know if he decided to study Shakespeare completely on his own, or if he was following up on an assignment merely touched upon at the lycée; we are certain that he read classic Latin and Greek texts extensively outside of school, and he may have sought these out due to the language courses in those respective languages. And while it has been documented that by the 1920s French secondary schools taught translated versions of *The Tempest*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *Merchant of Venice*, and *As You Like It*, and interestingly, some also included a history of “Shakespeare in France in the eighteenth century: growth of his fame; translations and imitations,” there is no concrete proof that any of the above titles or historical scholarship was part of Alfred’s schooling experience some thirty odd years earlier (Mellor 32, 34). It would appear that Jarry chose to read Shakespeare of his own free will, that he was smart enough to thoroughly understand it, and enjoyed the works enough to try to adapt pieces of it.

Various Shakespearean works served as models for a play titled *Les Polonais* (*The Poles*), written as a collaborative effort between Jarry and his schoolmates Henri and Charles Morin. As Jarry's brusque personality, very short stature, jerky motions, and robotically staccato voice did not attract many casual friends, the Morin brothers were counted among the few close relationships with peers Jarry enjoyed (Shattuck 189). Attending school at the Rennes lycée brought the three together, and it also offered them fodder for their ever-expanding imaginations. The prime example of inspirational source material became the main character of *Les Polonais*: the boys' physics teacher, Felix Hébert.

Monsieur Hébert was the classic example of the absent-minded professor, but he was to become a much more grotesque and absurd character in the hands of Alfred and the Morin brothers. By 1888, when they began taking classes at the lycée, Hébert had already been a popular target of playful student pranks for years, and was legendary for an inability to keep his classes from falling into utter chaos (Shattuck 190). The three boys used their ridiculous and entertainingly confused instructor as an anti-hero in their privately written adventures. He appeared in many epic stories, usually cast into rewritten versions of other authors' books that the boys were reading (191). This simple adaptation blueprint, driven by a desire to make one another laugh, led to the refinement of their schoolboy parody technique in the puppet play, *Les Polonais*, considered the ur-*Ubu Roi* text. Produced in the Morin attic (renamed for the occasion as the "Théâtre des Phynances") with the help of Alfred's sister Charlotte, and several other students, the physics teacher they loved to mock was transformed into an id-driven monster marionette. Hébert's physical features were basically stomach-centered—a bloated ghost-white figure dominated by a gidouille—a massive belly; other notable physical characteristics included a retractable ear and three teeth made of iron, stone, and wood (Shattuck 190, 203). In the play

he was called Père Heb, most likely a development of the student nickname Héb , by which he was popularly known.

Later that year, the three boys teamed up again to produce the play *Onésime; ou Les Tribulations de Priou (Onanism; or, The Tribulations of Priou)*. Much like *Les Polonais* was the basis for *Ubu Roi*, *Onésime* served as the original script for *Ubu Cocu, ou l' Archéopteryx (Ubu Cuckolded, or the Archaeopteryx)*, the first of two *Ubu Roi* sequels--the last play being *Ubu Enchanté (Ubu Bound)* Jarry would publish in 1900 to complete the *Ubu* cycle (Justice-Malloy).

Although at age seventeen, he was already a creative force with the Morin brothers, Jarry left Rennes for Paris. Shattuck, Seidel and others suggest that he left of his own accord, while Lennon says that realizing the shortcomings of the Rennes lycée, Caroline pushed him out the door in hopes of getting him better preparation for a university entrance exam (29). Whatever the actual impetus, in the fall of 1891 Jarry began studying at the Parisian Lycée Henry IV in order to ready himself for testing that he hoped would gain him admission to one of the highly coveted twenty-five openings at the Ecole Normale Supérieure.

Over the next two years, Jarry repeatedly tried and failed to pass the entrance exam to the university, but he balanced his educational failures by successfully making connections in the Parisian literary world and expanding his own writing repertoire. The latter developments impacted his decision to abandon his original academic plans and follow newfound opportunities. Having made friends with editor of the *Mercure de France*, Alfred Vallette, and his novelist wife Madame Rachilde, Jarry appeared regularly at their Tuesday receptions; he quickly became a sensation that he was resourcefully able to parlay into notoriety among other bohemian circles (Shattuck 194). Jarry was also busily obtaining recognition for his contributions in Vallette's journal, and other publications like *L'Echo de Paris* and *L'Art*

*Littéraire* for his pieces on art journalism, poems, sketches, as well as a Symbolist closet drama, *César-Antéchrist*. Symbolism embraced intentional ambiguity and Jarry's play certainly mystifies with its indefinite messages and confounding action, but one section of the play—its most literal part (the “earthly” section)—features an adapted and reworked version of *Les Polonais*. This passage exposed a small readership to the character of Père Heb (now Père Ubu), and while not Jarry's very first attempt at revisiting Père Heb's exploits (he first appeared in print in 1893's “Guignol”), it set the stage for Ubu's reappearance later in his career.

Although his writings were being published regularly in literary magazines, it was Jarry's peculiar appearance and mannerisms that most likely increased his fame in the Parisian literary world. Jarry had already taken on his mother's style of dressing outrageously: he donned a costume that regularly included a hooded provincial cape, tall, gleaming stovepipe hat, dirty cyclist pants, ruined canvas shoes that exposed his toes, and a pistol or two, which he was known to stock with blanks for firing at excited moments of the evening or to keep strangers at a distance (Shattuck 193, Lennon 33). His wild persona was rounded out with a ludicrous daily drinking schedule of absinthe and wine, keeping him perpetually removed from the grip of sobriety. All of these elements may have helped his celebrity, his imagination, and his idea of a different reality (the one in his head—Jarry subscribed to the idea of perception-as-reality, subjectivity over objectivity in a “true hallucination”), but his constant excessive alcoholism (with little food to counterbalance the effects) took its toll on his health. Jarry came down with influenza in early 1893, and after his mother and sister came to Paris to take care of him, Caroline Jarry became ill with the disease. She died in May of 1893 from influenza, and the epidemic struck Jarry's father as well; Anselme died a week after Caroline (Lennon 35). Jarry

recuperated, and overcome with sadness, he increased his drinking and writing, using his small family inheritance to fund his absinthe purchases and continued literary efforts.

In the following year, Jarry became both publisher and contributor. Along with coeditor Remy de Gourmont, Jarry issued *L'Ymagier*, a review of popular and religious prints (Shattuck 196). In 1894, the *Mercure de France* released his *Les Minutes de Sable Memorial (The Records of the Black Crest)*, a collection of poetry and prose (Lennon 37). Amidst all of this creative productivity, Jarry was unexpectedly drafted and ordered to report to Laval in November of 1894. Momentarily interrupting his publishing and socializing efforts, his service time depressed him greatly but nevertheless, his slight and odd presence must have been comical in the French army setting. Often kept out of sight of the other soldiers, Jarry was reassigned from conventional armed forces training to menial housekeeping tasks (Lennon 42). Desperate to get back to his bohemian lifestyle, Jarry hastened his freedom from the military by injecting himself with picric acid that turned his skin yellow, thus confusing the army doctors into giving him an honorable discharge for having gallstones; Jarry insisted that he was let loose for “precocious imbecility,” and many months before his release was official (in December of 1895) he returned to Paris (quoted in Lennon 42). In 1897, he reinterpreted his alienating military experience in the book *Les Jours et les Nuits, roman d'un déserteur (Days and Nights: Novel of a Deserter)*, but his time in the army was perhaps most famously put to use in 1896, in the battle scenes of the full version of *Ubu Roi*.

### *Ubu Emerges*

If Jarry's mother had dominated his psyche until the mid-point of 1896, it was his reconceived version of his old physics teacher, Monsieur Hébert, who cast a huge shadow over

the rest of Jarry's oeuvre and ultimately consumed his identity. By 1896, the bulk of *Ubu Roi* was published in six separate pieces, and had helped to drum up substantial interest. One of Jarry's greatest supporters, Paul Fort, excitedly published *Ubu Roi* over the course of two issues in his journal *Le Livre d'Art* (Shattuck 203, Beaumont 90). By June of the same year, the first edition of *Ubu* appeared in book form, to mostly favorable reviews. At this point, the possibility of producing *Ubu* still seemed highly unlikely, but Jarry's luck changed when his friend Aurélien Lugné-Poe, director of the symbolist and anarchist-leaning Théâtre de l'Œuvre, asked him to become secrétaire-régisseur of the drama group. While Lugné-Poe was away on holiday, Jarry worked with great fervor throughout the summer, planning the upcoming season, which he made sure included *Ubu Roi* (Shattuck 204). Upon his return, Lugné-Poe made no attempt to remove Jarry's play from that autumn's upcoming roster of shows, but as late as November of 1896 the director became unsure about producing *Ubu* with any success. Jarry was promoting it for months with flyers, posters, published articles, and the aforementioned pieces of the work in *Le Livre d'Art*, so he was desperately working towards its actualization on stage; after explaining his deceptively basic and cost-effective production choices to Lugné-Poe, the director relented (206).

The expectant crowd that assembled that December at the Salle du Nouveau Théâtre was primed for Jarry's widely advertised play.<sup>1</sup> Most of those in attendance were fellow writers and critics who already knew which side they were on, predisposed supporters or detractors, ready to use *Ubu Roi* as a battleground for the progress of French theater. And while there were some

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<sup>1</sup> The actual date of the infamous debut performance differs between sources: authorities like Roger Shattuck state the *Ubu* melee was on December 11<sup>th</sup>, while others like Claude Schumacher place the chaotic rehearsal on December 9<sup>th</sup>, insisting that a much calmer second show took place at the première on the 10<sup>th</sup>. As the details of Jarry's private life are confused and often debated, it is appropriate that the date of his legendary work in two scant, yet infamous performances remains unsettled as well.

poor subscribers who were not fully aware that they were about to view an assault on traditional drama, the majority of those in attendance were most likely waiting to either defend or attack Jarry's adaptation of a schoolboy farce.

Jarry was about to make theater history, and his pre-show jitters made it obvious that he was concerned with how his debut writing would fare. The playwright wore a baggy, black suit, matted hair, and a powder white face to greet the restless audience from behind a table while he furiously gulped down water (Lennon 48). He spoke for roughly ten minutes, first thanking the supportive critics in attendance before giving a brief explanation for the play and its production choices; those in attendance who documented the performance insisted that during this prepared monologue Jarry was even more mechanical in his voice and movements than usual (Shattuck 206). Jarry took his table and exited the stage. The curtain rose to reveal the actor Firmin Gémier (borrowed from the Comédie-Française) wearing a wide, white, pear-shaped costume approximating the extended defining *gidouille*, further emphasized by concentric circles drawn from the center (207). Here was Ubu.

He spoke: "Merdre!"

Jarry's infamous opening line was an obscenity that can best be translated into English as Cyril Connolly and Simon Watson Taylor's shushing and spittle-producing "pschitt!" or Barbara Wright's teeth-clenching "shitt!" It was a curse word somehow made to sound filthier by the addition of an extra consonant. The moment Gémier unleashed the misshapen term it sent the theater into pandemonium. During the next fifteen minutes some fled in disgust at what they just heard, and simultaneously an argument between Jarry's followers and hecklers of an opposing view shouted back the opening line above the din of a fist fight which had broken out in the orchestra pit (Lennon 49). The standing audience quieted down and returned to their seats when

Gémier improvised a dance—but the order only lasted until the following time he repeated the offending word that started the Act One (Shattuck 208). The play was continually interrupted by a barrage of cries from the offended conservatives and rebuked by the symbolist and anarchist factions who were undoubtedly pleased to bear witness to a dramatic piece that could elicit such an outpouring of emotion—especially negative ones; conflict was often the intended reaction of the artistic terrorists who ascribed to a new, more politicized vision of art’s function in society.

The violence at the *Ubu* performance was the temporary result of a gathered mass of people that held fundamental differences in opinion, but the heart of their argument continued to forge a lasting impression in the press. Defending critics (mostly those Jarry thanked in his introductory speech) passionately praised *Ubu*, and the conservative old guard spoke disparagingly of it; according to Shattuck both sides were well represented: “Jarry’s friends saw to it that every critic was present at the première” (205). But ignore the play as Jarry’s detractors might have liked to, even Henry Fouquier of *Le Figaro*, who was embroiled in a print battle with Jarry supporter Henry Bauer of the *Echo de Paris*, felt the urge to comment: “It strikes me that his performance brought a kind of release...At least it has begun to put an end to the Terror which has been reigning over our literature” (210). The majority of critics agreed that even though *Ubu* was childish and that on many levels may have been nothing more than a series of idiotic, slapstick actions scattered about a hackneyed plot, it existed and could not be blasted into oblivion. Its very presence heralded a change of some kind.

A revolutionary poet in his own right, William Butler Yeats, was in attendance at the debut performance. In his autobiography, Yeats recalls his reaction, supporting Jarry’s theatrical innovations, but also revealing his deep concern about what *Ubu Roi* may represent:

I go to the 1st performance of Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*, at the Theatre de

l'Oeuvre, with Rhymer who had been so attractive to the girl in the bicycling costume. The audience shake their fists at one another, and Rhymer whispers to me, "There are often duels after these performances," and explains to me what is happening on the stage. The players are supposed to be dolls, toys, marionettes, and now they are all hopping like wooden frogs, and I can see for myself that the chief personage, who is some kind of king, carries for a sceptre a brush of the kind that we use to clean a closet. Feeling bound to support the most spirited party, we have shouted for the play, but that night at the Hotel Corneille, I am very sad, for comedy, objectivity, has displayed its growing power once more. I say, 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.

(quoted in Shattuck 209)

In spite of Yeats' limited French, he was still profoundly affected by both the spectacle of the play and the public reaction to it. But the already established conflict between theater ideologies that helped to spread a promotional excitement for *Ubu Roi's* debut also gave Jarry an underground fame long before his dramatic aims became a point of debate at the performance; as far as Jarry's fame was concerned, he was in the right place at the right time. Probably unbeknownst to Yeats, the clash that unsettled the Irish poet was the result of months of critical division. The two camps were ready to voice their differing opinions at Jarry's play before it ever began, and the outbreak of violence at the debut legitimized the critical battle in the newspapers for weeks afterwards. But post-*Ubu*, Jarry's biggest problem with his work was not ideological or political—it was financial. He was never able to replicate the amount of attention and critical interest again in his lifetime, and with his diminishing celebrity among Paris literati

Jarry suffered from an ever-dwindling income. Lugné-Poe never risked any other productions with Jarry, taking his resentment one step further by refusing to stage any avant-garde drama, or even the work of *any* French playwrights (!) in conjunction with the Théâtre de l'Œuvre; Jarry found himself in serious danger of ending his theater career before it truly started. Due in no small part to Lugné-Poe's negative reaction, Jarry moved away from writing drama, and instead focused on novels, essays, and poetry (Lennon 55-56, 67).

Once his attention was turned away from writing for the theater, Jarry penned some of his most important works, such as the previously mentioned novel *Les jours et les nuits* (*Days and Nights*) in 1897, *L'amour en visites* (*Visits of Love*) in 1898, *L'amour absolu* (*Absolute Love*) in 1899. After the turn of the century, he wrote two novels about sexual geniuses; *Messaline* (1901) is the female story set in ancient Rome, and *Le Surmâle, roman moderne* (*The Supermale: A Modern Novel*), published in 1902, is the futuristic story (it takes place in 1920) of a multi-orgasmic man who meets his cataclysmic end due to a kind of erotic electrocution by an invention called "the love machine" (Jarry, *Supermale* 134).

Jarry's most challenging novel, *Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll, 'pataphysicien* (*Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, 'Pataphysician*), was completed in 1898, but he never lived to see it published in 1911. Subtitled "a Neo-Scientific Novel," *Faustroll* expounds the theories behind Jarry's own invented 'Pataphysics ("the science of imaginary solutions" that studies "the laws which govern exceptions," describing "the universe supplementary to this one" [Bunzli "Alfred Jarry"]) and tells the story of Doctor Faustroll's journeys "from Paris to Paris" on a sieve, accompanied by a bailiff after him for eleven months of back rent, and a dog-faced baboon limited in speech to "Ha-ha!" The character is capable of telepathy, and continues in his travels to another dimension where he measures death, and lives to talk about it. *Doctor*

*Faustroll* is science fiction story, symbolist adventure tale, critical satire, and drug-fueled travelogue told by a man who refuses to be held down because he insists on satisfying his lust of scientific discovery.

In fact, Faustroll's name comes from the compounding of the famed overreaching Faust and the cave-dwelling creatures called trolls; Jarry was familiar with the supernatural beings from Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, which was performed by the Théâtre de l'Œuvre during the same season as *Ubu Roi*. As Nigey Lennon perceptively suggests, by naming this crossbred Rabelaisian and H.G. Wells-type character Faustroll, Jarry explains his view of the "duality inherent in mankind"—that we are partly "driven to seek after higher truths even if such a search ultimately means our destruction," and partly vulgar animals only seeking to satisfy our immediate needs (67-68). In *Doctor Faustroll*, the reader is taken through hilarious blasts of absurdist humor, intensely creative views of both the physical and metaphysical worlds, and obscure passages that are thick with verbose, perplexing episodes that may never be properly understood. Apparently, Jarry was well aware of his writing ahead of his time, as he signed his manuscript with the note, "This book will not be published integrally until the author has acquired sufficient experience to savor all its beauties in full" (*Faustroll* 159).

In trying to come to terms with the often-contradictory information about Jarry, his art, and his identity, Roger Shattuck sees the novel's main character as another form of Jarry himself. "How better to define Jarry after all this than as a great 'Pataphysician? The word suggests both scientific rigor and farcical wand waving and permits him the combined qualities of comedian and wizard. His violated life is as much implicated in the word as his writings" (247). Shattuck continues to discuss the elusive quality of the author and his sense of humor, entertaining the idea that the pataphysical world is Jarry's own open-ended world of explosive imagination—a

place of possible opposites, which unfortunately, often leads to complete inaccessibility (250). *Faustroll* is a very ambitious novel and one that asks more questions than it answers, and it is unlike *Ubu* in that its plot is not wholly simplistic (either deceptively so, or otherwise).

And while *Faustroll* may embody the full range of Jarry's thoughts about the various possibilities of multiple existences, an idea evident in his maxim of envisioning his life as a kind of unending figment of the imagination, he did not attempt to *become* Dr. Faustroll in name or practice. This is an important point, because Jarry did call himself Père Ubu. It is Jarry's metamorphosis into his own creation that we find one of the oddest biographical stories in all of literature, a story more bewildering than *Doctor Faustroll*, and stranger than the main character from the *Ubu Roi* play with whom Jarry would merge his identity.

### *Art Imitates Life Imitates Art Imitates Life Imitates Art*

In an almost chicken-or-the-egg situation, or perhaps better represented by the ouroboros (the archetypal snake that bites its own tail), Jarry became his character of Ubu as Ubu had become Jarry. As mentioned above, Ubu was based on Monsieur Hébert, Jarry's physics teacher at Rennes, but once written into *Ubu Roi*, and because of its adaptation to the stage by an actual actor instead of controlled from above by a guignol puppeteer, the persona of Ubu grew into a confrontational force of greed, violence, and cowardice; this destructive figure surpassed the capabilities of the fat puppet used in *Les Polonais*. Gémier, the actor who played Ubu in the play's only two performances during Jarry's lifetime (and once more in the year following Jarry's death), took a cue from the playwright who expressed his belief that there should be an "adoption of an 'accent' or better yet, a special 'tone of voice' for the principal character" (quoted in Shattuck 205). Looking for this distinct voice, Gémier was told to look no further

than Jarry himself by the equally confused theater director, Lugné-Poe (Beaumont 94). According to accounts of the play, Gémier spoke Ubu's lines in Jarry's self-styled articulation (Schumacher 27). By having Ubu belch his menacing words in Jarry's own stunted, non-inflected accent, Gémier and Lugné-Poe may have unwittingly tied Jarry to his trilogy's primary role forever.

Jarry's unique style may have helped to give rise to his demi-monde celebrity status in literary Paris, and it is possible that this could have been the impetus for Gémier's decision to mimic him as Ubu: if Jarry himself was already a well-known character, how better to popularize his childish monstrosity? After the notorious performances at the Salle du Nouveau Théâtre, Ubu the character was often seen by his friends and many critics as an extension of Jarry himself, whatever Gémier's reasons for choosing to emulate the character's author. And while the possibility exists that Jarry told Gémier to copy his voice, there is no supporting documentation that Jarry directed his lead actor to do so. Although both performances of *Ubu Roi* were finished in 1896, this was a psychological relationship that continued to develop throughout Jarry's life. Certainly, the playwright was largely to blame for his deep-seated associations with Ubu as an identity that was already either partly his own to begin with (in a schizophrenic type of multiple personality incorporation) or as the result of Jarry suppressing his true self and latching on to the figure that brought him his greatest fame. Much like critic Harold Bloom's Freudian-based theory that poets write in conflict against earlier works created by others, Jarry lived in the shadow of his own particular "anxiety of influence," only it was one that he created—Ubu became an emblem of his greatest known, albeit most juvenile, literary work that he could never surpass or rid from his conscience (Bloom 11).

Explaining Jarry's transformation after the *Ubu Roi* debut, Barbara Wright quotes biographer Paul Chauveau (in translation), who says Jarry embarked on an "Ubique career which, dispossessing him of his own personality, was to deprive him during his lifetime of the estimation of those responsible people who, after his death, were to claim so much affection for him" (Wright *Ubu* vi). In 1903, Writer André Salmon noted the large discrepancy between the exceptionally odd attention-seeker literary Paris had come to know and the relaxed, even-keeled gentleman who would take pleasure in the simplicity of country life (vii). The crazed artist capable of shooting firearms in public, calling himself Père Ubu, and referring to himself in the royal 'we' did not necessarily want to be understood nearly as much as he may have wanted to be a topic of conversation.

Not only were many of his writings difficult to fathom, Jarry/Ubu was hard to comprehend in speech as well. Much like he had fashioned a small glossary of vaguely filthy and obviously profane nonce words for Ubu to shout in his plays, Jarry took on his big-bellied character's habit of invention. His snobbishly ultra-stiff manner of speaking was called "le parler Ubu" among his fascinated and imitative peers (Lennon 62). Using this inverted speech pattern, Jarry called a bird "that which chirps," and the wind "that which blows," while he gave friends and acquaintances titles like "he who posters," for art accomplice Toulouse-Lautrec, and "he who theatres," for avant-garde founder of the Théâtre Libre, André Antoine (quoted in Schumacher 28). Remembering that when Jarry spoke he used placed the same stress on every syllable (described in 1946 by André Gide as "relentless, without inflection or nuance, with an equal accentuation on all syllables, including the mutes. There would not have been the slightest difference if a nutcracker had spoken." [quoted in Wright, *Ubu* vii]), his backward way of talking must have been a nearly unintelligible version of French for those who were not used to

deciphering the music of his voice.

In his relentless effort to act idiosyncratic, the accounts of the time imply that Jarry rarely let his guard down, as if he was always “on.” Biographers have had considerable trouble trying to understand or explain who was actually behind Jarry’s cartoonish personality. Lennon insists that Jarry’s obsession with Ubu made it possible for him to “camouflage his own inauspicious origins,” and “close the gap between life and art...thus causing many observers to confuse his life with his art” (56-57). Lennon accuses prominent Jarry scholar Shattuck of getting caught up in the playwright’s self-perpetuated myth and ignoring the psychological conflicts that lurked behind the Ubu façade.

But Shattuck cannot be blamed for concluding that it is impossible to separate Jarry from what he created. Jarry’s writing reached a level of humor beyond mere sarcasm, to a realm that is not unlike one of Shakespeare’s fools: silly and mocking, yet painfully insightful. Shattuck calls his sense of humor “an enormous, unsparing thing,” which dominated his life as his health, popularity, success, and income were in decline during his last years (248). Saying that there are two methods of comprehending Jarry’s identity, Shattuck posits that the integral part that humor played in contributing to his personality is equaled only by his fascination with masks.

Acknowledging the associations that make the mask an object loaded with symbolism and meanings, Shattuck notes that besides the repetition of the mask in Jarry’s work and theories on theater, he insists that Jarry “treats the mask as a falsity vital to survival,” because in his case, much like his Ubu personality, “the mask becomes a protection for one’s reticence, an essential lie” (249). Jarry’s character was hidden during his lifetime by a persona, and the persona became a mask to which he conformed. Essentially, the face he wore functioned “not so much [as a symbol] of falsehood as of release from inhibition” (249). Shattuck does hint at the

possible sadness that Lennon believes to have been suppressed behind Jarry's outrageous personality, but unlike Lennon who sees Jarry's Ubu self as a way to hide emotional hurt, Shattuck views his personality as a determinedly modern figure who "transformed his life into something as 'lovely as literature' and attempted to strike a new balance between seriousness and humor"; the previous quoted phrase refers to another Jarry coinage, "N'est-ce pas beau comme la littérature?" ("Isn't it lovely as literature"), something he would often say after one of his shocking public displays (251, 217). It is definitely more intriguing and attractive to imagine Jarry as a man exercising supreme control over all of his methods of expression and communication rather than a sad, literary clown.

During Jarry's last four years it was increasingly difficult for him to get any of his works published. He began working on puppet plays, magazine pieces, and eventually, the early part of a novel, *La dragonne* (Shattuck 218). The last of his works to reach publication in his lifetime were *Ubu Sur La Butte* (*Ubu on the Mound*), a two-act, musical puppet play drawn from the *Ubu* cycle, performed in 1901 and published in 1906, and his three-act 'operette bouffe,' *Le Moutardier du Pape* (Taylor 9). But these small achievements did not renew his vigor; his health began to seriously falter due to his impoverished living conditions, malnutrition, and his downgrading from his usual constant flow of absinthe to lower priced ether (Shattuck 219).

A little more than a year before he died, his health diminishing, Jarry wrote a letter to Madame Rachilde wherein his Père Ubu personality was more than usually revealing. Shattuck observes that Jarry must have been considerably vulnerable, believing he is on his deathbed, fumbles uncharacteristically between what to actually call himself: Ubu, "he," or "me" (and "I" in the post-script):

Dear Madame R.

This time Père Ubu does not write with a fever. (This is beginning like a last will and testament, but that is taken care of.) I think you understand by now that he is not dying (excuse me! The word slipped out) because of drink and other orgies.

He didn't have that Passion, and he has been so immodest as to have himself examined all over by *merdicins* [doctors]. He is without blemish, either in the liver or in the heart or in the kidneys. He is simply run down (a curious end for the man who wrote *le surmâle*; his furnace is not going to blow up but simply go out. He will quietly stop running, like a tired motor. . . .

Père Ubu is shaved and has laid out a mauve shirt just be accident. He will disappear in the color scheme of the *Mercurie* . . . and he will start out, still consumed with curiosity. He has a feeling that it will be tonight at five....If he is wrong he will be ridiculous and that's that. Ghosts were always ridiculous.

With this Père Ubu, who has earned his rest, is going to sleep. He believes that the brain, during decomposition, continues to function after death, and that its dreams are our Paradise.

Père Ubu conditionally (he would so like to return to his Tripod [name for the *four-legged* shack he kept by the Seine at Coudray]) is perhaps going to sleep forever.

Alfred Jarry

P.S. I open this letter to say the doctor has just come by and thinks he can

save me. A. J.

(quoted in Shattuck 219-20)

Jarry was temporarily saved, and he did not die for another year. During his last year his weakened condition obliged him to spend some time with his sister Charlotte in Laval, before returning to Paris in the spring of 1907 (Shattuck 221). Later that year when Jarry had not been heard from in weeks, worried friends Alfred Vallette and Dr. Saltas arrived at the Grand Chasublerie to find Jarry lying paralyzed (220). They took him to the hospital, where he fell into a coma-like state repeatedly muttering, “*Je cherche...je cherche...*(I seek...I seek)” (quoted in Shattuck 222). What was Ubu, the visionary of his own “true hallucination,” the ‘Pataphysician, been seeking in his final moments? He finally asked for a toothpick. Dr. Saltas ran out to get him a box, and Jarry held one between his fingers. According to Saltas, Jarry had “pleasure visible on his face,” but it did not last (quoted in Lennon 87). Jarry received his last request and died. It was November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1907.

Death, that inevitability which Jarry referred to in *Doctor Faustroll* as something “only for the mediocre,” captured him at age thirty-four (Lennon 69). The medical diagnosis for his illness and death was tubercular meningitis caused by his poor living conditions (Schumacher 36). In his typically illogical, pataphysical fashion, Jarry managed to defy science: while it did not help his condition, doctors concluded that his massive daily ethyl alcohol regimen had no recognizable adverse effects on his liver and kidneys (Lennon 87). In fact, in a very un-Père Ubu way, Jarry died from malnutrition, due to his faithful drinking and destitute housing during his final years. Ubu/Jarry simply fell prey to a sickness of the terrestrial reality that even he, the great disbeliever, could not ignore thoroughly enough to eradicate and overcome.

**“...Under thatte Name Many Goodlie Tragedies”:  
The Shakespearean in *Ubu Roi***

In the history of *Ubu Roi* criticism Jarry's play is rarely discussed without mentioning, at least briefly, that the basic skeleton of the plot has its roots in the works of Shakespeare. Many critics agree that the overall storyline was taken from *Macbeth*, and prominent Jarry biographer Roger Shattuck draws a few connections to elements deriving from *Julius Caesar* and *King Lear* as well (Shattuck 229). But one additional Shattuck hypothesis about the motivating origins of *Ubu Roi* concerns Jarry's debt to Shakespeare for not only pieces of the *Ubu Roi* plot, but for the Ubu character itself: Shattuck suggests that while Jarry and the Morin brothers originally looked to the classroom pandemonium of Hérbert the physics teacher for inspiration, they found a compelling model in the impulsive exploits of Shakespeare's Sir John Falstaff, “whose benignly corrupt personality could never be confined to one play or action” (229). Indeed, Ubu—like Falstaff before him—is a large, loud, and dominating presence stumbling disgracefully through a series of (mis)adventures.

Shakespeare wrote Falstaff into three different plays, two of them histories (*1 Henry IV*, and *2 Henry IV*) and one comedy (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*)<sup>2</sup>. Falstaff is often a gravitational threat: the audience's attention is constantly pulled back by his excessive personality. Falstaff's freedom to enjoy himself to a consistently obscene degree plays upon a teenage desire for experiencing the tantalizing independence of an idealized adulthood. Falstaff's physical size, criminal behavior, interest in pleasure of all kinds, and unswerving spinelessness make him an archetype Jarry may have associated with the transformation of humanity's ugliness into the comedic, as Falstaff proves himself a horrible person whose

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<sup>2</sup> Falstaff is actually indirectly included in four plays as his death is mentioned in *Henry V*, but since he does not actually appear in it and the reference serves as proof of Falstaff's mortality, its importance lies outside of this conversation of comparison—Père Ubu never dies.

repugnant actions are comedic elements acted out in their primacy (Cooper 64). Père Ubu, the undeniable centerpiece of the three of plays carrying his last name, behaves in a similarly ill-mannered and cowardly way as Falstaff, but Jarry is able to push this brand of vulgarity to places where it is never curtailed by other characters or scenes more integral to furthering the action of the play. Ubu isn't merely a friend of the powerful like Falstaff is to Prince Hal, he is also like Macbeth, the horrible usurper who becomes the very source of power. Because of this additional leverage with which Ubu tries to sate his boundless desires, he is Falstaffian to the extreme, stretching those offensive traits from gross to grotesque at every turn. Yet within the entire scope of *Ubu Roi* as text and production, the perverse clownishness that partly defines the titular character is also only a fraction of the possible Shakespearean parallels Jarry may have consciously sought to incorporate or inadvertently internalized through his voracious learning of the source material, only to then reuse and adjust for his own purposes.

The aforementioned plot outline of *Macbeth* is generally accepted to represent *Ubu Roi* as a whole, mainly because of Mère Ubu's role, functioning as an impetus for planting the assassination idea in Père Ubu's head. But from a strictly plot-driven standpoint, the play also contains a *Julius Caesar*-styled conspiracy against a Caesar/Duncan named Venceslas and an ill-omened dream of a Calpurnia renamed Queen Rosamund. Bougrelas, a Cordelia of a punished son, speaks wisdom that comes back to haunt his kingly father not unlike *King Lear*. Bougrelas' revenge is spurred on by a family of ghosts in a multiplication of the *Hamlet* example. Claude Schumacher wisely observes, the play also contains both a bear attack straight out of *The Winter's Tale* and an escape by boat reminiscent of *The Tempest* (Schumacher 55). Père Ubu's all-encompassing stomach embodies the physical deformity of his hunger for usurpation not unlike Richard III's premature misshape. The tryst hinted at between Mère Ubu and Palcontent

Gyron is a comedic twist on the racially charged adultery of *Othello*. The gruesome body count and widespread bloodshed of *Titus Andronicus* is rivaled only by Père Ubu's impulsive overuse of his disembraining machine on the representatives of the entire national structure—nobility, justices, and financiers.

*Ubu Roi* not only contains plot devices found in Shakespeare's plays, but Jarry's construction and adaptation of the source material is very Shakespearean in technique. Nearly all of the Bard's dramas are formed on plots originating from classical, Italian, or English authors' work, which he subsequently recycled. And as in Shakespeare's time when drama was a "thoroughly collaborative" act (Greenblatt "General" xi), Jarry's early work on *Les Polonais* with the Morin brothers was no different: the play that served as the basis for *Ubu Roi* was a group endeavor of combined adaptations and reimagined story elements culled from a variety of texts, very likely including some longer discarded pieces written earlier by the three boys themselves. In his early twenties, Jarry rethought *Les Polonais* and shaped it to reflect his own unique (and more mature) dramatic concepts, "while deliberately retaining the primitive flavor and earthy humor of the schoolboy tradition" (Cooper 27). He was empowered to accept or decline the use of the parts of the ur-*Ubu Roi* text as he saw fit, and ultimately, *Ubu Roi* either retained or newly incorporated many Shakespearean elements stretching beyond plot points and into conceptions of language and staging. With the luxuries of retrospective analysis and rewriting the play as a solo effort, Jarry had the freedom to once again look back to the plays of his youth, many originating three hundred years earlier and across the English Channel; this time Shakespeare's plays had double impact as they could serve as both inspiration and justification, exemplary representations useful for bolstering Jarry's convictions about the purposes and possibilities for his own revolutionary vision of drama.

### *Who Made Ubu?*

Simply put, *Ubu Roi* is the story of Père Ubu's usurpation of the Polish throne, his short-lived rule of boundless greed and terror, followed by his and his wife's ousting to France by Bougrellas, the returning rightful heir to Poland. Along with the recognizably Shakespearean dramatic intrigue and archetypal key characters (who despite either their preposterously repugnant or Eastern European surnames are often figures based on characters originating in Shakespearean tragedies), it is also probable that the formation of the original storyline of *Ubu Roi* (in its previous incarnation as *Les Polonais*) was influenced by Emmanuel Chabrier's *Le roi malgré lui* (*The King in Spite of Himself*), a well-received comic opera that opened to Parisian audiences in 1887 (Shattuck 208).

Much as *Ubu Roi* and its riot-inducing debut has often been credited with liberating French theater through Jarry's crude yet radical language, *Le roi malgré lui* was noted for the composer's unorthodox (but in no way offensive) use of particular chords in yet untried ways (Myers 76). Chabrier's contemporaries Satie and Ravel recognized and supported the work's pioneering qualities, the latter of the two having often been quoted as saying the debut of Chabrier's opera "changed the direction of harmony in France," while a critic from *L'Événement* went so far as to call it "an important musical event likely to bring about a real revolution—a fruitful revolution—in the modern theater" (quoted in Charlton 409; quoted in Myers 76). If these assessments are correct, the first public performance of this musical innovation was a bloodless revolution, as it occurred without the crowd violence that marred *Ubu Roi*; but just as Jarry's play was confined to two Parisian performances during his lifetime, Chabrier's first run

of shows been held to three scant dates before a fire completely destroyed the Opéra-Comique<sup>3</sup> (Myers 76). All of the positive and groundbreaking traits of Chabrier's comic opera are to be found in the music—not in the complicated and flimsy libretto that may have resonated with Jarry and the Morin brothers. The storyline is as follows: in 1574, French Prince Henri has reluctantly been elected to the Polish throne, and mixing with the citizenry in disguise, joins a conspiracy to murder the Polish king (himself!) hoping to find an exit strategy back to France (70). As it is possible *Ubu Roi* recycled the idea of a Frenchman involved in a scheme to overthrow the Polish king, the idea does not originate there, as the libretto of *Le roi malgré lui* was itself a recycled work (and also not unlike *Ubu Roi*), a collaborative effort.

The title and general plot of Chabrier's opera derive from an 1836 comedy loosely based on the real-life history of French royal and selected Polish ruler, Henry de Valois (who became King Henry III of France upon the death of his older brother Charles IX [Zamoyski 128]). Emile de Najac and Paul Burani concocted the unconvincing story Chabrier decided to use as a basis for his opera, and because the originators were “two rather obscure hack writers...who it seems were not even good at their job,” the project began under unfavorable circumstances (Myers 69). Beginning work on his opera with a problematic libretto led Chabrier to recruit his friend Jean Richepin to help put the confused plot in order. Eventually, Richepin became fed up with the arduous job of correcting instead of creating, and left the fixing of Najac and Burani's third act to Chabrier himself (70). According to his notes, the composer's reaction to this unplanned collaboration appears positive: “We have here a bit of everything—a bouillabaisse of Najac and Burani cooked by Richepin and spiced by myself” (quoted in Myers 69). While the public consensus about the opera was that its plot was exceptionally confounding and ridiculous,

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<sup>3</sup> It must be noted that while the initial run of *Le roi malgré lui* was held to three shows, Chabrier saw it revived numerous times. Between the latter part of 1887 and 1888, fourteen additional Parisian performances took place, and many others were staged across Germany during his lifetime as well (Myers 77).

Chabrier must have felt the finished product was satisfyingly formed through an indirect collective effort with Richepin, and that overall, they had improved upon Najac and Burani's jumbled storyline.

The similarity between the plot of *Le roi malgré lui* and *Ubu Roi* are clear, but just as both works share a history of adaptation and collaboration, the men responsible for bringing the public each of these respective pieces were ultimately held back by these works and unable to garner much attention for any serious creations that followed. As Jarry's comedic trilogy of *Ubu* plays and *Ubu*-related writings dominated his psyche and overshadowed the rest of his more serious and symbolist oeuvre, Chabrier is remembered only for his light comic operas, having "never found the appropriate dramatic medium to contain the expression of his extraordinary sensibility" (Charlton 409). Because Chabrier's usual librettist Catulle Mendès (the person most often cited for persuading Chabrier to try writing the serious operas for which he was generally considered unsuited) also wrote for and about Parisian theater, it is possible, but unprovable, that Jarry and Chabrier may have met through this mutual acquaintance during the later half of the 1890s. If they had met, this might provide some additional link between Jarry's play and Chabrier's operatic predecessor. But this anachronistic speculation reaches beyond tracing literary influences, as *Le roi malgré lui* was already playing to audiences a year before Jarry collaborated with the Morin brothers on *Les Polonais*, and we have no documentation from Jarry mentioning the consultation of Chabrier's opera again during the time between *Les Polonais*' transformation into *Ubu Roi* (Myers 53, 144). The temptation exists to link the biographies of the two men since they were both notable figures in the creative boom of fin de siècle Paris, yet no accounts reflect any meeting. While Mendès would have most readily served as intermediary,

his main roles were as librettist and theater critic—in these he was noteworthy for serving both Chabrier and Jarry respectively.

The day after *Ubu Roi*'s debut performance, Mendès wrote a positive review for *Le Journal* recognizing the dramatic strides of Jarry's play. Ironically, in Mendès' long list examining possible similarities and sources of the Père Ubu character, he failed to see or mention any connection to his collaborator's opera from less than a decade earlier:

...in spite of the idiotic action and mediocre structure, a new type has emerged, created by an extravagant and brutal imagination, more a child's than a man's.

Père Ubu exists.

Compounded of Pulcinella and Polichinelle, of Punch and Judy...of Monsieur Theirs and the Catholic Torquemada and the Jew Deutz, of a Sûreté policeman and the anarchist Vaillant, an enormous parody of Macbeth and Napoléon, a flunky become king, he nevertheless exists unforgettably....He will become a popular legend of base instincts, rapacious and violent; and Monsieur Jarry, who I hope is destined for a more worthy celebrity, will have created an infamous mask.

(quoted in Shattuck 210)

Regardless of Mendès' inability to discern a parallel between the two works, the influence of Chabrier's patchwork libretto is evident in Jarry's play, and at the very least displays the closeness of subject matter.

In their teenage years, perhaps Jarry and the Morin brothers giddily found the chaotic plot development of *Le roi malgré lui* to be inadvertently funny—even funnier than the libretto's

intended jokes—and the proliferation of nonsensical plot events worth emulating in their own absurd play. If so, *Ubu Roi* may also be a deliberate pastiche combining juxtaposed influences: the “low” art of vaudevillian comic opera and schoolboy farce mixing with the “high” art of Shakespearean and classical tragedies. But even considered in this low/high construction, the previous examples do not exhaust the potential wealth of material that may have helped form the adapted basis of the play.

Another possible source for a major portion of *Ubu Roi* comes from another Frenchman, whose book attempting to extol the virtues of gastronomy is almost as difficult to define as *Doctor Faustroll* in that it reads as part nutritionist rant, part medical history study, and part dinner party etiquette advice column. Jean Brillat-Savarin’s *Physiologie du Goût* (*The Physiology of Taste, or Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy*) originally published anonymously in 1825 (Machen xiv), discusses goût as it pertains to food, not to the theater that the book may have indirectly influenced over half of a century later. A chapter entitled “Examples of Obesity” contains a military anecdote about a Polish king named John Sobieski whose tale of narrow escape is reminiscent of Père Ubu’s flight from vengeful, young Bougreilas and the reclaimed royalist Polish army: “As for the King of Poland, his obesity came near being the end of him; for, being forced to flee from before a large body of Turkish horsemen, his breath failed him, and he would certainly have been done to death, had not some of his aides-de-camp supported him, half-unconscious, in his saddle, while others generously sacrificed their lives to check the advancing enemy” (Brillat-Savarin 179).

While the near-fatal combination of corpulence and warfare is discernable in various scenes throughout Jarry’s play, it is also notable that a character named John Sobieski actually appears in Act Five of *Ubu Roi*—not as the king, but as an aid and fellow soldier backing

Bougrelas' return to power. Sobieski is confined to one aggressive line, the last to be spoken by the rightful Polish royalty before the Ubs (as Jarry always called the couple) and company make their escape to France: "Hit them, go on hitting them, the scoundrels are getting away" (71).<sup>4</sup> In reality, John Konstanty Sobieski was known as a visionary politician and strategic, brave fighter until his weight and advanced age curtailed his physical abilities on the battlefield (Zamoyski 186). In the scope of French history, Sobieski was important for signing the treaty of Jaworów in 1675 in order to form a united front against Prussia, but Sobieski's forces were unexpectedly pressured to subdue the invading Turks, and the Jaworów campaign became his greatest international failure (187). Brillat-Savarin's remarks about Sobieski more closely approximate the girth and inanity of Père Ubu and his lack of fighting prowess, than either the historical Sobieski, or the Sobieski who makes a cameo in the play. And while Jarry changed the assailing nation from Turkey to Russia (in 4.3 and 4.4), and then to the royalist Poles (in 5.2), the actual national identity of Père Ubu's attackers is less relevant than their role as pursuing agents. Ultimately, it is because of his gluttony that the Ubs are exiled. His arbitrary yet insatiable desires are only part of his problem, the other being the tangible result of those desires. As revealed by his grossly oversized and misshapen belly, the physical manifestation of his endless want causes him to be an ineffectual soldier and brings about the end of his rule in Poland. It is Père Ubu's irrepressible greed that makes him who he is, and combined with Mère Ubu's occasional devious push, his desires are the engine driving the action of the play. *Ubu Roi* is ultimately the story of a man stupidly and happily at the mercy of a maniacal stomach—a

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<sup>4</sup> Most of the quotations from *Ubu Roi* in English are taken from the Cyril Connolly and Simon Watson Taylor 1968 translation, which (while not always the most direct language conversion from French) strives to retain the flavor of Jarry's difficult words—particularly the twisted curse words. Citations show the page numbers from this Connolly and Taylor version. For an occasional alternate interpretation, I have drawn from the more literal-minded Barbara Wright 1961 edition, and citations will note this change. All character names are given in the original Jarry form: even in quoting from Connolly and Taylor, I have ignored the translators' commendable attempt at Anglicizing Jarry's French transliterations of Polish pronunciations. Additionally, all of the French is taken directly from Jarry's *Tout Ubu*.

stomach that seems to have given up feeding the rest of its oddly shaped body, as it has turned its attention to digesting an entire nation.

It is believed that both Chabrier's opera and Brillat-Savarin's food tome may have influenced the teenage Jarry and Morin brothers in their creation of *Les Polonais*, as both works had enjoyed a reasonable amount of fame. But it is also possible that these two artifacts, which were part of a larger pool of cultural works floating in the consciousness of the populace, invited mental associations and imitation by their very presence in the worlds of French music and letters. Certainly, there is also the likelihood Chabrier, Brillat-Savarin, and the Jarry/Morin brothers' disparate works merely happen to include some similarities because of their treatment of comparable subjects. And while Chabrier's opera contains an important connection between France and Poland that is mirrored in the overall *Ubu Roi* story that Brillat-Savarin's book does not, the proliferation of similarities to Shakespeare's tragedies in *Ubu Roi* basically forms the majority of the plot from start to finish. Though the Shakespearean plot twists appear blatant in some scenes (Mère Ubu's *Macbeth*-like assassination suggestion and the *Julius Caesar*-like events that follow between King Venceslas and his wife Queen Rosamund) others are more subtle and difficult to prove as specific adaptations. Certainly, it appears possible that Jarry and the Morin brothers adapted elements from both Chabrier and Brillat-Savarin, but since both works were based on historical fact the opera and book may have simply alerted the boys to the existence of this odd chapter of French royal history.

Chabrier, Brillat-Savarin, and Shakespeare's works outlined the bulk of Jarry's play, and while there is no concrete proof these elements were intentionally recycled it would be a remarkable coincidence if they were not. The Shakespearean sources Jarry may have borrowed from quite possibly remain second or third-hand usages from the Morin brothers (and possibly

handed down through other students mocking Felix Hébert at the Rennes lycée years before the Morins' arrival). Additionally contributing to the process of disconnect between playwright and originating material (or genealogical removal of the writer from the source of the influences), lies in those Elizabethan/Jacobean dramas that influenced Jarry. As those works were often themselves derived from Shakespeare's reinterpretation of a history, play, or poem, we are tempted to wonder whose ideas are we studying. For instance, it is generally accepted that *Macbeth* in its Shakespearean fictionalized form most probably originates from the Scottish section of Raphael Holinshed's *The Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (Greenblatt, *Will* 335). And although art does not exist in a vacuum, we must try to discern where along the chain of influences between works the successive links are no longer bearing any sway: so far as *Macbeth* is concerned, Holinshed may have mattered to Shakespeare, but Holinshed's influence is probably best described as faint and indirect on Jarry. Ultimately, because of the perceived distance between original and copy, some may still insist *Ubu Roi* is not Jarry's play at all, while others (if not the same people) will insist that *Ubu Roi* is likely based on plays written by someone other than Shakespeare. Disregarding either playwright's work as a kind of thievery or illegitimate appropriation is misguided, because regardless of the weight the inspiring piece bears on the work that emulates it, new ground must be tread in order to re-present thematic ideas, plot constructs, or even genre conventions. Regardless of both the many collaborative portions and preexisting elements traceable in either author's works, the plays did not write themselves.

Shakespeare's playwriting achievements and his influence on the development of the English language are indisputable, but the existence of any irrefutable proof of his genuine authorship, unfortunately, is not. Due to what some consider a lack of definitive evidence,

voices of dissent challenging bardolatry (or any kind of academic cult of worship dedicated to Shakespeare's genius) have made considerable noise about the true authorship behind Shakespeare's work. While these literary conspiracy theorists have not disproved the connection between the man known as William Shakespeare and the plays and poems attributed to him, the ideas of the unconvinced survive. And while we may find the question of authorship a pointless distraction from the beauty or power of his work, the problem may still occasionally cast a modicum of doubt as we read, especially when we feel compelled to ascribe biographical associations to the material (see Stephen Greenblatt's biography *Will of the World* for a well-written, more recent example). Understandably, the shared creation of playwriting understood to have taken place between Shakespeare's scripting hand and his company of actors' improvisations (not to mention the plausibility of additions or subtractions made from scribal transcripts and printers) is a much less intriguing idea than pondering the identity of another secret author outright (Greenblatt, "General" 70). Many of the anti-Stratfordian faction have guessed at possible esteemed figures like Oxford, Edward de Vere, Francis Bacon, William Stanley, or Christopher Marlowe as the genuine author behind Shakespeare's body of work, and vehemently argue the cause of who they believe to be their particular maligned author (Andrews "William Shakespeare"). Because the shameful impropriety of writing for theater was much too dangerous for a respectable man, especially one of royalty, many suppose people like the Earl of Oxford would have had to work in secret, possibly forgoing public credit for his writing in order to continue doing what he loved. The centuries of distance and the lack of remaining documentation from Shakespeare's life have clouded the issue, but it is still extremely difficult for the anti-Stratfordians to gather conclusive proof for their cause. Yet even with the assistance of advancements in record keeping methods during the twentieth century, less than twenty years

removed from Jarry's death (and aided by the ambiguous details of his life, no doubt), he too was subjected to a similar attempt at literary historical revision concerning his authorship of *Ubu Roi*.

After Jarry's death in 1907 there was little to resurrect his name from obscurity. The only substantial attempt to remind the public of his contributions to the world of letters appeared in 1908 in the form of a failed circus-styled revival of *Ubu Roi*, starring the original Père Ubu actor, Firmin Gémier (Schumacher 110). A dormant period followed until the Dadaist demonstrations between 1921 and 1922 renewed interest in Jarry's pioneering symbolism, along with an appreciation for the stylistic innovation and seemingly visionary depiction of mass-murder within *Ubu Roi* that had been chillingly echoed by the violence across Europe during the First World War (Shattuck 223). Selected pieces from Jarry's writings were later republished in two volumes to satisfy the next wave of readership interested in the man-machine from Laval, appealing to the admiring, the fascinated, and the combative book buyer alike.

Coinciding with the re-release of Jarry's work was a pamphlet intending to raise as much controversy as Jarry had himself in 1896: Charles Chassé's *Sous le masque d'Alfred Jarry? les Sources d'Ubu Roi* (*Under the mask of Alfred Jarry: Sources of Ubu Roi*). In the publication, Chassé examined *Ubu Roi* not as the product of collaborative work between Jarry and the Morin brothers, but as evidence of outright thievery, calling *Ubu Roi* an act of plagiarism committed by Jarry against the true authors, Charles and Henri Morin, who had both long since become artillery officers (Cooper 32). While in one breath accusing Jarry of stealing the work, in the next the belligerent writer of this exposé attacked the play for having no literary merit. To prove his point, Chassé went to great lengths, corresponding with the Morin brothers and trying to locate an elusive green notebook that apparently contained a finished version of *Les Polonais* written before Jarry ever moved to Rennes; the point of finding this relic "was not simply to

restore credit to the rightful authors of the play,” but to “discredit the play itself and along with it all the literature of an entire period” (35). The notebook was never found, yet Chassé used the Morins testimonials to strengthen his argument that the play’s success was due to a turn-of-the-century zeitgeist causing many critics to get caught up in a momentary lapse of judgment, permitting bad taste to spread, and along with it, critical acceptance (if not undeserved praise) of the symbolist school from which Jarry was associated (45). The Morins had no investment in the continued success of the play (as they had no legal claims to it that they could prove), and dismissed *Ubu Roi* saying that there was nothing in it worth being proud of (36). They also added that due to all of its immature scatology they found it hilarious that any French critics praised it at all, reinforcing Chassé’s point about *Ubu Roi*’s sensational, unearned reception.

Apparently, the base nature of the play became yet another reason that the Morins felt compelled to have nothing to do with it. Like the theory behind the belief in an unconfirmed aristocratic Shakespearean ghostwriter that proposes such a person would have maintained considerable detachment from lowly societal sectors like the theater out of necessity, so do the Morin brothers’ reasons for suffering years of anonymity imply that they felt the play was an embarrassing and frivolous thing of their youth, both behind and beneath them. In undermining the social and linguistic innovations that critics recognized within the play, the Morin brothers even went so far as to say that the play’s opening (and oft-repeated) line, “Merdre!” was not the result of Jarry’s inventive assemblage, but rather, that it came about because of the brothers’ young age and their parents’ forbidding their use of the actual swear word—the extra ‘r’ fixing the problem (“voilà tout,” said Charles Morin) (36).<sup>5</sup> Naturally, Jarry could not defend himself

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<sup>5</sup> Many will agree with Neil Blackadder, who writes, “...the addition [of the extra ‘r’] actually serves to underline rather than camouflage the obscenity. A word that has been disguised but remains absolutely recognizable draws attention to itself” (Blackadder 186).

against the Chassé/Morin campaign, but his aesthetic successors came to protect and even enhance his reputation as a visionary playwright.

Just as the battle raged in the press after the short-lived run of the play in question, so too did the argument over Chassé's assertions about it (Shattuck 223). The words conservative theater critics once condemned Jarry for writing were in danger of being ascribed to others, while simultaneously bashing him for stealing lines they considered worthless and disgusting in the first place. Almost as if his harshest opponents were waiting for such a moment to come out of hiding, they seized the chance to condemn Jarry again in the press, and the negative outbursts had the Dada constituency of the French literati up in arms. Jarry's detractors gleefully received Chassé's pamphlet as verification of their long-held opinions, while the forefront of the progressive literary world vehemently defended one of their prophets. Due in no small part to the excess of press coverage, interest in Jarry was given new life; critic Pierre de Saint Prix had remarked, "More ink has been spilled about whether or not Jarry is the author of *Ubu Roi* than on investigating the question of Naundorff's being the son of Louis XIV" (quoted in Shattuck 223).

In 1947, Chassé tried to revive his argument, as well as bolster his mistaken idea that Jarry was responsible for discovering Rousseau (something Jarry never claimed), and under the title *Dans les coulisses de la gloire: D'Ubu-Roi au douanier Rousseau (Behind the Scenes of Glory: From Ubu Roi to the Customs Officer Rousseau)* Chassé's book was reissued with additional substantiating articles (Beaumont 16). The new version of the book did not appear to make a great impact, nor did it conflict with the widely accepted understanding about *Ubu Roi*'s collaborative origins. Since the time of Chassé's last book on the subject, Jarry's authorial claim to the play has remained virtually uncontested, certainly to any comparable degree it had been disputed by the Chassé/Morin argument, one which has long since fallen into insignificance.

Shattuck insists, "...the truth...had been clear all along. A play originally written in collaboration had become Jarry's by default. His new title and revisions made it indisputably his" (223-24). Time, estrangement from the Morins, and personal investment in *Ubu Roi* certainly favor Jarry's authorship over his childhood friends', but the recontextualizing of the work—taking it from makeshift puppet theater of the Morin family attic, having it published in literary magazines, and then struggling to have it produced with live actors—affords Jarry a right to recognition based on the change in circumstances surrounding the transmutation of the play. This change from potache object to reassessed adult drama should clear him from charges of malevolently appropriating the play, regardless of the unverifiable Chassé/Morin accusations maintaining that Jarry only instituted the slightest changes from the version of *Les Polonais* scrawled in the missing green notebook. Much like Thomas Kyd is assumed to have written a long-lost play about a Prince Hamlet, the prospect does not make Kyd's non-existent work the definitive source of what we now call *Hamlet*; nor does the possible existence of such a work prove that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* does not contain a sufficient amount of Shakespeare's own writing, despite any inspiration he may have taken from (or any direct adaptations he may have reconceived outright) Kyd's play, other revenge tragedies, or even from the original twelfth-century version documented in Saxo the Grammarian's *Danish History* (Greenblatt, *Hamlet* 1661-62).

Discussing story connections and sources once again returns us to the question of adaptation: what constitutes legitimacy? If we can agree that *Ubu Roi* is a valid adaptation of Jarry's previous collaborative endeavor with the Morins, to what degree can we qualify his version of the produced *Ubu Roi* play as a legitimate adaptation of numerous Shakespearean works, dialogue, and staging techniques? In her article on *Macbeth* in France, "Monsieur

Macbeth: From Jarry to Ionesco,” Ruth Morse distinguishes types of adaptations by using the following identification arrangement: “slash and burn,” “knock off,” or “smash and grab” (Morse 113). The “slash and burn” category is the Voltaire translation type that “represents, corrects, and replaces;” the “knock off” is the imitation variety incorporating elements “as it were with a checklist in hand;” and the “smash and grab” technique acquires a singular feature from a larger whole and attempts to fashion something new out of it. Placing an adaptation in the last category can imply a certain wish to protect or better the appearance of a work, as in the “affiliative gesture” Morse says Jarry supporters applied to *Ubu Roi* by trying to link it to *Macbeth* (113). Or this third type of adaptation might exemplify a slightly cannibalistic inspiration, as in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, which Morse contends “may be the earliest ‘smash and grab’” (113). And while she admits that the inclusion of Hecate and the chanting witch scenes in *Macbeth* might make it a “smash and grab” itself (due to the songs originating in Thomas Middleton’s play, *The Witch* [Greenblatt, *Macbeth* 2560]), like *Ubu Roi*, we have only our suspicions but no any tell-tale authorial diagrams among the source material to help us decide.

Morse posits that because of the Voltaire/Ducis tradition of loose interpretation, the French understanding of Shakespeare was made flexible from the start, and thereby confused, contributing to the French readership’s isolation from the original English meaning of the work. Because of this “kind of ‘received familiarity,’ in which what is known...may not accord with any English-language edition of the play at all,” the aforementioned French perception of Shakespeare began as an interpretive vision, and continued even after the plethora of later attempts at direct translation (Morse 113). In essence, Morse contends that the French idea of *Macbeth* in particular (seen as a conventionally developed political story about the perpetual cycle of ambition and power), as a link between Shakespeare to Jarry, was initially possible and

demonstrable after its production, only because of the distance created by critical separation from the original *Macbeth* text. In other words, *Ubu Roi*'s casual cataloging as a *Macbeth* adaptation or parody is an afterthought based on topical similarity of subject within both plays and not much else. Because of a "lack of daggers, sleepwalking; ghosts or witches," in *Ubu Roi*, Morse attributes the accepted Shakespearean connection to "Jarry's brilliance as a publicist or perhaps just his good luck," resulting from his original supporters' "need to legitimate Jarry's scandalous puppet-show...[by reaching] for Shakespeare" (118). Morse makes a strong case for her conclusions about why *Ubu Roi* is always mentioned along with *Macbeth* particularly (especially when there are so many other identifiable characters and plot constructs incorporated from other Shakespearean dramas), but she is overlooking certain details to make this point. In fact, there are parodies of omnipresent daggers in the ubiquitous and bizarre weaponry Père Ubu wields or mentions, sleepwalking is visible in Père Ubu's sleep-talking soliloquy at the end of Act Four, and the Shakespearean ghosts are provided in the murdered royal family's spirits' visitation prompting young Bougreles to Prince Hamlet-like revenge. This multiplication of vengeful ghosts is Shakespearean in its excessiveness: Shakespeare transposed the storyline of Plautus' *Menaechmi* by doubling the comedic problem of separated twins through the addition of a second pair of estranged twin servants in *The Comedy of Errors* (Greenblatt, *Comedy* 685). Perhaps Morse would consider these examples coincidental, and in the last instance, a case of the right device implemented in the right style, but a device taken from the wrong source nonetheless. Even so, this is only one of *two* ghost visitations (Mère Ubu is chased from her pillaging of the former Polish Kings' crypt in 4.1 by the ghost of John Sigismund)—meaning the elements are certainly there.

So can we classify *Ubu Roi* as simply a “smash and grab,” a misappropriated adaptation nullifying the many *Macbeth* qualities it features because of its lack of completeness and its inability to focus solely on one Shakespearean source? Or can we accept the work as a partial variation on the original, legitimately drawing from other Shakespearean dramas as well? The adaptation question does not seem fully answered by Morse’s contention that we are simply dealing with an extra-textual matter invented by Jarry’s literary circle in an attempt to gain respect and publicity for his play. By this measuring stick, we render the *Ubu/Macbeth* relationship a purely parasitic one benefiting only the younger work, and we ignore the obvious shared similarities in the two plays beyond the bond shared in their thematic exploration of power and ambition. And while we cannot confine the Shakespearean parallels of *Ubu Roi* solely to the Scottish play, we must acknowledge the tropes, symbolic objects, and archetypal figures deriving from it.

*Ubu Roi* calls our attention to Shakespeare right at the start, as it begins with a dedication page stating in Jarry’s own invented archaic French: “Adonc le Père Ubu hoscha la poire, dont fut depuis nommé par les Anglois Shakespeare, et avez de lui sous ce nom maintes belles tragédies par escript” (Jarry, *Tout* 29). Preserving the antiquated feel of the words, the message has been translated by Connolly and Taylor as “Theratte Lord Ubu shooke his peare-head, whence he is by the Englysshe yclept Shakespeare, and you have from him under thatte name many goodlie tragedies in his own hande” (19). A more direct, yet less Jarry-flavored translation of this inscription appears before the Wright version as “Then Père Ubu shakes his peare which is afterwards called Shakespeare by the Englishe and you have many excellent tragedies written by his hand under this name” (Wright 8). In typically Jarry-esque inverted logic (or pataphysical rationality), Ubu the character is not only part of a parody that appropriates Shakespearean

characters and plot devices—he *is* Shakespeare—or at the very least, that is what the English call him! Schumacher offers a mathematic interpretation: “Ubu = Shakespeare = author of *Macbeth* = author of *Ubu* = Ubu!” (55). Perhaps Jarry found it fitting to begin with a joke about the Shakespearean literary trove he was about to plunder through farcical parody, or maybe this is a backward confession alerting the reader that the script for this play is indebted to Shakespeare for many of its elements.

While biographer Keith Beaumont calls the epigraph “facetious,” he is all too sure that the Shakespearean “borrowings” are examples of simple “parody or spoofing for its own sake, born of a schoolboy disrespect for the ‘great’ and the revered” (Beaumont 116, 318). I am unconvinced by Beaumont’s interpretation; he construes Jarry’s influence and intentions in much the same way as Morse’s “smash and grab” theory leads us to believe there is no authorial intention to honestly adapt *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, or any other play for that matter. There is too much of Shakespeare in this play to categorically define the relationships as mere spoofing—on one level it is obvious that Jarry’s devastatingly explosive black humor is aimed at anything and everything that gets in his path (and Père Ubu’s for that matter), and while the overall effect of *Ubu Roi* certainly does not aim to achieve the transcendent universality of Shakespeare’s dramas (which may not have actually been Shakespeare’s aim either), we cannot ignore the level of Shakespearean understanding Jarry developed in order to properly implement those themes, characters, and plot devices for his own play’s comic ends.

The rapid-fire pacing aided by the play’s extremely short scenes may hide the Shakespearean influences within the language of the play; and unlike the Shakespeare tragedies it incorporates into its plot, *Ubu Roi* is devoid of any sustained soliloquies or particularly long passages. The longest monologue comes at the end of Act Four as Père Ubu shouts aloud as he

has a nightmare. Even then, this rant is punctuated with many an “Ah!” and “Oh!” Because the play was first meant by the teenage writers to be acted by puppets, it retains its intended speed of short episodic scenes expressed in mainly a series of direct actions. Although each scene necessarily builds on the preceding one, there is little in the way of suspense, as the rapid pacing of the play does not give long enough pause for the reader or audience to contemplate the outcome of Ubu’s impetuous deeds (Cooper 48). But after *Ubu Roi* was staged with actors, Jarry’s “Questions of the Theater” article appearing in *Revue Blanche* made it perfectly clear that he did not care about the public’s comprehension of his work or its intentions, identifying the majority of the public in attendance as “what the scientists would call idiots...suffering from a dearth of sensations, for their senses have remained so rudimentary that they can perceive nothing but immediate impressions” (Jarry, “Questions” 175). And yet, he was assured by the rioting that took place that in Ubu’s embodiment of the worst traits of humanity (and specifically the bourgeoisie) the public was “aghast at the sight of its ignoble other-self, which it had never before been shown completely” (174). This hardly sounds like the stuff of comedy. And even conceding that genre can be subjective, Jarry himself contends the play was nearly rehearsed as a tragedy on Lugué-Poe’s suggestion before the famed comedian Gémier was hired in the lead role. Once determined to produce a comedy, Jarry continued to call his play a “macabre comedy of an English clown, or a Dance of Death,” thereby revealing his farcical parody’s ulterior motive, of shaking up the “inert, obtuse and passive” audience (174-75). But his opinion of the public left him feeling that the role of theater cannot intend to educate the public—he saw them as a lost cause.

Jarry expressed his belief that theater must exist as “an active pleasure” for an elite audience that takes a role in the dramatic process. He displayed his hope for the future,

identifying fellow playwright Maurice Maeterlinck as single-handedly responsible for the rebirth of French drama, due to his creation of “an abstract theater...without the trouble of a translation, plays as eternally tragic as those by Ben Jonson, Marlowe, Shakespeare...” (quoted in Schumacher 107). With his renowned pomposity it is surprising that Jarry was never quoted as saying his own work was better than those early modern authors, but he unquestionably saw a need for French audiences to experience the profound effect of those playwrights’ works in their own language, something he detected possible in Maeterlinck’s plays.

Because Maeterlinck was capable of eliciting the same ageless effect of the early moderns, Jarry cited him as an exemplary French dramatist. But in Jarry’s “Questions of the Theater” article, he draws a comparison between his own works and those of Shakespeare, arguing the impossibility of innovation without upsetting French bourgeois goût: “if it is the public’s susceptibilities we are supposed to respect...one only has to re-read certain of Ophelia’s words, and the famous scene (nearly always cut) where a Queen is taking French lessons” (Jarry, “Questions” 173). Jarry alludes to the confrontational sexuality within the madwoman ramble of post-Polonius Ophelia (*Hamlet* 4.5), and the resemblance to the obscene-sounding French of Catherine’s poorly spoken English in *Henry V* (3.4), in response to the public’s violent reaction to his own convoluted perversities. This connection must have been reinforced by the reviews that said *Ubu Roi* was in a “vulgar imitation of Shakespeare,” a criticism Jarry disputed, clearly reminding his readers how Shakespeare was historically (and still in Jarry’s own time) considered distasteful in France as well (173). Documentation from the riot during *Ubu Roi* recalls some unidentified Jarry supporters rebuking the enraged segment of the audience by yelling, “You wouldn’t understand Shakespeare either,” drawing an intellectual parallel between the unconventional work and the chilly French reception Shakespeare endured for hundreds of

years (Shattuck 208). As if Jarry's play was not already rife with Shakespearean references, it is possible that the outraged French response to his work was yet one more indication of his comedy's Shakespearean-styled position as a new barbarian entertainment forcing itself upon the easily insulted world of the Parisian theater.

### *Familiar Faces and Déjà Vu Scenes*

Stephen Greenblatt notes how Shakespeare's tragedies result in ruin "when the hero gets what he wants" (*Will* 335). The comedic genius of *Ubu Roi* is invested in the conundrum that Père Ubu, an anti-hero to be sure, basically gets *everything* he wants, or everything he thinks he wants. Yet because of his endless appetite, after the first scene of the play he is never quite satisfied again. Possibly because of this constant dissatisfaction, ruin never comes to him as it would in a political ambition tragedy. A cycle of uneasiness permeates the play, giving his reign a tenuous grip that also allows him an exit route without the feeling of loss that would otherwise accompany such a great fall from power. But his fall is not due to an oversight or a tragic flaw—his entire existence is a tragic one so hopelessly mired in his abominations he becomes comic due to the absurd degree to which he fails to be great.

Père Ubu's lack of a singular tragic flaw lies buried behind his flabby exterior, crude insults, and the "sheer magnitude of [his] passionate will," which within the play's comic confines, directs him to commit a series of mostly uncorrectable mistakes (Perry 86). Yet his fixation on the instincts of his lower body (an obsession with his entire digestive process, particularly fecal production) is joined to his commandeered military advancements, leading to a kind of political indigestion, and (like Macbeth) he is unsatisfied with his gains (88). Père and Mère Ubu escape any reprisal after overthrowing the Polish government, but almost as if their

whole oppressive dictatorship was a joke (after all, the Ubs return to Paris by boat—drinks in hand), and as customary in Shakespearean tragedies, original royal power is restored in Poland.

In this restoration, the play contains the kernels of a revenge tragedy as Bougrelas, the remaining son of the assassinated King Venceslas, is crowned upon the Ubs' expulsion; the major difference between Bougrelas' route to justice and the traditional Senecan-Elizabethan revenge tragedy model is his inability to properly use the sword bestowed on him by Lord Mathias' ghost to "[deal] death to the usurper" (34). Because of the farcical nature of the play, Bougrelas' is unable to truly get revenge for his family's murder through the death of Père Ubu. Although he actually does stab Ubu in the heat of battle, Ubu does not die. This Macbeth, this Brutus, this Richard III, this Titus Andronicus, this Falstaff that is Père Ubu does not pay with his life for his bloodshed and thievery, nor does his Lady Macbeth; the young, fleeing Bougrelas character who is the rightful heir to Venceslas (like Banquo's Fleance), returns from hiding in a cave as an avenging Prince Hamlet backed by a royalist Polish army. Interestingly, Bougrelas, like his enemy, defies the revenge tragedy model and lives.

As it turns out, many characters are stabbed, poisoned, perforated, or simply explode only to return in the next scene (and not necessarily as ghosts). Writing in 1985, Schumacher remarked that this device of the inexplicably revived character had been incorporated heavily into cartoons of the previous sixty or seventy years, but because it had never been standard practice for theater Jarry's use of it was revolutionary (42). I would argue that because of the increasing cultural prevalence of character-centered video gaming media in the last three decades (which has also undoubtedly affected the way films are created and viewed) this contrivance has become typical. We only need witness one character's self-actualized return to life in order to understand that whatever it is we are viewing (play, television show, graphic novel) functions

under this illogical rule of revival. A twenty-first century audience has become so used to this trope it may not even blink at its inclusion in *Ubu Roi*. Aside from our inability to be jarred by the occurrence of a revived character, its inclusion still requires our acknowledgement. Because of this necessary affirmation, the trope tends to lean on the side of the comedic, especially if it happens with any regularity. In fact, this constant resurrection or unanticipated survival of previously doomed characters is partly responsible for the parody's success in transforming the tragic into comedic: blood is spilled without the retribution of blood, murder is quickly forgotten as happenstance, and the dead reappear without shock to the victim or the killer.

This odd method of shared amnesia concerning death and forgoing justification for the return of characters might have been an erroneous oversight of youth if it were not for the fact that it occurs so often in the play. But as it is, outside of an unlucky few whose deaths are integral to the furthering of the story (particularly King Venceslas), some of *Ubu Roi*'s characters' share an uncanny ability to rebound again and again from the clutches of mortality, including Père Ubu himself. Immediately following his overthrow of Venceslas, the stage directions tell us that Bougrelas "rips open Père Ubu's boodle with a terrible sword-thrust," and seemingly uninjured, Père Ubu follows Mère Ubu from danger via a secret staircase. The next scene to feature Père Ubu mentions nothing of the attack, nor does he refer to any wound.

While Père Ubu's resilience might have more to do with the impenetrable depths of his *gidouille* than an authorial desire to simply forget the stabbing, hero Bougrelas and villain Père Ubu are not *killable*. They survive to parody the tragic form from which the two figures are born, and in Ubu's case, to expose the terrorizing power of the bourgeois audience. And because Jarry made it clear that Père Ubu was an insult to the regular bourgeois attendees of the Salle du Nouveau Théâtre who, quoting Mendès, he said was comprised "of eternal human imbecility,

eternal lust, eternal gluttony, the vileness of instinct magnified into tyranny,” *Ubu Roi* presents a double-parody: the social issues related to art appreciation in Jarry’s day, and Shakespearean drama (“Questions” 174).

Concerning the latter, *Macbeth* as the most popular critical reference made in the scope of *Ubu Roi* analysis (beyond the reasoning provided by Morse), is inviting this comparison from the first scene. Mère Ubu coerces Père Ubu to murder King Venceslas and his entire family for an incongruous bounty of limitless riches, sausages, a “fine carriage,” and the prospect of regaining past glory (as we learn that Père is the ex-king of Aragon, harkening back to an adventure from another lost text). Père Ubu resists for all of two lines, until he is swayed by her promise of getting trifles like “an umbrella and a guard’s officer’s greatcoat” (22). The Ubs do not seek power for its own sake, but as a means of acquiring the trivial things they desire (not unlike their bourgeoisie counterparts, or indeed, the “fruitless crown” and “barren sceptre” Macbeth finds himself stuck with at the start of Act Three [3.1.62-63]). And just as Lady Macbeth spurs her husband on after learning of the witches’ prognostications, Mère Ubu functions like the witches by first relating the possibility of regicide, and subsequently, as Lady Macbeth, baiting her husband into action. The major difference in early plot development lies in the events leading up to the killing of the kings. Macbeth is rewarded for his bravery, given the title of the former Thane of Cawdor, but first told of the advancement by the witches, then by a messenger, and finally, en route to Inverness, confirmed by Duncan himself (“My worthy Cawdor” [1.5.47]). One interpretation of *Macbeth* suggests that the word of the witches (related by letter to Lady Macbeth) may start the cycle of ambition, already given momentum by Macbeth’s new title, but Mère Ubu has no need of predicting witches because she is the originator of the assassination plan. When Père Ubu is given the title of Count of Sandomir in

Act One, scene six, it does not prevent her murder plan (which, like *Macbeth*, is enacted in Act Two, scene two) but unlike the promotion showing Venceslas' righteousness and fairness for servitude (like Duncan) it serves to show his foolishness for granting anything positive to such a self-serving idiot. But as opposed to the offstage slaughter Macbeth's wife demands he complete in their home, the murder of the Polish king is accomplished onstage at the royal parade ground, and in full view, hilariously instigated by Père Ubu's signal of stomping of Venceslas foot and yelling "MERDRE." (31). Unlike Lady Macbeth, there are no chamberlains that Mère Ubu must involve, and curiously, Mère Ubu is nowhere to be found during the assassination. It would seem that her job is as simple as hatching the scheme, and not involving herself in the bloody deeds themselves.

Although Mère Ubu is a composite character of Lady Macbeth and the witches, her words more closely mimic Lady Macbeth's lines than any of the rhyming chants of the witches' curses. In her response to Père Ubu's decision to kill Venceslas there is an obvious reverberation of Lady Macbeth's manipulative threat, "When you durst do it, then you were a man; / And to be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the man," (1.7.49-51) as Mère Ubu says, "Well done, Père Ubu, now you're talking like a man" (22). Even in this brief quote, undermining Père Ubu's short-lived contentment ("I'm perfectly satisfied. Who wouldn't be? Captain of the Dragoons, aide de camp to King Venceslas, decorated with the order of the Red Eagle of Poland, and ex-King of Aragon" [21]), the parody is evident and the possibility of Jarry's intention to have Mère Ubu remind us of Lady Macbeth is strong.

While both female characters demonstrate similar connections between male sexuality and violence, the sexual aspects of the two ladies' womanhood separates the two greatly: Lady Macbeth longs to be unsexed and made more violent, and subsequently, so much more the man

herself (1.5.39), while Mère Ubu is a stereotype/archetype of an untrustworthy wife who spends most of the play as Père Ubu's female ego-double. While she occasionally offers sensible advice that goes ignored, she also schemes to steal her husband's money and tries to have an affair with the henchman left to protect her while Père Ubu is off at war. As Lady Macbeth feels compelled to initiate a symbiotic relationship with her husband, based on power, Ubu uses her marital ties in the same way. And although desire for riches is tempered with some sound counsel, she has wound Père Ubu up and unleashed his initially reticent, unending want upon the world. Eve-like, the onus for the evil deeds rests with the female lead characters.

In Jarry's original vision of Mère Ubu, her costume choice was a grotesque and sexually suggestive one meant to embody her ugly lust, much like the mannish, wizened look the witches often assume in *Macbeth* productions to show their morally corrupt nature. This physical description resonates textually as Père Ubu refers to her as a "clownish female" during moments when she offers political advice (41, 46). As Jarry's intention was to have the entire cast represent guignol puppets of a hideous appearance, Mère Ubu's stage look may have been fashioned to reflect the dramatic conviction that, like *Macbeth's* witches, evil manifests itself physically. This symptomatic corporeal response is best seen in the gidouille literally and figuratively leading Père Ubu toward every action as both a sign and a result of his insatiable hunger. A detectable similarity exists in the character of Richard III, whom "Tudor apologists depict...not merely as venal or unscrupulous but as a monster of evil, a creature whose moral viciousness was vividly stamped on his twisted body" (Greenblatt, *Norton* 507). As Richard confesses that he is "Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time / Into this breathing world scarce half made up"(1.1.20-21), the mark of his not-quite-human form is possibly a reason for the ill-treatment that made him as hateful as he is portrayed in the history, the monstrous persona

he possesses, and emblematic of his horrible deeds to come. Similarly, Père Ubu's huge stomach is a symbol of past voracity, current desires, and cause of his future collapse as Polish ruler.

Père Ubu's *gidouille* perpetuates a vicious cycle of digestion: he becomes hungrier because of his appetite for everything—an appetite that only increases as it is fed, made richer, or causing unnecessary deaths. These preposterous acts are a dark parody of Macbeth's bloodthirsty urges rising to meet his hunger for power. And as Macbeth acknowledges his power's empty ends ("There's nothing serious in mortality: / All is but toys" [2.3.93-4]), *Ubu's* third act begins with his complaints about his condition in terms, not of usurping power, but of gluttony: "By my green candle, behold me, monarch of this fair land. I've already got the gut-ache from over eating, and soon they are going to bring in my great bonnet" (38). Over-feeding his enormous stomach is the same ugly act as his unbridled political violence, and the result of his excesses is as unpromising as the worthlessness facing Macbeth.

Like Macbeth, Père Ubu flaunts his bloodthirstiness in a pointless attempt to slake his nonsensical desire for limitless power, but ultimately, his political aspirations are only another form of eating, the foremost consideration of his desires (Perry 88). All of his wishes conform to the boundless presence of his digestion process. Even in the killing of his advisors, Père Ubu sends them to their deaths through a mechanized version of digestion, where they are swallowed by a chute, bled, and dissected. The relationship with his belly is both actual and metaphoric, a functioning emblem of his greed, and a ubiquitous presence in every scene—not unlike Falstaff, who claimed, "I have a whole school of tongues in this belly / Of mine, and not a tongue of them all speaks any other word but my name" (*2 Henry IV* 4.2.16-18). Because knighthood was as high as Falstaff ascended, the implications applying to all of his self-centered appetites do not carry the same far-reaching detrimental influence as Père Ubu's desires. But Falstaff's

assessment, “My womb, my womb, my womb undoes me,” (4.2.19-20) defines Père Ubu’s focus and inner conflict at nearly every turn in *Ubu Roi*. And just as Falstaff bolsters his argument about the insignificance of honor by calling attention to the usefulness of his prominent stomach and the digestive system it holds (“I need no more weight than mine own bowels” [*I Henry IV* 5.3.34]), so Père Ubu ascribes to a similar creed, one that begins and ends with filling his physical and figurative belly. There is never a shred of consideration for preserving the honor of his public or private character, nor the honor of his wife, his throne, nor his subjects, as far as his stomach is concerned.

We see the most direct example of the importance of his relationship with his belly during the second and third scenes of Act One. Père Ubu is enraged before and during the banquet due to the amount of food Mère Ubu offers the guests (and consequently, what he childishly feels he is losing by not eating these foods by himself) and the money spent on the banquet for his co-conspirators (“Hey, do you think I’m an oriental potentate, shelling out all that money?”); Mère Ubu reacts to Père Ubu’s ire by telling the party, “Pay no attention to him. He’s off his rocker” (24). This is another parody of Lady Macbeth’s hostess role and her reaction to Macbeth’s inhospitable behavior after the appearance of Banquo’s ghost (“Pray you, keep seat. / The fit is momentary... / Feed, and regard him not” [3.4.53-54, 57]). Indeed, the banquet is a parody not only of the *Macbeth* scene, but also of all dinner parties. The food served veers from standard fare like chicken and veal, to nonsensical dishes like “chicken and hound pie, parsons’ noses from the royal Polish turkeys,” as well as “Jerusalem fartichokes and cauliflower à la pschitt” (“choux-fleurs à la merdre,”) (24). From a Shakespearean view, is this dinner really any less absurd than the Senecan cannibal banquet at the end of *Titus Andronicus*? It is certainly less bloody. But fecal matter is the gastronomical stand-in for human meat, yet unlike the doomed

guests at the *Titus* banquet those poisoned during the *Ubu* meal by the toilet brush resuscitate when Père Ubu demands their exit. And disgusting as either dinner party menu may actually be, rulers Saturninus and Tamora are feasting on Tamora's rapist sons Chiron and Demetrius unwittingly, while Père and Mère Ubu are knowingly guilty of serving and eating some feces—but ultimately, this is not nearly as criminal as devouring human beings.<sup>6</sup>

But the strangeness of the Ubu banquet is centered on food as it relates to Père Ubu, not in and of itself as cause for problems. As Banquo's ghost disrupts Macbeth and subsequently, the entire banquet to which Lady Macbeth scolds, "You have displaced the mirth, broke the good meeting / With most admired disorder" [3.4.108-9], Père Ubu manufactures his own chaos to disrupt the dinner Mère Ubu has prepared before and during the meal. Waiting for the guests to arrive, he diverts her by having her look outside while he eats most of the chicken and veal. Later, after he feeds his guests the brush, he pelts them with bison ribs, forcing all to leave but his main co-conspirator, Capitaine Bordure (or Captain Macnure in the Connolly and Taylor translation, which is often shortened to Captain M'Nure).

The anger and selfishness Père Ubu exhibits about food share a similarity to Macbeth's bloodthirsty angst over maintaining his power and controlling his own mind. The outrage defines Père Ubu's over-eating as essential a component of his personality as Macbeth's guilt—powerful enough to weaken Macbeth's mind, making him susceptible to the torturous ghostly visions associated with his murders. The absurdity in the banquet example is that Père Ubu actually wants to eat every one of these repellent meals, and he is prompted to violence when presented with the prospect of giving any portion of it away. Desire's negative aspects may provide the starting point for the lead characters of each play, but the result of desire plays out

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, Père Ubu's carnage runs riot in Act Three, scene two when his disembraining machine eliminates the heads of every institution in Poland, possibly bypassing the blood-stained events of *Titus Andronicus*. Yet Père Ubu's attack is *not* personally motivated; he is a tyrant simply doing his job.

physically in Ubu's stomach and Macbeth's brain. Père Ubu's belly-centered body and its command of his actions are as integral a factor for understanding his character, as recognizing Macbeth's anxiety and guilt-ridden mind ("full of scorpions" [3.2.38]) and the dominance it exacts over him.

Worried as Macbeth is, he never actually succumbs to cowardice. The opposite is true of Père Ubu. At every turn, Père Ubu tries to blame others, shirk responsibility, hide, escape, or in moments of extreme fear, turn to prayer. After quickly working out an arrangement in principle with Captain Bordure to overthrow King Venceslas in exchange for a dukedom in Lithuania, Père Ubu is summoned by messenger to Venceslas' castle. Immediately, he fears beheading for treason and plans on blaming Mère Ubu and Bordure for the plan, but the worry is unfounded as Venceslas dubs him Count of Sandomir in the following scene. Later, at the conspirators' meeting, Père Ubu reveals his plan of poisoning Venceslas by "stuffing his lunch with arsenic," an attack as close to his own personality (as evident in the poisoning toilet brush he wields in Act One, scene three) as it is cowardly (28). Poison can be interpreted as symbolic of a manipulative and ignoble personality: Père Ubu's craven proposal is evocative of King Claudius' fainthearted murder of King Hamlet, and his attempted murder of Prince Hamlet with the same poisoned wine that mistakenly kills Queen Gertrude. After all shout down Père Ubu's idea, Bordure suggests killing Venceslas by giving "him a good wallop" with his sword, allowing him to "cleave him from top to toe," which the conspirators agree is a "noble and gallant" method of disposing of the king (28). Bordure's plan is reminiscent of the account of "brave Macbeth," who dispatched Macdonald by slicing "him from the nave to th' chops" (1.2.16, 22), and is very likely intending to draw such comparisons, distinguishing Bordure from Père Ubu. Recognizing the difference between Bordure and himself, Père Ubu threatens to turn the conspirators in if

they do not conduct the assassination his way. Once all is agreed on, Père Ubu calls them back to take an oath, showing his cowardice and self-serving attitude in a parody of *Julius Caesar*'s Brutus. Unlike Brutus' refusal of Cassius' wish to have the conspirators swear, saying "if not the face of men, / The sufferance of our souls, the time's abuse— / If these be motives weak, break off betimes" (2.1.113-15), we have no evidence of corruption in Père Ubu's time, his own motives are pure greed, and even the process of taking an oath is mocked as he calls Mère Ubu to stand in as a priest.

The conspiracy is only one of the elements of *Julius Caesar* parodied in *Ubu Roi*, as Calpurnia's dream and the subsequent death of Caesar are also incorporated into Jarry's play. Just as Caesar's wife warns him not to leave home after she recounts the prescient dream of his murder, Queen Rosamund goes one step further, specifying Père Ubu as the party responsible for her husband's death: "I saw him in a dream, smiting you with massed weapons and throwing you into the Vistula, and an eagle like that which figures in the Arms of Poland placing the crown on his head" (30). Venceslas dismisses her warnings, and showing his faith in Père Ubu's loyalty decides to attend his Grand Review without sword and breastplate. Following Caesar's course of action, he is attacked at the event and killed along with two of his three sons. Venceslas proves himself a fool for trusting Père Ubu instead of his wife, and his moment of death is equally unbecoming of a king, revealing he is a cowardly as he is stupid. Compare the farcical weakness of Venceslas' frantic last words, "Help, help! Holy Virgin, I'm dying," (31) to Caesar's serious and lordly reaction to his dire situation: "Et tu, Bruté – Then fall Caesar" (3.1.77). Both rulers mistakenly trust the central character of each play (Brutus and Père Ubu), but the comedic value of the situation lies in the motive of the conspiracy. Brutus believes Caesar a great man whose tyranny can only be stopped with death, and Brutus eventually sacrifices his own life to preserve

Rome; Père Ubu has brains enough to recognize that Venceslas is unwise and gullible, but Père Ubu relies on no national pride, as he would not sacrifice his own lunch to save Poland—in fact, he is not even from there.

As Rosamund's attempts to keep Venceslas at home from the Grand Review, his youngest son, Prince Bougrelas, agrees with his mother's assessment of Père Ubu's untrustworthiness. But as we learn that because Bougrelas called Père Ubu "an old fool," in Act One, scene six, Venceslas found Bougrelas "extremely cheeky...to Master Ubu, Knight of my Orders and Count of Sandomir," and forbids him to attend the Grand Review (Connelly 27, 30). In Bougrelas' ability to discern a true and clear picture of the danger that Père Ubu poses to his father, he is the only one of the three sons to voice his opinion, and Cordelia-like, he draws Venceslas' anger and forced distance in a Lear-ian decision that turns out to be fatal for the king. During the Grand Review scene, Bougrelas and Queen Rosamund go to the chapel to pray, staying clear of the attack on their family. After the assassination, Bougrelas flees to the mountains with his mother, and realizing the seriousness of the circumstances, Rosamund dies of grief, saying: "I long for your just restitution, my dear child, but I fear that I myself shall never see that happy day" (34). Rosamund's sadness about the unprovoked tragedy that has befallen her family, coupled with a lack of faith in Bougrelas' capacity for regaining the throne may be an echo of the hopelessness in the false death of Queen Hermoine in 3.2 of *The Winter's Tale*. Queen Hermoine, also of some Eastern European origin, laments: "The Emperor of Russia was my father. / O that he were alive, and here beholding / His daughter's trial," (3.2.117-21). Perhaps Rosamund's end also carries some of the unexpectedness of the offstage death of Lady Montague in Act Five, scene three of *Romeo and Juliet*; we are told by her husband's conversation with Prince Escalus that she has died from misery after receiving news of Romeo's

banishment. But Rosamund's anguish is far greater as she grieves the deaths of her husband and two sons she has just witnessed through the window of the chapel, as well as experiencing Bougreles' exile from his family's palace into the mountain wilderness.

Bougreles is quickly incited to fashion a military campaign of revenge and reclamation of the throne by The Shade, the ghostly figure of "Lord Mathias of Königsberg," who reveals himself as "the first king – and founder – of [his family's] House" (34). As a functionary who reveals information and demands action, The Shade is most definitely a parody of King Hamlet's ghost, only his presence is backed by a small phantasmal group composed of Bougreles' recently deceased family (including Rosamund who was alive roughly three lines earlier in the same scene). Bougreles serves two symbolic purposes: first, because he represents any enduring hope for royal Polish restoration, and he is the last remaining living relative of the party who has been wronged, he is the dramatic foil of usurping Père Ubu—Bougreles demands the return of what Père Ubu has taken, as well as his blood for the royal blood he has spilled; second, Bougreles' role incorporates a struggle with emotional issues weighed down by national pressures too great for his young age, à la Prince Hamlet. His hope for bloody retribution extends beyond the classic revenge tragedy variety, although it is still dependent on the death of the ruling member of the state, but Bougreles' fight also embodies the archetypal battle of all conflicting forces: the rightful and good seeking to undo the unjust and self-serving. Bougreles' struggle takes on national implications, as everyone from Bordure, the Tsar of Russia, and the disenfranchised Polish poor immediately turn to Bougreles' cause once they are subjected to the criminal policies and widespread violence of the corrupt and terrible Père Ubu.

In the conflict between these adversarial characters we might find Jarry's representational view of his heroic self, pitted against that of his oppressive and hopelessly ignorant teacher,

perhaps encouraged by the knowledge that most students and members of the Rennes lycée administration shared his opinion about Felix Hébert's incompetence as an educator. And while bad teaching can never be tantamount to the capital punishment Père Ubu obsessively distributes, for a bored teenager sitting through poorly executed lessons day after day, it may very well feel like torture, and the metaphor (while stretched) works well enough within Jarry's play.

But the focus of the play remains on the villainous Père Ubu, who traps us as an audience forced to follow his exploits, revealing the blackest of comedies. In the absence of Bougrelas, *Ubu Roi* turns our attention towards Père Ubu's small-minded, greedy episodes. After his military coup, we witness Père Ubu's reluctant charity and accompanying feast for the Poles, followed by his indignant dismissal of Mère Ubu's advice to try and win over Bougrelas with generosity. She is wise enough to understand that he is a threat to their illegitimate monarchy, and attempts to convince her husband that he would be safest if he were to quash Bougrelas' fiery intent:

MÈRE UBU. For the last time, I warn you. Young Bougrelas may  
 very well carry the day. After all, he has justice on his side.

PÈRE UBU. Oh, tripe! Isn't injustice as good as justice? (39)

The conflict is a polarizing one, setting a determined youngster against a careless, aging slob, who in his stupidity exposes his inability to perceive any fundamental difference between right and wrong. Thus, Père Ubu's immorality is almost an accidental byproduct of his childish greed rather than any sophisticated determination to be evil in the conventional sense of any stock villain. There is even the temptation to call him amoral were it not for the fact that many of his aggressive acts are premeditated. Additionally, the traditional roles of responsibility are reversed, as teenage Bougrelas is ruled by his intention to revenge his family's death and restore

order and fairness to Poland, while adult Père Ubu tries any outlandish method he can propose to amass more wealth for himself. This dichotomy of purpose can most easily be seen in the weaponry they use for achieving their goals: Bougrelas wields a nearly holy sword bestowed on him with dutiful intent from beyond the grave, while Père Ubu uses various nasty instruments against his adversaries. Père Ubu's tyrannical reign serves as a counterpoint to the heroic quality of Bougrelas' mission, and Bougrelas and his allies' strength also reveals the cowardice of Père Ubu the warrior, a Falstaff of Eastern European military strategy and warfare.

Père Ubu's unwillingness to turn his attention from tax collection to battle is determined by the same covetous interests and innate cowardice that directs Falstaff's method of impressment in the two *Henry IV* plays—both would prefer to increase their income at once rather than strengthen their chances in their battlefield later. But Père Ubu's immaturity and spinelessness renders him even less devious than Falstaff, and more susceptible to the whims of his wife and advisors. When Père Ubu receives defected Captain Bordure's threatening letter promising a Tsarist invasion to restore Bougrelas to power, he turns to prayer ("St. Anthony and all the Saints, protect me. I'll shell out bags of phynance and even burn candles to you. Lord God, what's to become of me?"), and then breaks down in a sobbing fit (46). Mère Ubu and his counselors seize the opportunity to coerce him to meet Bordure's forces in combat, but it is obvious he would be happier to continue swindling the population for more tax money rather than fund a counterattack. Reluctantly, Père Ubu agrees to go to war ("since you're all steamed up about it"), under the condition that he does not spend "a single sou" (47). Characteristically, his main concerns stem from his cowardice and greed, and these facets of his personality define his soldiering as well.

Crossing the Ukraine to meet the Russian forces, Père Ubu's personal military technique displays all the false bravery of Falstaff at Shrewsbury in *I Henry IV*. Waiting for the Russians to appear, Père Ubu urges his men drop their search, "fall out for a quick piss," to eat lunch, and sing their anthem, the "Financial Song," a scatological drinking number (54).<sup>7</sup> No matter the situation, his priorities are stomach-centered, encouraging another comparison with Falstaff's preparation for war: demanding his breakfast of his Eastcheap inn hostess (4.1.188), sending off Bardolf to get him sack while Henry awaits his company's appearance in battle, and his true reasoning for tarrying, revealing his plan in battle and life: "Well, to the latter end of a fray / And the beginning of a feast / Fits a dull fighter and a keen guest" (4.2.71-3). Père Ubu is cut from the same cloth: from the moment he is informed by General Laski that the Russian assault has commenced until he escapes with two of his men at the end of Act Four, scene five, his lines vary between self-pity, panicking flight, and the desperate cries accompanying his spastic violent charges. And much like Falstaff fakes death after the fray with Douglas (*I Henry IV* 5.4), Père Ubu often precedes his offensives with similar deceitful tactics. He kills his first Russian by feigning death ("I'm hit, I'm holed, I'm perforated, I've received extreme unction, I'm buried") before ripping him apart; he kills the disguised Bordure by pretending to beg for mercy before clumsily throwing the entire weight of himself on top of him and then ripping Bordure's body "to pieces" (as the stage directions explain). Trying the same body hurling technique against the Tsar, Père Ubu fails and is forced to flee. After making a lucky jump over a trench that catches the Tsar, he retreats, abandoning his general and his forces while they continue fighting. Père Ubu's unnoticed escape makes no impression, and he displays no guilt for his cowardly actions. As Falstaff's dishonest show of stabbing the already-dead Hotspur enables him to concoct a story of bravery after the fact ("Nothing confutes me but eyes, and nobody sees me. / Therefore, sirrah,

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<sup>7</sup> Alternately called "Song of Poland" in *Ubu sur la Butte*, the two-act *guignol* reduction of the *Ubu* plays.

with anew wound in your thigh, come you along with me” [5.4.123-24]), so Père Ubu enacts a personal revisionist estimation of his clash to his followers, Pile and Cotice: “As for me, I displayed the greatest valour, and without endangering myself in the least I massacred four of the enemy with my bare hands, not counting all of those who were already dead when I dispatched them” (59). The lack of battlefield witnesses coupled with the act killing of the already-dead are Jarry’s reuse of the Shakespearean device for the same comedic reasons for which they were originally created: they provide us with an over-the-top depiction of the lengths these faint-hearted characters will go. And although Père Ubu recalls Falstaff’s battlefield technique, his villainy places him on the wrong side of justice. Unlike Falstaff’s wrongdoings, which are overlooked due to his relationship with Prince Hal, Père Ubu’s stem from not only his own corrupt nature, but from the Ubs entire campaign against morality and the right of rule. This insular ethos prevents him from receiving any false glory, and he is forced to recount his fictional involvement to his two remaining followers inside the unfriendly environs of a Lithuanian cave.

The setting of Père Ubu’s cave in the five scenes between 4.5 and the end of 5.2 (as well as Bougreilas and Queen Rosamund’s mountain cavern hideout in 2.5) recalls the Poor Tom/Edgar hovel in Act Three, scene four of *King Lear*; and while the horrible weather does not carry the symbolic weight of the titular character’s helplessness it does in *Lear* (“Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! Spout rain!”[3.2.13]), it serves the same purpose of heaping extra misery upon the ousted king, only in this instance, the hostile conditions are parodied as a mere annoyance: “What vile weather! It’s freezing hard enough to split a rock” (58-59). Jarry further exploits the cave location to include a bear attack on Cotice, parodying the Shakespearean device of the bear attack on Antigonus in 3.3 of *The Winter’s Tale* (Schumacher 55). Jarry uses the

animal conflict to depict Père Ubu's cowardly, self-serving persona again: Pile and Cotice wrestle and stab the bear while Père Ubu recites the Pater Noster. Predictably, Père Ubu takes full credit for killing the beast ("Thanks to me, you've got something to eat."), complains about having to eat the creature raw, refuses to carve it, fearing that it might "not be quite dead yet," and stubbornly provides absolutely no help to his underlings in any way (61). Pile and Cotice abandon him once he falls asleep, and in the following scene he is awakened by Mère Ubu seeking refuge from the loyalist Poles. During this scene he uses the bear, not for food, but as a weapon: he hurls it at Mère Ubu during an argument, and in the following scene, he swings it over his head, knocking down Bougrelas' men, exiting the cave, and making his escape.

As previously mentioned, Schumacher notes the continuation of the Shakespearean devices until the last scene of *Ubu Roi*. He notes, "the final escape by boat and the storm at sea echo the opening scene of *The Tempest*" (55). The directives called out by the boat Captain in *Ubu Roi* mimic the Boatswain of *The Tempest*, as both voyages navigate inhospitable seas. Through Antonio's claim "We are merely cheated of our lives by drunkards," (1.1.50) Shakespeare hints that alcohol may have inhibited the crew's abilities, while Père Ubu and his fellow exiles drink together after laughing at the near-capsizing of the ship. Thus, *Ubu Roi* closes with this seafaring return to en route to Paris (and in their northern trajectory, Jarry inserts one last Shakespearean reference through Père Ubu's declaration, "See, we are tacking past the Castle of Elsinore at this very moment" [73]), while *The Tempest* begins with a failed voyage. The journey ends as the Ubs are returned to their "sweet France" where Père Ubu plans to seek appointment in Paris as "Master of Phynances," while *The Tempest*'s Prospero heads back to the mainland and his Milanese retirement. Starting with Mère Ubu's Lady Macbeth-styled suggestion and closing with the homeward-bound boat ride, *Ubu Roi* consistently adapts,

parodies, and inverts the devices, tropes, and characters of Shakespearean tragedies to create a mock-heroic comedy with heavy revenge tragedy features. In using these elements, Jarry's play bridges late fifteenth-century/early sixteenth-century drama to the innovations of fin de siècle Paris, which in turn, influenced the existential black humor of the Absurdist plays created during the twentieth century.

***“S’il n’y avait pas de Pologne, il n’y aurait pas de Polonais!” (“If there weren’t any Poland, there wouldn’t be any Poles!”) – Le Parler Ubu’s (im)Proper Nouns***

With the larger portion of Shakespeare's plays set in locations outside his native England, it is understandable that descriptive details like names, geography, customs, or cultural references from the foreign locales must pervade his works to a degree. And while studying classical sources and the allusions born from that learning likely influenced the Greek and Roman setting choices for some plays, characters often anachronistically retain their early modern Englishness in word and action, despite bearing names and titles from abroad. For Shakespeare's audiences, social and intellectual background would determine an individual's comprehension of these elements, most likely proving more familiar and easily understood to the well-educated and better-traveled (Gurr 102). Presumably, both playwright and knowledgeable spectator alike were acquainted with these non-native places, peoples, and customs that Shakespeare had written into his plays through the importation of foreign literatures or visiting acting troupes (Greenblatt, *Twelfth* 1761). One wonders how the idea of a London-like Ephesus colored the experience of watching *The Comedy of Errors* for those in attendance at its tightly packed Gray's Inn debut in 1594 (Greenblatt, *Comedy* 684). As the play they were watching was not supposed to be taking place in Elizabethan England, but a Roman fantasyland of another time, certain implications must be considered pertaining to what ideas an audience brings to *any*

play—ideas that draw on a combination of their personal, academic, or even imagined experience based on cultural stereotypes. Correspondingly, a playwright might hope to recall, exploit, or question these beliefs in his play by setting a potential local crisis in another nation during an earlier century; critical evaluations of Shakespeare's plays often theorize that he benefited by implementing geographic and temporal distance in order to deal with sensitive topics, like problems concerning the English monarchy, such as the Earl of Essex affair in *Richard II*, or questions of transferring power after Elizabeth's imminent death in *Julius Caesar* (Maus 1526). By adapting settings and conflicts and placing them in other countries or at other times in history, he was able to discuss these off-limit matters as if they were fair game, free of legal or social repercussion. And while a playwright may also disregard the implications of any particular setting, placing the action of his play where he likes regardless of the possible connotations the place may suggest, the result of an entire culture's knowledge may still evoke associations from the audience. Thoughts about place and time (like a contemporary bordering nation, a distant city during the recent past, an empire from the ancient world) can be entrenched in the mindset of generations, residing deeply in the fabric of a culture, far beyond the reach of the author and his intent.

Because we are presented with a similar issue of contextualizing a foreign setting regarding Jarry's use of Poland in *Ubu Roi*, it is my belief that Poland is an important component of the play, often influencing the action. As mentioned, the ur-*Ubu Roi* text, *Les Polonais* (yet another blatant clue that we are dealing with something more particularly Polish than Jarry would let on in his *Ubu Roi* rewrite) probably drew from source material originating in the Chabrier opera and/or the Brillat-Savarin book. If two works both set in Poland are responsible for providing the basic outline of Jarry's play, it may well be the sole reason for the majority of

*Ubu Roi*'s action taking place in the same location. But Jarry's justification for the setting of his play sounds quite deliberate in his reasoning, if not postmodern. Displaying a novel kind of dramatic forethought, he believed Poland was representative of what he was attempting to create: an eternal drama, a work free from the constraints of a particular time and place. Poland was merely acting as a universal placeholder of sorts, or at least that was the objective.

Jarry explained his choice of setting in the conclusion of the speech he gave before *Ubu Roi*'s debut: "The action, which is about to begin, takes place in Poland, that is to say: Nowhere" (quoted in Shattuck 206). The printed program from the performance continued the thought: "Nowhere is everywhere, and to begin with the country in which one finds oneself," meaning Jarry was ostensibly aiming for an empty box with which to contain the action (quoted in Hyman 402). Certainly, the task of telling a story in a fictional kingdom would be made easier by giving the nation some invented name, so why would Jarry insist on introducing one so tightly bound to the history of his own modern-day Europe? It is sometimes difficult to take him at his word, especially when he leads us to believe Poland functioned as an easy reference of publicly accepted nonexistence, a collective notion helping to situate the unfolding drama in a nation "legendary and dismembered enough to be this Nowhere" (quoted in Stillman 55). Yet he makes no great effort to separate *Ubu Roi* from some concretely Polish or Eastern European indicators. Prefacing his play with this starting point may have proven accidentally evocative, as the actual or conceptual Poland and its people very likely held certain powerful associations for a French audience in 1896.

By the late nineteenth century, the Prussian, Russian, and Austrian Empires partitioned Poland into nonexistence, subjecting its people to second-class citizenship, and in the case of the Prussian rule, denying the Poles of their own language (Zamoyski 302). The fate of Poland and

its captured nationals became a cause taken on throughout Europe, symbolizing “the internationale of peoples arrayed against the Holy Alliance of monarchs,” and often eliciting a cry of “Vive la Pologne!” as it had in 1848 when a Parisian mob marched on the Hotel de Ville (286); while empires were consolidating power across the continent, Poland disintegrated into annexations within their imperial borders. It is possible Jarry set *Ubu Roi* in Poland not solely because of its condition as a nation of people without a physical state, but also because of its image as an already victimized country. In having Père Ubu take over Poland specifically, I would contend that this is not the blank slate he intended, but rather, that the choice was a politically-loaded one, further explaining the plausibility for such a foolishly hatched conspiracy as the Ubs’ to be successful: by 1896, *anyone* could take over Poland.

Jarry’s assessment that the play takes place “Nowhere,” attempts to obscure the Eastern European heritage of many of the characters’ names and histories. Shattuck observes that Chabrier’s opera includes a character named Laski (who is transformed into General Laski in *Ubu Roi*), and Prince Henri has a “grand palatin,” from which Jarry and the Morin brothers most likely created the term palotin, or “platoons” (translated by Connolly and Taylor as “Palcontents”), the name for the group of Ubu’s cronies, Pile, Cotice, and Gyron (208). Ironically, Chabrier’s opera also contains a scene where King Henri asks an Italian about the character of the Pole and the reply is “Le polonais est triste et grave” (“The Pole is sad and serious”). This is the opposite caricature of the Poles running amok in his opera or in the mad rule of Père Ubu’s kingdom, but quite possibly the accepted French opinion of the homeless, defeated people (Freeman 79). Regardless of the unmistakably Polish ethnicity of many of the characters’ names in *Ubu Roi*, Jarry’s symbolic placement of the action in Poland-as-Nowhere also overlooks the plot development based on the geographic linkage between the Polish

landscape and the surrounding area: Père Ubu battles with Tsarist Russian forces, he marches across the Ukraine, he hides out in Lithuania, escapes through the Province of Livonia, and sails back to France via the Baltic Sea. These particular choices could have or should have been changed to names or places less definitively Eastern European if there was no authorial purpose in suggesting that *Ubu Roi* was occurring in any version of Poland's recent or historic past. Further, Jarry could just as easily called the nations "X," "Y," and "Z," and given all of the personages of the play names as unrecognizable in origin as Père Ubu himself. If we are to fully believe that in his purpose to convey an atrocious, disconcerting strangeness, Jarry's play occurs in a land made mythic by its absence, he might have avoided setting scenes in "the crypt of the former Kings of Poland in Warsaw Cathedral," or having Père Ubu shout about getting buried in Krakow (50, 63). All of the play's firmly established Polishness becomes even more evident when watching the ease with which director Piotr Szulkin adapts Jarry's play in his 2003 film, *Ubu Król*, to a contemporary, post-Communist Poland, where the Ubs' greedy takeover seems more at home than it might prove to be in an eternal Nowhere dystopia.

Jarry's notes about the production disclose his earnestness to accurately portray a fundamentally impossible concept. While he may have honestly believed the partitioned Polish nation perfectly represented the timeless place he envisioned for his drama of illogical political upheaval, rampant brutality, and boundless greed, the final line of *Ubu Roi* gives us a hint he understood his justifications did not necessarily eradicate the prevailing connotations about Poland in France, simply because Poland itself was not on the map.<sup>8</sup>

In as much as Jarry's inclusion of characters with names like as Stanislas Leczinski, Nicolas Rensky, and John Sobieski assisted in creating his fictional Polish world, other

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<sup>8</sup>The last line is Père Ubu's response to Mère Ubu's remark that she has heard Germany is a beautiful country: "Ah, Gentlemen! However beautiful it may be, it can never equal Poland. If there weren't any Poland, there wouldn't be any Poles!" (Wright *Ubu* 164).

characters were given subversively filthy jangled ones (like Bougrelas, a name Schumacher explains as best translated in a two-word compound, forming the thinly-hidden and obscene imperative “Buggerim” [66]). The potache sentiment behind the play was inventive in its targeting of not only the still-hallowed rules of drama and the French bourgeoisie who insisted they remained upheld, but also, the French language itself. One of the values of *Ubu Roi* as a satirical work lies in its ability to get away with devastating attacks on its audience without the pretense of trying to be funny. The playwright himself said, “[Père] Ubu’s speeches were not meant to be full of witticisms, as various little Ubists claimed, but of stupid remarks, uttered with all the authority of the Ape” (Jarry, “Questions” 174). But this sub-human monster was the perfect mouthpiece through which Jarry could methodically and rebelliously destroy and reinvent words, juxtaposing them in forms that made for a nauseating vocabulary unique to *Ubu*. Besides generating terms difficult to translate without a good deal of approximation, his play said things that had never been said before in any mother tongue, and with good reason. Most might be hard-pressed to call these neologisms an improvement on the French language, but nevertheless, they were a change in tradition and a key ingredient of Jarry’s innovation in French theater.

Through this new dark and obnoxious clowning, Jarry took an anti-authoritarian stance, oftentimes exploring the satirical aspects of drama to the point of confrontation through Père Ubu’s proclamations and curses (Zelenak 45). *Ubu*’s language, the means through which a large portion of any play’s ideas is transmitted (outside of those aiming to be delivered through physical gesture, facial expression, costume, music, lighting, etc.), is slanted toward outrageousness, and gives credence to the interpretation of the play as Jarry’s statement against the status quo. Curses and insults figure prominently throughout, and in their double meanings

potache zeal for public disturbance meets the playfulness of the older brickbats launched by Shakespeare's greatest swearers.

Of these invented abusive terms, *merdre* is rightly the most well known. Its infamy is due to a multitude of reasons, starting with the fact that it begins the play: just the one word exclamation appears unaccompanied on its own line. Secondly, the word's importance figures prominently in the play's history; accounts practically blame the word as much as (if not more than) its creator for the patrons of the Salle du Nouveau Théâtre's riot. Shattuck sees the word as the trigger for the violent response, carrying almost magical properties, saying immediately following the word's first public declaration from the stage, it "had done its work; the house was pandemonium" (207). Another factor contributing to the recurrent focus on the term *merdre* is its relationship to scenes like the distasteful banquet and the assassination on Venceslas—it is both the defining symbol of perversion and the signal for a deathblow. The word can also be interpreted as a figurative extension of Père Ubu's loathsomeness, even as he bellows it. It even becomes part of the fabric of his relationships, calling Mère Ubu, "Madame de ma merdre," and his officer Rensky, "garçon de ma merdre" (Stillman 47). *Merdre* also seems to offer tremendous satisfaction as a curse word, so much so that in various moments of disgust or frustration Mère Ubu shouts it herself, as did many in attendance at the debut. Using the word's construction as a blueprint, some hurled the curse back at the stage as "mangre," an invented form of "eat shit;" according to some accounts, the shouting of this curse during the third act has been cited as the riot's inciting moment (Schumacher 73). If those reasons were not enough, *merdre* shows up in *Ubu Roi* more than any other dirty word—newly coined or traditional—adding up to thirty-three instances (Blackadder 183).

But even with merdre representing a kind of super-excrement, a substance worse than any product of the body previously imagined possible, it still had to come from somewhere: logically, its origin was Père Ubu. As depicted in Jarry's notes, drawings, and woodcuts, the character did not have what one might call a human body, and sometimes he looked not unlike a great heap of merdre personified (Menon 61). As related to the reader in the mock-antiquated French on the play's dedication page, "Lord Ubu shooke his peare-head," which is not only a possible method of alerting the reader to the Shakespearean plot thieveries from the start—it is also literally describing the shape of the character's head (19). It has been suggested Père Ubu's pear shape can be interpreted as relating to both the sound-connection of "père" and "pear," as well as *poire*, an emblem used for representing an idiot. Earlier in the nineteenth century, authors and artists often utilized the pear, especially those lampooning Louis-Philippe of the July Monarchy who, like Père Ubu, was often depicted with a pear-shaped head (Menon 63). Perhaps because of these associations, Jarry was predisposed to envision a dimwitted persona like Père Ubu with a pointed head, but the notion of his character's form also gave rise to the term *cornegidouille*.

Translated as "hornstrumpot" by Connolly and Taylor, and "horngibolets" by Wright, *cornegidouille* is the other of Père Ubu's favorite curses. The term may be symbolic of Père Ubu's self-centeredness, stretching the metaphor to imply that he is the originator of his being, the offspring of his own asexual reproduction. Linda Stillman explicates the term through her discussion of the machine *cèlibataire* (also called the "bachelor apparatus"), which "in its most basic form," is a technological symbol of the "mechanical solitude of a sole human," a machine capable of "functioning as a transformer of love into a death-device." Stillman explains that *cornegidouille* is a paradoxical term representative of Père Ubu's own version of the machine

célibataire, the machine à décerveler (translated by Wright as the “disembraining machine”), which consumes him in Act Three, scene two (Stillman “Machinations” 22). Corne (horn) is “used for penetration and impalement—representing the male element,” and is attached to the front of gidouille (large belly), “the cosmic receptacle for gastric satisfaction and survival—representing the female element” (28). Both cornegidouille and merdre are relied on for expletive prefaces to other statements, and in some cases, either could just as easily be replaced with “Damn!” But the ambiguity of the terms’ meanings strengthens Jarry’s cause against the tyranny of dramatic language. Although the theater culture of his time would not abide inappropriate public speech, Jarry’s terms are exemplary in their inappropriateness—it is clear they are symbolic of words considered improper for dramatic use, but in their originality the audience is forced to interpret, compelled to linger on the terms. Because these are not the same base expressions people would mutter angrily in their own homes, and whereas common swear words pose no questions, the augmented structure of Jarry’s terms demands his audience make meaning of these unfamiliar obscenities, unraveling the unpleasant definitions of insults hurled past the footlights.

Père Ubu’s language is marked by many such curses and oaths, which in the case of the latter, not only recall a mock-heroic quality, but they also reveal his status as the imperious dictator. Yet for all of Père Ubu’s novelty as a character, his childishly illogical villainy and ridiculous physical appearance cause him to be an archetype of sorts: his melodramatic and cowardly responses to battle, coupled with his impulsive, one-dimensional, greed-driven motivation gives him the same attributes of the Vice figure. While Mère Ubu is the figure who initially functions as one of the “tempters in the same general fashion as the Vice of the morality plays,” it is Père Ubu who most consistently chooses to degenerate his rule by celebrating

himself in an orgy of blood and riches (Barber 195). It is this crude Vice-like quality that relates him to both the sinfulness of Richard III's unrepentant wickedness and Falstaff's unapologetic self-indulgent ways.

Père Ubu does not reflect on his actions, unlike Richard III, who recognizes his own sophisticated immorality. But in Richard's exploitation of others through the meaning of words he is adept at exhibiting "a slyness that is also often comic," an effect not intended or possible in Père Ubu's transparent personality (Greenblatt, *Richard* 511). Curiously, when Richard makes us aware that he recognizes the similarity between himself and the Vice figure of morality plays, he articulates this by revealing his manipulation of language: "Thus like the formal Vice, Iniquity, / I moralize two meanings in one word" (3.1.82-83). The simile might work for Père Ubu, had he any attention to morality (or immorality for that matter) as a value to consider or fight against. But we cannot totally discount the "two meanings" inherent in the main swear words of *Ubu Roi*, because of Père Ubu's stupidity—Jarry may have inadvertently put too much of his own love of language into the dialogue. Nor can we ignore the centuries-old Christian paradigm of double meaning as confirmation of a Satanic nature (even as it was an ideological lynchpin of the Puritan's attack on the duplicity of actors and the theater in England), double-talkers are to be feared. Similarly, we must recognize the importance of what Greenblatt calls the "fantastically inventive, aggressive language games" of Falstaff and Prince Harry, reminiscent of "the trading of comic insults...the madcap linguistic excess" Shakespeare may have engaged in with the university wits (Greenblatt, *Will* 217). Dramatic language can function as a sign of a character's nature, in some cases proving that how ideas are expressed can be more important than what is actually spoken. But, as in the Greenblatt example above, wordplay always offers a game of language for the playwright, regardless of the connotations of its use.

Jarry appropriated the fun of these verbose exchanges in *Ubu Roi*, relying on the device while simultaneously parodying it. In the following section from *1 Henry IV*, Prince Harry and Falstaff swap insults in a manner that must have delighted young Jarry:

PRINCE HARRY. I'll be no loner guilty of this sin. This sanguine  
coward, this bed-presser, this horse-back-breaker, this huge hill  
of flesh—

FALSTAFF. 'Sblood, you starveling, you elf-skin, you dried neat's  
tongue, you bull's pizzle, you stock-fish—O, for breath to utter  
what is like thee!—you tailor's yard, you sheath, you bow-  
case, you vile standing tuck—

(2.5.223-229)

Besides the style of the playful offenses, the use of “horse-back-breaker” as a descriptor for Falstaff may have found its way into *Ubu Roi* as well: we learn that sometime between the end of Act Three when Père Ubu was unable to mount his horse and Act Four, scene three, when we find him marching his army through the Ukraine, he has “completed the whole journey on foot, leading the animal on the rein,” due to the charger not being “commensurate with [his] dimensions” (53). The threat of his animal collapsing under his weight was a concern harkening back to both Brillat-Savarin’s Sobieski and Falstaff’s problematic size. Later, in Act Five, scene two, Père Ubu and Mère Ubu have their final showdown with Bougrebas, and the three couple their blows with insults, mingling Shakespearean influences with the style of guignol:

BOUGRELAS. (*striking him*) Take that, coward, vagabond,  
braggart, miscreant, mussalman!

PÈRE UBU. (*countering*) 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!

(Wright<sup>9</sup> 152-53)

Even if Jarry meant for Père Ubu's character to be incapable of saying any witticisms or of joking in a non-threatening, lighthearted way, the excerpt above shows that by incorporating Shakespearean insult trading Jarry was taking his farce to an even sillier place. Here, the shared cataloging of offenses belittles the importance of the moment. By adapting this type of comic wordplay for the deciding battle scene, Jarry parodies a parody: Prince Harry and Falstaff's heated, jocular exchanges were already spoofing a playwriting style long out of popular use, and by Jarry's time, Shakespeare's style was also hundreds of years past its milieu (Greenblatt, *Will* 217). Because of Jarry's calculating satirical aims, his intent was determinedly highbrow in its inclusion of Shakespearean details. By this point in time, many of the bourgeoisie may have had some Shakespeare knowledge, but it is doubtful that many had experienced enough academically to catch many of the references or in-jokes. This gap in knowledge may have also helped to divide the audience and push them towards rioting: the bourgeoisie were left watching from an outsider perspective—right where Jarry preferred them—confronted with a type of theater that exposed their lack of understanding. Their violent reaction incriminated them further, confirming Jarry's estimation that they were worthy candidates for his satire. But for the bourgeois members of the audience who expected that this comedy would bring harmless jokes and a perverseness more bawdily titillating than disgusting, missing some academic allusions

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<sup>9</sup> I have chosen the Wright translation for this selection, as the Connolly/Taylor version, while entertaining, is particularly creative, deviating substantially from Jarry's text.

would not have been as much of an issue as the radical unseemliness of the production as a whole.

In moving beyond the simplistic comic goal of eliciting laughs, Jarry takes measures to reduce any chance of seriousness during the face-off between the Ubs and Bougreles, belying the suspenseful moment that it might otherwise have been if it was in the context of a conventional play. But even as the plot centers on this very event to restore the royal power and expunge the Ubs from the Slavic landscape, it is not treated as any great dramatic moment—it simply functions a plot contrivance well-steeped in the physical Punch-and-Judy style of a traditional farce. The second fight between the two parties is an inevitable occurrence necessary to end the play, giving Bougreles his chance at vengeance before acquiring the throne, and supplying the hapless couple with a carnage-free route out of Poland. In this perfect travesty of the revenge tragedy form, Bougreles fails at familial duty, but still rescues the state, while Père Ubu does his best to realize the plan he mentions in a rather off-handed way during the third act: “I’ll soon make a fortune: then I’ll kill everyone in the world, and go away” (43). While he never pays for the barbarity he unleashes upon the military and ruling bodies of Poland, Père Ubu does his best to murder all those holding any power and flee from Bougreles, his army, and all of Eastern Europe. In order for the comedy to remain as absurdly farcical and dark as it is, *Ubu Roi*’s final act was treated with the juvenile levity usually reserved for the base comic relief of Shakespeare’s greatest tragedies (the urinary and sexual preoccupations of *Macbeth*’s porter, for instance), but disregarding all of Bougreles’ supposed rage and the Ubs’ villainy, Jarry implements low comedy, assuring that juvenility is the only rule.

The offensive linguistic potshots teenage Jarry originally fired against an adult world in *Les Polonais* served him as well in his own adulthood with *Ubu Roi*, as the playwright’s

ambition was to squarely hit his satirical targets (which now included the pretentiousness of the French theater institution, and its bourgeois patrons). And while satire remains one of the foremost objectives of this dark comedy, Jarry's delight in playing with language is also evident within Père Ubu's swearing. The totality of this aggressive use of language is not confined to an instinctive voicing of dissatisfaction, although there are seemingly more scenes than not where Père Ubu is cursing at his enemies, his wife, or about his stomach. But in addition to swearing *at* the person or object of his scorn, Père Ubu swears *on* something in the Falstaffian manner of making an oath; these are akin to the apostrophized Renaissance sayings "'Sblood" ("God's blood") or "'Zounds" ("God's wounds") found in Shakespeare's work, and are directly parodied in Père Ubu's use of the oaths "God's bones," "God's whiskers," "By God's holy horn, by God's third leg," (22, 27, 52). When he is not using the Lord's name in vain, Père Ubu is usually swearing upon his "green candle" (presumably a euphemism for his diseased member), his cash collecting instruments, or his seemingly endless arsenal of invented weaponry.

By naming machinery we are not always privy to see (and sometimes we are, wishing we had not been), Père Ubu's oaths present a window into Jarry's imagination, a fantastically realized extra-textual source of bizarre equipment, injecting an occasional hint of science fiction into the play. These futuristic glimpses appearing in Père Ubu's oaths demonstrate the kind of fascination Jarry held with all things machine-based and their escalating intimacy with humanity, an idea he would explore in books such as *The Supermale* or *Doctor Faustroll*, 'Pataphysician. Remembering that in its many forms *Ubu* was written during the late 1880s and early-to-mid 1890s, the same time that the prospect of invention had recently excited all of Paris—and even a non-electric invention like the bicycle was capable of great attention, especially from Jarry, who was known to ride his obsessively (Shattuck 12). And while he apparently envisioned new

machinery as capable of empowering the individual with a freedom of movement, throughout *Ubu* he also considers the possibility that technology could become a tool of a despotic government.

Fictional apparatuses are used by Père Ubu throughout the play, and sometimes merely referred to in passing. For instance, after the hardship of dismounting his horse and walking across the Ukraine, Père Ubu gives promises of technological advancement to correct the situation in the future: “But as soon as we get back to Poland we shall, by making use of our knowledge of physics and in consultation with our learned advisers, invent a wind-driven carriage capable of transporting the entire army” (53). This instance may be the only mention in the play of a machine with positive attributes, albeit one with military deployment as the impetus for its design. And with an ecologically sound, renewable energy source providing its power, this fictional people-mover running on wind may have been included to draw a comparison between Père Ubu’s greedy delusions and those of chivalric Don Quixote—Act Four’s battle with the Russians even features Père Ubu’s commandeering of the famed *Don Quixote* icon: “we shall assume our command position inside the windmill...” (54). But benign technology is the exception. Generally, machines are to be feared in *Ubu Roi* as instruments of economic rape, medieval-sounding close range combat weapons or grisly torture devices, and cold, mindless executioners capable of killing on a grand scale.

As the play progresses towards Act Three, Père Ubu’s oaths increasingly refer to the threatening pieces of equipment he has amassed, often with names combining the financial with the martial. Some of these weapons include the “cash-sword” (“sabre à finances”), also called the “sword of phynance” in the Connolly and Taylor translation, and the “cash-horn,” (“corne finances”). But these weapons that Père Ubu swears by are only a small fragment of his entire

appalling collection—a far cry from the daggers, rapiers, and poisons most Shakespearean characters use in order to dispatch their enemies. Much like the rapier might suggest the chivalric quality of its carrier (like the many honor-conscious characters of *Romeo and Juliet*), the omnipresence of Père Ubu's main weapon of choice, his walking stick, serves to remind us of his detestable nature.

From the standpoint of frequent use and mention, Père Ubu's walking stick figures prominently into explaining his character. Although sketches suggest he is always supposed to carry his stick in his jacket pocket, it does not serve its full representative purpose until it is paired with his bowler hat, thereby reminding us of his bourgeois standing (Schumacher 50). But the walking stick doubles as his scepter once he becomes king, and presumably, this is no different than the “unmentionable brush” he fetches during the first act's dinner party (24). As a symbol of his role as bourgeois king and coprophile, the stick defines his true status, grotesque nature, and like his gidouille, reminds us of his ineluctable connection to his appetite and digestion. Among all of his weapons, the guignol context of the play would lead us to believe he is to brandish this particular weapon to traditional comic effect, much like the bat of a Harlequin, the club of Punch, or even the cowardly swordsmanship of Falstaff (Braun 52). But beyond its physical enactment on the stage, the walking stick/toilet brush/“physick-stick” (“baton à physique”) is more emblematic than his other nonsensical props of Père Ubu's alternating position as ruler, abusive husband, and delusional money-hungry egomaniac.

But this is only one of many multifaceted and gruesome weapons he possesses. Some of his other weaponry includes the “Noble's hook” (“crochet à Nobles”) the “phynance-hook” (“le croc à finances”), the “Noble's knife” (“couteau à Nobles”), the “nearole-incisors” (“ciseau à oneilles”), the “face-chopper” (“couteau à figure”), and the “phynancial pistol” (“pistolet à

phynances”). Never to get completely removed from the play’s refrain, the names of some weaponry moves from the economic towards variations on *merdre*: the “*ciseau à merdre*” (“*pschitt-scissors*”), the “*croc à merdre*” (“*pschittahook*”), and the “*sabre à merdre*” (“*pschittasword*”). As a comic counterpoint, Père Ubu also heavily relies on his “little wooden pick” (“*petit bout de bois*”) as he uses it in battle against the Russian Emperor and to torture Mère Ubu by “penetration of the nearoles” (69). In any case, the purpose of supplying Père Ubu with a ridiculous assortment of arms is to show his crudeness and the total absence of nobility in his character that might otherwise be represented by his carrying a gentlemanly rapier (Schumacher 51). But the weapon exercised with the most barbarity operates in a manner quite differently than this little uncomplicated stick, and is responsible for causing the a devastating blow to the Polish kingdom in a manner eerily prophetic of the mass-murders of the early half of the twentieth century.

The debraining, or disembraining machine (“*machine à décerveler*”), is at the center of the action during the gruesome liquidation of the remaining Polish nobles, judges, and financiers in Act Three, scene two. Père Ubu unveils his fiendish plan, revealing a series of unconventional contraptions, explaining the killing process to everyone including Mère Ubu, his court, and his soon-to-be-victims: “Those who are condemned to death, I shall push thorough this trap door. They will fall down into the bleed-pig chambers (“*les sous-sols du Pince-Porc*”), and will then proceed to the cash-room where they will be debrained” (Connelly 39). The off-stage device is not only essential to the scene, its very presence is of such import that Jarry places it in the character list following the dedication page—right after Père Ubu’s horse (“*The Phynance Charger*”) and before both the crew of the ship and the ship’s captain who appear in the final scene of the play.

Including the disembraining machine in the cast of characters may have been another tactical move to educe indignant crowd reactions, but a number of critics were outraged; they felt it necessary to voice their displeasure, stating that no machine could not be an actual character and Jarry was wrong for trying to convince his audience otherwise (Skillman “Machinations” 28). Truly, this small detail of machine-as-persona, one that might regularly appear in any science fiction screenplay, is an innovation we take for granted in a post-*I, Robot*, *Forbidden Planet*, or *Star Wars* world. But Jarry’s consideration of the vicious machine as a being equal to all manner of royalty, magistrates, and financiers was extraordinarily shocking for Paris of 1896. To a degree, the French public, a forward-thinking democratic society, may have still retained a deep reverence for monarchical heads of state; this was a veneration that subjects of Renaissance England would have appreciated, as evident in the belief of an all-controlling “Great Chain of Being” (a hierarchy of rule originating from Heaven, delivered through kings, and descending to the smallest living molecule) would testify. But the idea of a disembraining machine, an invention constructed specifically for a single-mindedly horrible purpose, while thoroughly disturbing, probably seemed as thoroughly conceivable to Jarry’s audience as say, clairvoyant witches posing a “monstrous threat to the fabric of civilized life” to Shakespeare’s (*Will* 355). Since the influence of machines was becoming palpable in everything from architecture to leisurely activity, and because no Parisian could guess how technology would be harnessed in the future, the far-fetched, satirical disembrainer was rendered a terror no less plausible in Jarry’s time than the ever-threatening presence of destructive Satan-worshipping hags in during the early modern period.

The equivocation of their gloomy riddles aside, the witches speak Macbeth’s inner desires back to him, suggesting and rationalizing the future glories he seeks. Likewise, the

disembraining machine works as an extension of Père Ubu's greed and bloodlust, mindlessly killing in the same unswerving manner as its owner, feeding his longing for empty titles and riches. And while neither the witches nor the disembraining machine control their masters, they both perpetuate each respective character's belief in murder as a solution to their problem of acquiring and keeping power. After Duncan's death, Macbeth's biggest issue is with his own mind, but the witches' prognostications have him questioning his safety. His reaction is the dispatching of hired killers and eventually doing battle. But as an unthinking character incapable of reflection, Père Ubu precedes from the revolutionary celebration by resorting to his maniacal, tyrannical self.

The excitement of the new Polish government transforms from the gold-throwing festive giddiness of Père Ubu's nascent reign at the end of the second act, to his compulsive ferocity and sense of invincibility. He shows a total disregard for the dukedom he owes Bordure and the threat of Bougrellas' vengeance ("As far as I'm concerned [Bordure] and Bougrellas can go jump in a lake" [38]), and launches an avaricious campaign to seize titles, monies, and lives. Insulting his victims before finding out their worth, declaring them guilty (for crimes never even mentioned), and then sending them down the chute to their death, the entire disembraining procedure continues in factory assembly line fashion at Père Ubu's insistence. Ignoring the pleas of Mère Ubu ("What base brutality!" "You're too bloodthirsty," "Oh, what have you done," [40, 41]) who has inexplicably developed a conscience, he continues to murder all of the nobility, judges and tax collectors. When the liquidation is completed, Mère Ubu tries pleading with her husband: "Come, come, Lord Ubu, kings aren't supposed to behave like that. You're butchering the whole world." Stupefied, with nothing he can say to justify his actions at this point, he unsurprisingly responds with: "So pschitt!" (42).

As the gory anarchy of this moment of black comedy might suggest, those he kills by way of the disembraining machine do not return, unlike some other characters in the play. The difficulty of staging this scene is eased by the use of a trap door, and shuffling the victims through to their off-stage deaths. And while we might be morbidly curious, wondering how the disembraining machine operates, Jarry's musical puppet play, *Ubu Sur La Butte*, includes a rudimentary description while extolling its charismatic popularity in "La Chanson de décervelage" ("The Song of the Disembraining"). In Wright's version of *Ubu Roi*, the play is directly followed by a translation of the lyrics. Ubu's Palotins sing the refrain:

Look, look at the machine revolving,  
 Look, look at the brain flying,  
 Look, look at the Rentiers trembling!  
 Hurrah, arse-horns, long live Père Ubu! (169)

The song tells the story of a bourgeois man and his family who spend their Sundays dressing up to watch the weekly disembraining, when on one occasion, at the prodding of his wife (not unlike Mère Ubu), he tries throwing dung at the condemned Rentier but hits the Palotin executioner instead, and is subsequently thrown at the machine by the enraged crowd. In the song's final verse, we are given another sense of the machine's processing and the violence of which it is capable—even when one makes the mistake of endeavoring to watch it perform from a distance:

...I'm rushed along arse-over-tip into the big black hole  
 Whence no one ever comes back-unless they're wrapped in a shroud  
 And that's what happens to people who go for their Sunday walk  
 To the Rue d'Échaudé to watch them disembrain,

And work the pig-pinching machine, or even the tomahawk

When you set out you're alive, and when you come back you're slain. (171)

The last line of the verse clarifies what appears to be an obvious sentiment, but as we have learned in *Ubu Roi*, people do not always stay dead once they die. The disembraining machine changes all of that, as it assures fatal endings. How it is we have come to hear this sung testimony is a mystery, but very likely, this is an intentionally ridiculous and confusing question of a song without an answer—not unlike the enigmatic qualities of presenting us with a Poland that is not Poland, the roundabout meanings/meaninglessness of Père Ubu's curses and oaths, and the puzzling indeterminacy of weapons we cannot clearly see or readily imagine.

### *Watching Ubu Staged*

Elitist satire targeted at the bourgeois classes forces the viewer to make a choice. The underlying message from the playwright is: you are either one of us or you aren't. If the viewer is part of the former group, he can freely enjoy the satire's exposure of the latter group's shortcomings. If the viewer is actually part of the latter group, he is in the wrong place at the wrong time. Such is the case of any member of the bourgeoisie who found himself in attendance at the debut of *Ubu Roi*. Jarry had intended for his play to "confront" the bourgeois attendees "like the exaggerating mirror in the stories of Madame Leprince de Beaumont, in which the depraved saw themselves with dragons' bodies, or bulls' horns, or whatever corresponded to their particular vice" (Jarry, "Questions" 174). His satire of an entire segment of the population, along with their preferred style of theater, was a confrontational act, and in a way, a directorial method of picking a fight with a paying crowd he despised. Had Jarry been playing to a house of exclusively symbolist aesthetes, his production would have very likely received no extreme

reactions (at least in terms of violence against his work or other non-symbolist people in the crowd), and correspondingly, with no need for others to fight for or against what they believed the play represented, or tried to represent, the work would probably not have acquired its legendary reputation.

But the satire of the bourgeois theatergoer and his intellectual shortcomings is not the sole reason for Jarry's success with *Ubu Roi* in literary history, nor is this type of lampooning an exclusive product of his time. As long as there have been plays performed, there have been critical audience members who brought expectations of being entertained in a particular manner with them to the staged event, and in turn, there have been playwrights wholly unhappy about creating works purposely gratifying the anticipations of their audiences. But these audience expectations pose a threat to the playwright, not just because the public's tastes may influence which plays are made but they can also dictate *how* they are made: from content, to production choices, and even the way a play might end, success of a production is usually based on the ability of a play to sustain itself financially, and past examples will often dictate future theatrical investments. The public's taste has traditionally been demonstrated by economics—they like what they are willing to pay to see. And in Jarry's case, the mockery of this taste was both his play's *raison d'être* and the cause of its failure to maintain any longevity.

After *Ubu Roi* closed, Jarry wrote that his own play could have more readily suited the French public's idea of *goût* “by making the following minor changes: the initial word would have been Blast or Blasttr, the lavatory brush would have been a courtesan's couch, [Père] Ubu would have conferred a Knighthood on the Tsar, and several people would have committed adultery—but in that case it would have been filthier” (Jarry, “Questions” 174). Filthier as it

might have been, the play would have been quite different: less daring, less offensive, and probably more successful with the public he was striving to incense.

Jarry's ideas about the conflict of a playwright's unique vision facing opposition with public opinion have an English predecessor of sorts in the work of Shakespeare's contemporary, Francis Beaumont, who wrote the satirical *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* in 1607. Much as the bourgeois population was strongly influencing Parisian society and its culture by the end of the nineteenth century, so had the citizens of London changed the social landscape of their own city nearly three hundred years earlier. As the English merchant class began to enjoy a life that afforded them some leisurely activity, they began to take in theatrical entertainments with more frequency. Because of their increasing wealth and influence they felt their purchasing power had guaranteed them the right to a certain type of show. This is no different from the idea many hold today. Advertisements constantly bombard us at every turn, and, as ticket buyers we have developed the notion that we have the right to see the show we have paid to see within reasonable approximations of our expectations, specifically, those sold to us in commercials. We feel we deserve a show without any notably great deviation from the way it is marketed to us—generally, a comedy should make us laugh, a tragedy should make us feel pity or fear, etc. In Jarry's era, and in Shakespeare's, audiences came to the theater looking for a pleasurable experience, and if those expectations were not met, they did not hesitate to let the actors on stage know about it.

A poetic account from Ben Jonson, written in 1608, describes the Blackfriars audience (a clientele we are inclined to believe was more gentry than citizen in its makeup due to considerably more expensive ticket prices, but proof seems inconclusive) as diverse (from “knight,” “lady,” and “shop's foreman”), hypercritical (“had, before / They saw half, damned the

whole play, and more”), and disapproving (“Their motives were, since it had not to do / With vices, which they looked for, and came to—“), or, in other words, they came to the theater armed with a sense of entitlement (quoted in Kinney 386). Because Beaumont’s meta-play mocks the supposed privilege of citizens through an angry grocer named George (who is suspicious of the acting troupe’s satirical intentions of their play-within-the-play, *The London Merchant*), Beaumont is able to explicitly mock both the merchant class and their theatrical tastes. In practice, Beaumont’s play was perhaps as unsuccessful in its satirical aims as Jarry was with both his detractors and Lugné-Poe. Beaumont’s publisher had remarked in 1613, that the audience “not understanding the privy mark of *Ironie* about it...utterly rejected it” (quoted in Gurr 74). In the case of *Knight*, we are unsure if its failure was due to a lack of comprehension or the displeasure of an audience with a citizen majority who, as Jarry said of his bourgeois spectators’ reaction to his own work, “resented it because they understood only too well, whatever they may say” (Jarry, “Questions” 175). Through the character George’s outbursts, we learn Beaumont was voicing his contempt of the citizens and their preferred style of drama, a style demanding traditional and widely played favorites, but thoroughly and hopelessly unchallenging—they had no interest in seeing anything novel or unexpected (Gurr 103). The opinion of what theater should and should not be was as strongly held by the Parisian bourgeoisie, even if what constituted that opinion was markedly different than that of the London merchant class.

Jarry’s staging of *Ubu Roi* came during a time when two completely different schools were fighting to remove what they perceived as a bourgeois stranglehold on the progress of the French theater. On one side of the battle against the status quo, naturalist reformers such as Zola, Antoine, and Strindberg, sought to create a theater of “life-like” or “honest” stage representations

(Schumacher 104). Some of the dramatic principles of naturalism called for historically accurate costuming, genuine props, architectural structures, live animals wherever possible, crowds represented by large stage gatherings, and actors speaking in an ordinary, unaffected style (106). Symbolists like Jarry had completely different views on the proper way to change the theater. Mainly due to a perception that because of their celebrity some stage actors felt emboldened to freely interpret a playwright's text, symbolists viewed many actors as a problematic group who in their self-absorption caused a rift between an author's message and the audience to whom he was trying to convey his ideas (104). Additionally, the symbolists saw theater as an intellectually elite medium, one demanding a shared responsibility on the audience's part to fully envision scenes by the mere suggestion of costuming, and limited scenery.

The symbolist conundrum of producing a play without the interference of actors is a confounding one. But it appears Jarry believed he had resolved this considerably Herculean issue in a letter to Lugné-Poe. In trying to convince the director of the fiscally conservative and easy way with which *Ubu* could be produced in his interpretation of a symbolist manner, Jarry states:

...It would be interesting, I think, to stage this thing (at no cost by the way) in the following manner:

1. Mask for the main character, Ubu, which I could get you if need be. I am right in thinking, am I not, that you have yourself studied the mask problem?
2. A cardboard horse's head, which he would hang around his neck, as on the old English stage, for the only two equestrian scenes—all these begin suggestions in the spirit of the play, since I intended to write a guignol.

3. A single set or, better still, a plain backdrop, eliminating the raising and lowering of the curtain during the single act. A formally dressed character would enter, as in puppet shows, to put up signs indicating the location of the scene. (Note that I am convinced that such signs have a far greater “suggestive” power than any set. No set or extras could convey the sense of “the Polish army on the march in the Ukraine.”)
4. Abolition of crowd scenes, which are all too often badly staged and are an insult to intelligence. Thus, a single soldier on parade, a single soldier in the scuffle when Ubu says, “what a crowd,” “what a retreat,” etc.
5. Choice of an “accent” or, better still, a special “voice” for the main character.
6. Costumes with as little local colour or chronology as possible (the better to suggest something eternal); modern preferably, since the satire is modern; and sordid, for the tragedy will appear still more wretched and horrifying that way.

(quoted in Schumacher 105)

Later printed as an introduction for the program, his exegetic note can be interpreted as a declaration of principles, based partly on production simplicity and partly on economic incentive. He builds a case for an intellectually superior drama unencumbered by standard theater convention. Jarry’s letter also shows his continued artistic connection to a symbolist appropriation of the guignol puppet theater from which his play was originally conceived, and that he was attempting to appropriate for his own unique vision of the symbolist cause. Many of the choices for the play recall the English Renaissance stage, thereby giving him a historic and

respectable basis for his decisions, while recalling the Shakespearean plot aspects of the play itself. In fact, in casting Bougrellas, Jarry cited Shakespeare's stage and the "earthiness" of the medieval theater it came from, suggesting the role be played by a fourteen year-old boy (Shattuck 205). Recalling the English stage as support for his stylistic choices may support Morse's theory of the "smash and grab" adaptation, yet these choices do not simply reflect an attempt to better the image of his play by aligning it with something great, it also displays his inclination to incorporate many of the same production choices believed to originally be used in the adapted works appearing in his play.

Finally, to understand Jarry's aesthetic conception for *Ubu*, we must consider the importance of the puppet theater and its relationship to public performance and Shakespearean texts in nineteenth-century France. Although puppetry was primarily the domain of the French rural working-class, marionette theater had been established in fin de siècle Paris by the time of Jarry's arrival; the mechanized puppets of the Petit Théâtre de la Galerie Vivienne performed classic dramas of world literature (Jannarone). The theater's spectators were often comprised of avant-garde artists, many who became vocal supporters of the superiority of puppets to actors, insisting that the medium fostered artistic excellence unaltered by human error. This highbrow version of the puppet theater was not a formative part of Jarry's experience, but his Rennes background, with its populist, folk version of the art form, had a substantial influence on his view about drama and a profound effect upon how *Ubu* was produced.

The working class puppet theater, popular throughout rural France, was by and large an endeavor of permanent and traveling companies who were keenly aware of their audience's finances, occupations, and schedules (Jannarone). The social background of the puppeteers brings to mind the guildsmen who produced the miracle play cycles in fourteenth and fifteenth-

century rural England—entertaining and informing, but not in their main vocation; because many of the puppeteers themselves were also working class craftsmen entertaining for supplemental income at best, performances were extremely low in price (and sometimes free), and various shows were repeated many times over a Sunday or holiday, usually because of the cramped space (a basement or portable booth) allocated for the show itself. By the middle of the 1800s, the Bibliothèque Nationale published low-priced editions of French and European authors to great success, and the puppeteers mined these stories looking for plays to add to their repertoires. Léopold Delannoy explains that the plots to these stories were often rough outlines “filled in following their imaginations,” and often randomly changed by “adding or subtracting according to [the puppeteers’] fancy” (quoted in Jannarone).

Concerning *Ubu*, an interesting piece of data regards the voices used for the puppets. The vocalizations used in the puppet theater became a language unto the medium itself, an involuntary or comical distortion, an invented lexicon, and a particular accent—one that in northern France, often employed a patois of Lille that over-rolled the ‘r’ sound, and begat a rhotacism that replaced other sounds with the ‘r’ (Fournel and Delannoy quoted in Jannarone). These elements undoubtedly informed young Jarry’s conception of theater, and must have equally influenced the Morin brothers’ preferred method of enacting their plays, as they attempted to recreate the experience of the puppet theater in their own renamed attic, the “Théâtre des Phynances,” appropriating Shakespeare, and mocking their inept teacher in *Les Polonais*.

It is easy to conclude that the linguistic style of the rural puppeteers had a direct bearing on Jarry’s production and writing choices for *Ubu Roi*: note his belief that the actors should have “a special ‘voice,’” the invented vocabulary of curses and weaponry pervading each scene, as

well as the intrusive extra ‘r’ of *merdre*. Clearly, Jarry’s six ideas for staging *Ubu* shows his goal of incorporating the elements of the puppet theater into “legitimate,” or human-acted theater, and he is explicit about that point. It is ironic that a satirical work aimed at the bourgeoisie stems from both the low art of a grassroots working class art form and the perceived high art of dramatic genius. But this integration of a popular entertainment form into Jarry’s work is not unlike Shakespeare’s use of the antique *mimus* character in the form of his clowns and comic actors—if nothing else, this parallel reveals how both playwrights share in the tradition of using vulgar (common) entertainments for other purposes (Esslin 233-34). And while this is not to suggest Shakespeare was consciously trying to exclude large audiences, it does imply that by using these elements within the context of something greater he was simultaneously appealing to the erudite as well as the groundlings.

But mass-appeal was not Jarry’s aim. His letter expresses his insistence on suggestion as a key ingredient of the work, demanding the audience shoulder a certain amount of responsibility. And while this choice is distinctively anti-naturalist, similarly Shakespearean in its demand that audience members visualize the entirety of setting for themselves, it would prove to require too much of his audience.

Shakespeare’s plays, as acted in his age, were performed in “lavishly costumed” actors on “stages that gave no pictorial representation of place or time...a flat, dusty promontory,” with props and textual suggestions serving as the main clues as to the location of a scene (Gurr 15). Jarry, with the help of Pierre Bonnard, Vuillard, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Sérusier, created a piece of scenery more confusing than helpful in determining place. It was described by an Englishman, Arthur Symons, as a mural containing everything from multiple climates, miniature elephants, a hanging skeleton, a bed with snow falling on it, and a fireplace where the actors

entered on to the stage (Shattuck 207). Jarry called the scenery as “a perfect *décor*, for just as one good way of setting a play in Eternity is to have revolvers shot off in the year 1000,” stressing his intention to stage action unfettered by the confines of setting (206). Jarry was adamant that using scenery to make the audience believe they were not watching a theatricized version of something, but the thing itself “scandalizes those who see nature in an intelligent and selective way, as it presents them with a caricature of it by someone who lacks all understanding” (“Futility” 179). To be sure, these incompatible visual choices are not Shakespearean by any stretch of the imagination, but the imagination is actually the key point: the playwright’s wish to have the audience meet him half way, to actively participate in the work. In his tenet of the dramatic experience, the conception of watching a puppet show in a shared, small space has similar implications for *Ubu Roi*, as the size of the guignol theater insists the viewer watches the action from a very short distance.

This is the very nature of confrontation. Once faced with the “exaggerating mirror” we can simply leave the theater if we do not like what we see, but if the goal of the author is to force his audience into active response—violent, displeased, disgusted—we may feel compelled to oblige, especially if his message is being crammed down our throats.

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In Jan Kott’s 1964 book, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, the author insists that the twentieth century’s dramatists, like Absurdist playwright Samuel Beckett, are all Shakespearean in their own way, but that each exhibits “more similarities to Shakespeare and medieval morality plays than to nineteenth-century drama, whether romantic or naturalistic” (131). Believing that

Absurdist plays should be called “anti-theatre,” and that they are remarkable for their “grotesque quality,” he draws a parallel between the weighty tragedies of Shakespeare and Absurdism (131-32). He continues by quoting Maurice Regnault’s statement, “the absence of tragedy in a tragic world gives birth to comedy,” and explains that both the tragic and grotesque derive from the same elements (132). In this, *Ubu Roi* is the supreme example. If “the downfall of the grotesque actor” inspires in us a “mockery directed not only at the tormentor, but also at the victim who believed in the tormentor’s justice,” *Ubu Roi* provides us with an acutely grotesque vision, one devoid of true justice or even a sense of unequivocal retribution (132). In *Père Ubu*, Jarry has given the stage an unfunny clown, an immature killer, a cruel despot, and a clueless idiot. While his play offers us a satirical view of complacency, we must acknowledge the significant role of Shakespeare’s tragedies, characters, and use of language lying behind the unwavering purpose of Jarry’s black comedy.

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