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Helen Solterer, *Medieval Roles for Modern Times: Theater and the Battle for the French Republic*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010. 287 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$80.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-271-0361404.

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In 1938, the *Théophiliens*, an amateur theatrical troupe of Sorbonne students under the direction of professor Gustave Cohen, performed a medieval play in front of Notre-Dame de Reims as part of a Third Republic celebration of the cathedral's successful reconstruction. Three years later the same troupe, featuring a second generation of students, performed at Chaillot, the theater that had been headlining acts for Nazi leaders, then toured France through a Vichy project to teach rural residents about French cultural heritage. In her *Medieval Roles for Modern Times: Theater and the Battle for the French Republic*, Helen Solterer examines the many paradoxes evident in the foundation, development, and reception of this student troupe and its medieval repertory. Her book makes a valuable contribution to the increasing body of critical work dedicated to the understanding and appropriation of medieval cultural productions by people of radically different religious and political beliefs.

The book is, however, much richer and much more complex than this initial description might suggest. Examining a period of French history through the lens of a troupe of culturally diverse college students and their Jewish-Belgian director provides remarkable insights into what it meant to be "French" in the first half of the twentieth century and how role-playing could be applied not just in the theater, but also in real life. While the book's subtitle (*Theater and the Battle for the French Republic*) captures the ways theatrical productions were appropriated by various political and religious factions, its primary title (*Medieval Roles for Modern Times*) evokes the *Théophiliens'* personal connections to the characters and messages of the plays they performed. Such associations were particularly interesting during World War II when acting was so often a key to survival. The concept of psycho-social role-play underlies much of the book, filtered through the theories of Russian director Nikolai Evreinov and Gustave Cohen, who advocated a kind of "theatrical cohabitation" in which modern actors made their medieval characters come alive, a process of identification with adopted personae that many Holocaust survivors later evoked when describing their coping mechanisms.

Chapter one, "French Mysteries and Russian Miracles," lays the groundwork for future chapters by explaining the European vogue for medieval mystery and miracle plays that spread throughout Europe in the first years of the twentieth century. This was a type of theater that emphasized self-sacrifice for the collective good, a notion that would come into play during World War I, which was often evoked in terms of passion plays or the Crusades. Solterer also introduces the figures of Gustave Cohen, a Belgian scholar from an assimilated Jewish family, whose scholarship focused on the "transforming effect" of the medieval plays on those who participated in them, and Russian director Nikolai Evreinov, whose experimentation in adapting French mystery plays in Saint Petersburg placed emphasis on representations of sacrifice. After the war, both men would emigrate to Paris (Evreinov in 1920 and Cohen in 1932), where their theories found a wider audience.

Chapter two concentrates on Cohen, a World War I veteran and a charismatic Sorbonne professor, who encouraged hands-on exploration of medieval literature through performance, in the tradition of youth groups including the Scouts and the Comédiens Routiers. He adapted medieval texts for modern audiences and worked with students to elaborate theories about performance and *mise-en-scène*. Here Solterer introduces the *Théophiliens*, who took their name from performances of Rutebeuf's *Le Miracle de Théophile*, a thirteenth-century play about a bargain between the devil and a clerk, the eponymous Théophile. Lead actors in the group included a Jewish Syrian student and a Russian Orthodox student, while others, including women, hailed from Switzerland, Madagascar, England, the Middle East and the French provinces. The numerous photographs reproduced (there are forty in the book) provide visual confirmation of the troupe's experimentation with the medieval French repertory and the professionalism with which Cohen and his students interpreted these plays. Solterer frames the complexities of the medieval texts chosen by Cohen, many of which depict religious and ethnic difference, in terms of his devotion to casting the Middle Ages as a reflection of Republican belief in the importance of unity and equality. His position can be gauged by the virulence of attacks against him by members of the *Action Française*, eager to claim their own more exclusive and anti-Semitic version of the Middle Ages.

Chapter three evokes the development of the *Théophiliens*, from 1935 to 1939, against the backdrop of Hitler's rise to power. While describing the production of *Le Jeu d'Adam* and its tremendous success (students gained national exposure and took their show on the road, notably to Chartres in 1935 and Reims in 1938), Solterer continues to stress Cohen's use of medieval texts and *mises-en-scène* as a way of championing the values of Republicanism in order to block out the increasingly ugly political debates of the time. Recognized by the government as a legal "association," the *Théophiliens* went on to produce Arnoul's Gréban's and Jean Michel's passion plays based on Cohen's adaptations of popular stories within them: *Marie-Madeleine*, *Judas*, and *Notre Dame*. Solterer describes these traveling productions and their focus, which lay less on the religious elements of the originals than on the emotional transformations undergone by lead characters. It is also in this chapter that she provides a biography of Moussa Abadi, the best actor of the group (he later toured internationally with a professional company) and a scholar of Rutebeuf (he played the peddler in *Le Dit de l'herberie*). He had grown up in a traditional Jewish family in Damascus, yet chose to play the most reviled of medieval roles in Paris: Judas and Satan. Solterer traces the paradoxes inherent in portraying anti-Semitic stereotypes by night while engaging actively by day in protests against anti-Semitic Parisian groups. The chapter concludes with examples of religious conversion and immigrant assimilation into French life attributed to theatrical role play.

Chapter four, "Theatrical Double Jeopardy," follows the *Théophiliens* through World War II (1939-1944) as some student actors were drafted into the war, sending back letters couching their experience in terms of the passion plays they had interpreted, or were interned in camps where they performed to keep up their spirits (there is a wonderful account of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Bariona ou le fils du Tonnerre*, a satirical take on a mystery play). The bulk of the chapter, however, is dedicated to the fate of the troupe under Pétain, when Jewish professors such as Cohen had been stripped of their posts and students were left on their own. Some, like Maurice Jacquemont, used medieval drama as an instrument of resistance while others, like Pierre Sadron, who became the troupe's director, followed Vichy directives and cultural initiatives closely enough to be accused of collaboration after the war. The second generation of *Théophiliens* performed farces such as *Maître Mimin*, *Pathelin*, and *Condamnation de Banquet* at the request of the government, thus catering to Vichy's fondness for medieval France, outlined in detail in this chapter. Solterer also provides a counterpoint in the form of trained medievalist Edith Thomas' private journal, in which she denounced the fiction of the medieval fantasies spread by Vichy as propaganda.

Chapter five, "*La France éternelle* in American Exile," leaves France, following Gustave Cohen in his wartime flight to the United States. He was one of the lucky few who managed to obtain a teaching post in the United States, and worked to develop the New York-based Ecole libre des hautes études, which

capitalized on the skills of forty-nine displaced French-speaking professors and some thousand students. Another such venture, which reprised dialogues about European identity that had been held at the Abbey of Pontigny after World War I, was conducted at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts. These discussions, which united American and European scholars, were interpreted by the U.S. government as a hotbed of French nationalist sentiment. Like De Gaulle's Free France in exile, Cohen attempted to keep his ideals of an "Eternal France" alive in the U.S. despite the many contradictions inherent in continuing to uphold the values of a country that had clearly betrayed them. Drawing on Cohen's actions and correspondence, Solterer expands to discuss the problems of other assimilated French Jews' ideals and conflicts of identity during this period. She concludes the chapter with discussion of Cohen's *La Grande clarté du Moyen Age*, a work of propaganda in defense of France, which had a significant impact on Louis Aragon, whose *Le Crève-coeur* and *Les Croisés* transmitted Resistance ideals through medieval motifs and forms.

Chapter six returns to France to describe the wartime life of Moussa Abadi, one of Cohen's star student actors. Abadi did not flee France, deciding, instead to work with the Jewish underground in Nice. Solterer traces his path from actor to *résistant*, refusing a ticket to return home to Syria, choosing instead to live and work in Nice, first with Cohen (not yet departed for the United States) and then with his girlfriend and future wife, Odette Rosenstock. He taught in a Catholic school where he put on medieval religious plays with his students before working with Rosenstock and the bishop of Nice to establish what would come to be known as the "Marcel Network" to protect Jewish children. This chapter is fascinating for the insights it reveals into psycho-social role-play and the ways Abadi and Rosenstock used theatrical techniques with children to help them escape detection. The end of this chapter evokes the fates of many other Resistance figures who adopted role-playing techniques during the Occupation, some following Louis Jouvet's mystical and extreme understanding of role-play as a "double life" (p. 215). The chapter concludes with analysis of Abadi's Holocaust testimonial, in which he drew from medieval passion plays to characterize his experiences.

The epilogue follows those who survived the war, noting the divisions among the original *Théophilien*s and those who had so closely participated in Vichy initiatives. Gustave Cohen embraced the new troupe when he returned to France, yet even his Republican credentials could not redeem their suspect activities of the war period. Indeed, Solterer shows the extent to which medieval drama and theatrical troupes in general had been tainted by the Vichy experience. Nevertheless, the troupe persisted, recreating itself once again by performing the comic *Aucassin et Nicolette* and then the *Mystère de la passion*, which toured France, Europe, and the world, achieving particular success in 1950s Brazil as emissaries of the global-leaning Fourth Republic. The *Théophilien*s thus evolved from an amateur student troupe to an institution, funded by the government and earning royalties from its work. While the troupe itself eventually collapsed, their work did not. She reveals that their high-profile public performances made the Middle Ages relevant for modern France by allowing subsequent generations to project their own interests and concerns on medieval texts. Of particular interest here is her discussion of the cultural contributions of several former *Théophilien*s, like Roland Barthes, Alain Resnais, Paul Zumthor, Jacques Chailley, Edouard Andriantsilaniarivo, and Moussa Abadi, who survived the war and went on to establish a radio show for RTF.

Medieval Roles for Modern Times is unique and so beautifully written that it is difficult to do its content justice in a book review. Solterer, a medievalist, has spent over twenty years researching the *Théophilien*s by consulting American, French, and Russian archives and collecting written and oral histories. This is one of the first books treating the medievalism of this period in great depth, but it also does much more. It provides a biography of Gustave Cohen and Moussa Abadi; the history of a little-known but influential student theatrical troupe; an analysis of the benefits of psycho-social role-play; a cultural history of the period from 1905 to 1950; and case studies in the difficulties of negotiating Jewish-French identity at this time. It is important to note, however, that the book is, as Solterer puts it, "the life story of a group and its two principal figures" (p. 17) rather than a systematic historical study of theatrical

practices of this time. The book ranges widely, touching on many topics, but its center is resolutely biographical.

The book's ambitious scope was a pleasure for this reader, already familiar with the medieval revival in France, but it may be a bit overwhelming for others. A few choices are not entirely explained and a few arguments could have been made more rigorously. There is no rationale, for example, for the geographic focus of the book, particularly the long passages treating the Russian context (mystery plays were popular throughout the world at this time). This is likely a function of the Russian Evreinov, whose theories and practices were important for the *Théophilens*, yet other discussion of travel is related explicitly to the activities of the students or Cohen. Similarly, while Solterer moves from the particular (the medieval role-playing of the characters she examines) to the general (role-playing under Vichy), she makes too many claims for the power of medieval theater. Did student actors really convert to Catholicism because of their performances of medieval theater? Or did they join the *Théophilens* because they were already interested in the religious themes evoked in the medieval repertory? Did creative students such as Alain Resnais and Roland Barthes achieve success because of their participation in the *Théophilens*? Or like the students who converted to Catholicism, were they attracted to the troupe because of a pre-existing interest in creative initiatives? Was the role-playing of the Occupation a specific response to medieval theater? Or rather to the remarkable popularity of all kinds of theatrical performances in the pre-war period?

Despite several passages where the importance of the medieval feels stretched too far, Solterer's overarching thesis, that role-playing became a crucial strategy for exploring secular, religious, and national identity in France in the first half of the twentieth century, is extremely important. She expertly traces Cohen's and Abadi's stories and the trajectories of their involvement with medieval French theater as they grappled with Jewish identity and love of France at a time when the two no longer seemed compatible.

The book abounds with information relevant to a wide variety of readers, not just those interested in the Middle Ages or in the history of the theater. In fact, those who will likely be most interested in the book are modernists, particularly those who study the social dynamics of the Vichy regime; those curious about the complexities of Jewish-French identity from 1905-1950; those intrigued by the activities of French refugees in the United States; those fascinated by Resistance movements; and those who study psycho-social role play. The book is so enjoyable and well-written (many passages are so gripping they read like fiction) that it will also be quite approachable to a non-specialist readership. It is a fascinating book, full of interesting details and insights about French society and attitudes in the early twentieth century.

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