

## The Pleasures of the Cuckold: Bruscambille and the Tradition of the Mock Encomium

Annette Tomarken  
(Miami University, Oxford, Ohio)

An early seventeenth-century theater-goer arriving at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in Paris to see a farce, a tragedy or a tragi-comedy would not have been surprised if the play did not begin immediately. Instead, he or, more rarely, she would frequently be greeted by a prologue to the main event. This 'warm-up' speech would be delivered by an *harangueur*, a witty speech-maker who entertained the audience until the play itself began. Often dazzling in their rhetorical inventiveness, these orations might take as their topics anything from the joys of the cuckold to those of the prisoner, from the glories of large noses to those of the fart. Since the *harangueur* was also an actor, the speeches would be delivered with all the gestures and dramatic suggestiveness necessary to catch and hold the impatient spectators' attention. Very few of the farces of this period, the plays for which the harangues were mere introductions, survive. Paradoxically, a surprising number of editions both large and small of the speeches by one of the *harangueurs*, named Bruscambille, have come down to us - I have counted over twenty from 1609 to 1668 listed in the *National Union Catalog*. Pondering the reasons for this surprisingly long-lasting popularity, this article proposes a new way of interpreting some of the works of Bruscambille, the *harangueur* most often mentioned by scholars discussing the development of French theater in this period.

Bruscambille was the stage name of Deslauriers, about whom very little biographical information has been unearthed. Critics seem able to agree only that he was in Paris at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in 1609 and for some time thereafter.<sup>1</sup> There is a bibliography of his numerous speeches by Georges Mongrédien.<sup>2</sup> Although possibly not written down by Bruscambille himself, the collections provide valuable insights into a theatrical period about which, as John Lough has pointed out, we have far too little hard data.<sup>3</sup>

The diversity of Bruscombille's topics is matched by that of his tone. It is therefore not surprising that the published pieces are given a variety of titles--*facéties, prologues, discours comiques, imaginations*, and, most revealingly for my present purposes, *paradoxes*. These differing titles mirror and perhaps foster the often contradictory critical and scholarly assessments of Bruscombille which have been expressed since the nineteenth century. Attitudes to the speeches vary from disapproval to enthusiasm. The disapproval is usually due to the works' frequent obscenity, whereas the enthusiasm springs from a variety of causes. Typical of the negative evaluations is that by Victor Fournel (1863), who remarks scornfully that "on ne peut feuilleter ce dégoûtant recueil, sans avoir des haut-le-cœur à chaque page"<sup>4</sup>. In a similar vein, Lough shows that earlier historians cited Bruscombille as evidence that no decent woman would ever have dared be seen at the theater (p. 114). Joseph Vianey, on the other hand, claims in his long and enthusiastic article that the speeches are one of the best French adaptations of the playful spirit of the Bernesque writers of the first half of the sixteenth century.<sup>5</sup> In his study of *La Fantaisie verbale et le comique* in French theater, Robert Garapon admires the skill with which the rich resources of linguistic fantasy, some deriving from medieval techniques, were used by Bruscombille for a simple basic end, to make the audience wait patiently for the play: "Le galimatias dramatique est avant tout un effort de remplissage à l'aide de mots".<sup>6</sup> Finally, Barbara Bowen, in her study of the survival of the characteristics of French farce in the years 1550-1620, explains her own interest in Bruscombille. Laying less stress on the Italian influence than had Vianey, she focuses first on Bruscombille's obvious and avowed debt to Rabelais, whom he called "ce sublime personnage" (*Les Caractéristiques*, p. 170), and points out that many passages in Bruscombille echo the "souriante tolérance" of Montaigne (p. 174). Her chief focus, however, is on his use of certain themes and stylistic traits of traditional French farce, which was also marked by an "acceptation de la vie telle qu'elle est" (p. 174). For her, then, "Bruscombille n'a pas seulement traduit en français des poètes de société italiens; il a retrouvé les accents de l'humour et du bon sens français, tels que son public les connaissait d'après les farces" (p. 176). She adds that the history of this entire group of *farceurs* is "un grand travail qui reste à faire" (p. 171).

Obviously, such a "grand travail" cannot be undertaken here. Instead, I will consider one major aspect of the Bruscombille corpus which has received almost no attention and which will permit us, first, to bring together the various insights of the critics cited above, and, second, to suggest why Bruscombille's speeches were deemed worthy of so many editions in the

course of the seventeenth century. This neglected aspect of the harangues is related to the title "paradoxe" sometimes given to the published speeches, indicating that they were perceived by at least some contemporaries as theatrical manifestations of one of the most popular sub-genres of the Renaissance, the paradoxical encomium or satirical eulogy, a type of writing which began in antiquity, declined in the Middle Ages, and was revived in the Renaissance all over Europe. The classical writer most often associated with the genre is Lucian of Samosata, many of whose works were translated by Erasmus, the composer of one of the greatest mock encomia, the *Moriae Encomium*. The encomia have most often been discussed by critics under three headings determined by subject-matter, namely, the praise of a vice or vicious/amoral way of life or individual, the praise of a disease or physical infirmity, and the praise of a small animal or insect. In each of these categories, a work by Lucian provided a model. The praising of the seemingly unpraiseworthy was popular with Neo-latin writers as well as with writers in the vernacular languages. Although it was formally a fluid genre -- pieces could be short or long, in verse or in prose -- the mock encomium seems to have been clearly recognized by its practitioners as belonging to a long literary tradition. Prefaces such as that by Erasmus for the *Moriae Encomium*, which cited illustrious predecessors as justification for what might otherwise have seemed a frivolous and unworthy undertaking, were repeated and often expanded by later writers. These lists and various internal hints and references signalled to readers that an ironic reading of the work was intended.

Recent studies by Rosalie Colie, Walter Kaiser, C.A. Mayer, P. M. Smith, and others have demonstrated the widespread popularity of the paradoxical encomium with major as well as with little known authors.<sup>3</sup> For our present purposes, it is significant that both Rabelais and the Bernesque writers owed a considerable debt to Lucian and Erasmus. The praises of the codpiece and of "pantagruélion," Panurge's masterly "éloge des dettes," and even Rabelais' habit of ironically calling his readers "goutteux" or "verollez" "tresprecieux" all had connections with the mock encomiastic tradition. In the case of the Italian Bernesque writers, the links to the classical mock encomium are equally clear, as they eulogize the plague, debt, venereal disease, the mosquito, and so on. The Bernesque writers exercised an influence on French literature well before the time of Bruscombille: the Pléiade *hymnes-blasons* on animals and Du Bellay's "Hymne de la Surdit " all owe them a considerable debt. By the time of Bruscombille, however, the genre was often moving across the delicate line of paradox and into the domain of parody, not always deliberately.

What Bruscombille does, and his achievement in this regard has not been recognized, is to repeat quite clearly but in dramatic form arguments that had by now become the stock in trade of the mock encomiast. To be sure, he also includes both the elements of traditional French farce and the stylistic fantasy and inventiveness analysed by Bowen and Garapon respectively. But a feature of his work which is at least as striking as these is his constant use of the themes of traditional mock encomia.

In support of this contention, I shall examine some specific instances of the actor's skill with the more literary tradition. First, let us turn to the speech which provided the title of this article, that in defense of the horns of the cuckold. As Barbara Bowen has shown, the theme of cuckoldry was a common one in French farces, which frequently depicted the struggle for mastery between husband and wife as well as the wife's skill at tricking her husband while she enjoyed the love of a younger, more attractive male. Only rarely did the husband manage to deceive the wife (Bowen, p. 30). The focus in the plays is on the couple, on the arguments, quarrels, and eventual compromises made necessary by their married state. A resigned, sometimes cynical, but humorous view of life's frustrations and disappointments prevails. One piece even draws the conclusion that a peaceful, deceitful wife is preferable to a faithful, but bad-tempered one. The general attitude seemed to be that, since women's sexual appetites were greater than men's, wives would inevitably look outside the marriage for satisfaction. Under such circumstances, marital jealousy was both useless and foolish. Taking for granted the traditional views of the battle of the sexes, Bruscombille's piece on this topic ignores the drama of the couple's daily squabbles, deceits, and accommodations in order to concentrate on that most common symbol of the cuckold, his horns. In so doing, the *farceur* was borrowing from another, more literary French tradition, that of the ironic *blasons* and *hymnes-blasons* inspired by the mock encomia of Lucian and Erasmus.

Typical of these pieces are two poems, both entitled "Les Cornes", one by Remy Belleau and the other by the little-known Caïe Jules de Guersens. These follow the Ronsardian *hymne-blason* technique of praising their topic by way of sometimes complicated mythological references, elaborate images, and a veritable cascade of words designed to persuade the reader that the horns of the cuckold and, indirectly, the state they represent, are desirable manly attributes. To achieve this goal, two matters are emphasized, first, historical individuals and creatures who wore horns -- animals in the Zodiac, Pan, Jupiter disguised as a bull, and second, the curved shape of real horns.

This curve is compared with the dome of the sky, and with the curving rays of the sun. Finally, the usefulness of horn as a substance is noted, in the horn of plenty, in musical instruments, and so on. The language of the verses displays considerable erudition, particularly in the case of the de Guersens piece, as the following lines demonstrate:

O corne! qui des dieux va eslevant le front,  
D'où vient le peu d'honneur que les hommes te font?  
D'où vient, corne, d'où vient que ta pointe honorée,  
Au Lybique dessert chez Ammon adorée,  
Est blasmable entre nous, et que le moindre hommet  
Se sent deshonoré, te portant pour armet?  
Belle corne, est-ce pas nostre foible nature  
Qui ne peut supporter la divine encorneure  
D'une chose si rare? Ainsi le chassieux  
Se fasche du soleil qui luy touche les yeux;  
Ainsi le degouté rejette la viande,  
Ainsi le cerveau creux s'ennuie de la bande  
Des mignons de Phoebus, quant d'une masle voix  
Ils marient un vers au vent de leur haubois. (p.110)<sup>8</sup>

The function of these complicated references is to shift the focus away from what the invisible horns represent. As the imaginary, but physical entity is praised and described, the humiliations of the cuckold's state are glossed over or diminished by virtue of their noble associations. Symbolized by the elaborate lines is the constant search by the "mari complaisant" for a way of disguising or evading the truth. Indeed, the appropriateness of the horns as a symbol of the deceived man was always that they were something invisible to the wearer, because of their position, but laughingly evident to everyone else. The two humanist poets therefore provide a mocking shelter of learned language to distract the husband, where the farces had enabled him to laugh at others' misfortunes without pausing to see himself in the glass of satire.

These more learned approaches to the perennial topic are combined by Bruscombille with the familiar attitudes of the farce in an interesting prologue whose very title suggests the combination of traditions which the speech itself achieves: "Des Cocus, & de l'Utilité des Cornes." The first part of this title recalls the comical characters of the farce, while the second is related to the tradition of the paradox, the defense of the seemingly indefensible. Like Belleau and de Guersens, the harangueur concentrates on the horns as a physical attribute rather than on the deceived husband's relationship with his

wife. He stresses the attractiveness of the horns' curved shape, so like that of the new moon. He recalls the horned animals of the Zodiac as well as that fabulous and attractive horned animal, the unicorn. Even the name "cocu" is a charming one, given to one of spring's most delightful birds. Such sustained paradoxical argumentation is close not only to that of Belleau and de Guersens but also to that of the Italian paradossi, which first appeared in Italian in France and were later popular in Charles Estienne's French translations. Different from the earlier works is the theatrical mode of presentation, which sheds a fresh light on the traditional claims. To see these cunningly combined arguments, some of them familiar to spectators, dramatically acted out, accompanied by appropriately suggestive gestures and facial expressions, was to see juxtaposed the belly-laugh of farce and the reflective smile of the reader of a literary satire. In terms of the theme of cuckoldry, the theatrical format adds an original twist to the picture of the cuckold as the man willing to be distracted. For the spectators are being caught up in the same type of procedure as the foolish husband. The audience allows itself to be charmed and manipulated by the persuasive "harangueur" much as the husband is by his wily wife.

In this way, the seventeenth-century actor draws on the multiple strands of literary and theatrical traditions to present a novel and entertaining picture of the cuckold's dilemma. But the speech on cuckoldry is no isolated instance of a link with a more literary tradition. Major elements of the majority of Bruscombille's orations can be traced back to earlier mock encomia. Thus, his "Paradoxe, Nihil scientia peius, aut inutilius" is clearly influenced by Lando, Agrippa, and Montaigne. His "Egestas nobilissima" repeats arguments in favor of poverty advanced by numerous mock encomiasts, and his "Paradoxe sur la Prison" resembles both French and Italian ironic works. Last but by no means least, his "De la Folie en general," with its catalogue of women, lovers, poets, doctors, merchants, and gamblers who live under folly's rule, owes as much to Erasmus as to the fools of French farce.

If, as the above analysis has sought to demonstrate, Bruscombille's works derive as much from a major literary as from a theatrical tradition, as much from French as from Italian predecessors, what conclusions may we draw? What light is thereby shed on the popularity and on the survival of these speeches? What follows may begin to resolve some of the recurrent problems encountered by critics seeking to understand this comedian.

First, Bruscombille's clever blend of learned and popular elements surely reinforces Lough's claim that the audiences at early seventeenth-century

theaters were far more socially varied than earlier critics such as Gustave Landon and Emile Magne asserted (Lough, p. 10). Many of Bruscombille's more erudite references would have passed completely over the heads of the rough types formerly believed to have been the almost exclusive members of such audiences. Indeed, some pieces, such as that in praise of poverty, might have struck them as insulting and callous rather than comical and thought-provoking. To posit a more diverse audience also makes understandable the use of rather correct Latin in the speeches, something which has puzzled critics: as Lough puts it, "filthy as Bruscombille's prologues often are, their smut is at times curiously erudite" (p. 21). It has even been asserted that it was probably another, more educated man, or group of men and not Bruscombille, who wrote the speeches down, polishing and correcting them in the process. Even if this is true, it seems more likely that this educated individual or individuals would have decided to write down and publish the pieces precisely *because* of their fascinating and entertaining range of styles and use of differing traditions. It seems far less likely that such later writers would have devoted so much time and energy to grafting learned passages onto a series of texts which in their original form were utterly devoid of such features.

Secondly, understanding the complex, partly literary origins of Bruscombille's speeches may help explain their continuing appearance in print throughout the century. The satirical eulogy has by this time become a genre accepted all over Europe as having a distinct history and a clear set of authoritative practitioners who could be used as models and cited as justification for such seemingly frivolous endeavors. So well established was such writing that it was being widely anthologized, in particular by Neo-Latin writers. The most extensive such collection, the *Amphitheatrum sapientiae socraticae ioco-seriae* (1619) by Caspar Dornavius, contains several hundred encomia both long and short, classical and contemporary, from most European countries. In the vernacular in France, the *Paradoxes* and the related mock epitaphs (the *Sermons funebre*, also translated from Italian originals) appeared in many editions. The idea of collecting Bruscombille's speeches, therefore, whether it occurred to the man himself or to another writer or writers, fits perfectly into the general trend of the age to publish together pieces of this sort. This trend may explain why the speeches appeared in so many editions, whereas we have few surviving instances of the farces known to have been produced at this time: as Bowen puts it, "pour le fameux trio [Turlupin, Gros Guillaume, and Gaultier-Garguille] les légendes fourmillent mais presque aucun texte n'a subsisté" (p. 172). Admittedly, the Bruscombille works, unlike most mock encomia, have the special property of being designed originally for stage

delivery, with all the dynamism and vividness of presentation that this entails. But the reader of one of the Bruscombille volumes would find no difficulty moving to it from a collection of paradoxes by Estienne. Indeed, his enjoyment of the Bruscombille works might be all the greater because of their more flamboyant, risqué style, their Rabelaisian verbal acrobatics and irrepressible sense of fun.<sup>9</sup> In addition, if this imaginary reader was aware, as he probably would have been, given the regularity with which they were cited, of the classical sources of the mock encomium, he would also realize that Bruscombille was bringing the genre full cycle, back to its origins. For the satirical encomia of Lucian and other orators had also been designed for spoken delivery, in this case to a quite sophisticated and critical live audience.

By incorporating the more learned elements of the literary mock encomium, Bruscombille's speeches were thus moving French theater one step further towards its great flowering later in the century in the hands of the dramatists of the age of Louis XIV. Recent critics have shown that Ben Jonson, Shakespeare, and other major Renaissance dramatists made regular use of the tradition of the mock encomium in their plays. We must not, therefore, be fooled by the obscenity and popular style of Bruscombille, any more than we are by that of Rabelais, into thinking that behind the scatological humor and verbal ebullience there does not lie a "sustantificque moelle."

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- 1 See the *Dictionnaire de biographie française*, ed. M. Prévost and J. Balteau (Paris: Letouzey et Ane, 1933-), fasc. xxix, p. 574: Venu à Paris en 1606, il entre à l'Hôtel de Bourgogne comme harangueur: avant le spectacle ou en intermède, il débitait des morceaux de son cru, "satires berniques," d'après des modèles italiens sur des sujets généraux de politique ou sur des points d'actualité. Comme il s'adressait au parterre, ses boniments étaient souvent bouffons, trop souvent orduriers. Il vivait encore en 1629.
  - 2 Georges Mongrédien, *Bibliographie des oeuvres du facétieux Bruscombille* (Chartres, 1926).
  - 3 John Lough, *Paris Theatre Audiences in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London: Oxford UP, 1957), Introduction, pp. 1-6.
  - 4 Cited by Barbara Bowen, *Les Caractéristiques essentielles de la farce française et leur survivance dans les années 1550-1620*. Illinois Studies in Language and Literature, 53 (Urbana, IL.: U of Illinois P., 1964), p. 172, n.15.

The citation is from Fournel's *Tableau du vieux Paris* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1863), p. 359.

- 5 Joseph Vianey, "Bruscambille et les poètes berniques," *RHL*, 8 (1901), 569-76.
- 6 Robert Garapon, *La Fantaisie verbale et le comique dans le théâtre français du moyen âge à la fin du XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1957), p. 147.
- 7 On this genre in general, see my study, *The Smile of Truth: the Satirical Eulogy in French Renaissance Literature and its Antecedents* (Princeton: Princeton UP), forthcoming.
- 8 Caie Jules de Guersens' poem appeared in the *Recueil des trois livres de la Muse folastre* (Paris: Jean Fuzy, 1607). On the author, see Georges Diller, *Les Dames des Roches* (Paris: Droz, 1936).
- 9 As a sample of this dynamic style, consider the following passage:

Messieurs & Dames, ie desirerois, souhaiterois, voudrois, demanderois, & requerrois desiderativement, souhaitativement, volontativement, demandativement & requisitativement, avec les desideratoires, souhaitatoires, & volontatoires, demandatoires, & requisitatoires, que vous fussiez enluminez, irredifiez, & esclarifiez, pour pouvoir penetratoirement, secretatoirement, & divinatoirement, *videre, prospicere, intueri & regardere* au travers d'un petit trou qui est en la fenestre du buffet de mes conception, pour voir la methode que ie veux tenir aujourd'huy à vous remercier de vostre bonne assistance & audience, laquelle vous continuerez, s'il vous plaist, à une petite farce que nous vous allons représenter.

(Bruscambille, *Les Oeuvres de Bruscambille* (Rouen: Robert Sejourné, 1929), p. 135). Given Bruscambille's fascination with Rabelais, both linguistically and thematically, it is worth recalling that the chief motivation for Panurge's quest in the *Tiers Livre* is his obsessive fear of cuckoldry.

- 10 On Shakespeare's use of paradox, see Brian Vickers, "*King Lear* and

Renaissance Paradoxes," *Modern Language Review* 61 (1968), 305-14. On Jonson, see Douglas Duncan, *Ben Jonson and the Lucianic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979). See also Christopher Robinson, *Lucian and his Influence in Europe* (London: G. Duckworth; Chapel Hill, NC: U of NC P, 1979).