

Marie and the French Basoche

Paris, October, 2016

One of my stays in Paris was with Marie, a Sorbonne PhD, author, and now chercheuse at the French National Centre for Scientific Research, who lived with her thirteen-year-old son on the Left Bank in Saint-Germain-de-Près. A researcher, her bedroom walls were floor to ceiling shelves of books and reference material. The shared bathroom was a mélange of six dozen toiletry bottles of various sizes on the bathtub rims, the washer, and the vanity. There were no candles, but there was a hand shower.

The boy off to school, we would meet in her kitchenette where she sipped tea from a bowl to warm her hands and feel the moist heat on her face. Then she would stand in her bathrobe and stringy morning hair, gesturing as she spoke about topics including women in Paris and the history of theatre. She had given me a copy of her PhD thesis: *The French Basoche in the Late Middle Ages: A School of Technical Savoir-Faire*, which led, delightfully, to a discussion of such a guild in England, and its possible connection to Shakespeare's *Henry VI*.

The Basoche was a community, or trade guild, of young lawyers and legal clerks in the French Palace of Justice with its own jurisdiction for resolving legal disputes among its members. The Basoche was charged with providing entertainment at various holidays including Mardi Gras. Members also staged plays from legal transcripts. In England, the Inns of Court hosted a similar collegium.

Recall that in Shakespeare's time, the players were all men (and boys). It is interesting, and here is my *Henry VI* reference, that as in Paris, many of Shakespeare's actors were likely apprentice lawyers and law clerks, from the Inns of Court, England's version of the Basoche. It was Marie's thesis, and our discussions, that gave me a different lens with which to examine the classic quote, "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers."

Some scholars have considered the quote a lofty suggestion that the legal profession somehow stood in the way of taking down the king. Others have opined that it is, perhaps, the first lawyer joke, just a disparaging reference.

Consider, however, that the actors playing the rebellious ruffians were likely clerks or apprentice lawyers themselves. In a bit of silly musing about what

they would do, if they were king, their leader, Jack Cade, listed farcical changes he would make, including a mandate that “small beer” drinking be made a felony. Dick’s earlier suggestion, that first the lawyers be killed, was likely an inside joke, a bit of silliness at the expense of their legal mentors - a Barrister’s Club roast item inserted into a play. It is my contention that the line was an ad lib, embraced by Shakespeare.

At times, we talked while walking in her garden. A couple blocks from the apartment, “her garden” was the famed Jardin du Luxembourg, created by her namesake Queen Marie de Medici. She also pointed up to Catherine Deneuve’s apartment in the neighborhood. I enjoyed the terrace at the nearby Café Casette where in the evening a table of men in religious dress may be found in heavy conversation, smoking and drinking wine. On one occasion Marie and I met Cara at Café De Flore, and on another, we took her son out for pizza.

~Mark Goodall