

Moderate Devotion, Mediocre Poetry and Magnificent Food: The Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception of Rouen

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The Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception was probably the most prestigious confraternity in the French city of Rouen. It was also unusual, both in its organization and in its central purpose, which was to organize a competition of devout poetry every year. As a result, it had a three-fold nature in which piety, culture and sociability each played significant roles. The purpose of this article is simply to describe this interesting and unusual confraternity, and explore briefly the nature and purpose of its different roles.¹ In the process, this article may suggest further avenues of investigation, such as the relevance of this confraternity to the issues of late medieval piety or attitudes towards civic society, but these will not be explored in detail at this point.

Rouen's Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin was founded in 1486 by Pierre Daré, *lieutenant-général du bailli* of Rouen, the chief royal officer of the city. At this time, Rouen was probably the second-largest city in France. It was capital of Normandy, and thus an important administrative centre, a role which would soon be enhanced by the establishment of a *Parlement*, a royal court of appeal, in 1499. It was also an important commercial centre, and was entering a period of prosperity in the late fifteenth century.²

Each year, on the first Sunday after December 8, the feast of the Immaculate Conception, the confraternity organized an entire day of events, devoted in turn to each of the aspects of the confraternity's nature—devotional, cultural and social. The day began with a high mass in honour of the Virgin. All of the brothers had to attend, as did the winners of the poetry competition of the previous year. The mass was followed by the annual general meeting of the confraternity. The middle part of the day was taken up by the poetry competition, which was called a "Puy". These contests had begun in the late Middle Ages, in the cities on either side of the present border between France and Belgium. They were usually associated with confraternities devoted to various aspects of the Virgin Mary. Over the course of the fifteenth century, the popularity of the Puys spread south to Normandy.³ The Puy of Rouen

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- 1 Other recent works, such as Catherine Vincent, *Des Charités bien ordonnées: les confréries normandes de la fin du XIIIe siècle au début du XVIe siècle* (Paris, 1988), and Gérard Gros, *Le Poète, la Vierge et le Prince du Puy: études sur les puys marials de la France du Nord du XIVe siècle à la Renaissance* (Paris, 1992), have touched on certain aspects of this confraternity. However, they are limited in scope and contain inaccuracies.
 - 2 For background on Rouen, see Philip Benedict, *Rouen During the Wars of Religion* (Cambridge, 1981), chapter 1.
 - 3 Gros, *Le Poète*, 30. A similar phenomenon developed in Toulouse and was called the *Jeux Floraux*; see John Dawson, *Toulouse in the Renaissance* (New York, 1923).

was established fairly late, but it quickly became one of the most prestigious in France. Aspiring poets from Rouen and elsewhere read out poems on the subject of the Immaculate Conception to a select panel of judges and to an audience made up both of the brothers and the general public. Finally, the day ended with a grand banquet, the inevitable conclusion of this confraternal activity. The banquet was accompanied by poetry rather different in tone from the serious verses recited earlier in the day.

At first sight, it appears that each aspect of the confraternity—devotion, culture and sociability—had its own separate section of the day, tracing a steady progression from the cares of the spirit to the cares of the flesh. Indeed, this article will examine each of these sections of the day in turn in order to illuminate this confraternity. However, it will become evident that in fact all three aspects of the confraternity's nature were interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Each aspect, although associated with its own particular event, had a vital presence throughout the day.

DEVOTION

Catherine Vincent, in her study of the confraternities of Normandy, has characterized their piety as moderate, conservative and serene. Norman piety tended towards the optimistic, and was not marked by what Vincent describes as the "*dolorisme*" common in the confraternities of Mediterranean Europe. Thus, penitent confraternities were never very prominent in Normandy, and there were none before the end of the sixteenth century. Norman piety also tended to be external: up to the middle of the sixteenth century, there was little evidence of any emphasis on the interior spiritual life, such as private prayer, spiritual education or devotional discipline. Rather, Norman confraternities tended to emphasize the accumulation of good works, such as masses.⁴ Finally, it has been argued that the main devotional purpose of late medieval confraternities was to encourage the Christian virtue of *caritas*, that is, charity or fraternity.⁵ This was certainly true of Norman confraternities. They concentrated on the encouragement of fraternity within the organization, and the provision of mutual assistance, mainly in the form of providing funerals for brothers.⁶

The piety of the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception of Rouen was entirely typical of its province—its pious activity lay mainly in the form of the provision of masses and funerals. Being a wealthy confraternity, it made provision for more masses than usual: a low mass every day of the year, and a high mass on all of the feast days of the Virgin (the members attended only the high masses). The confraternity also made detailed provision for the funerals of members. Furthermore,

4 Vincent, *Des Charités*, 130, 141, 192.

5 This is a major theme in confraternal studies. See, for instance, Vincent, *Des Charités*, 28, 225, 294; John Bossy, *Christianity in the West, 1400-1700* (Oxford, 1985) 57-60, 73; Andrew E. Barnes, *The Social Dimension of Piety: Associative Life and Devotional Change in the Penitent Confraternities of Marseilles (1499-1792)* (New York, 1994), 174-175.

6 Vincent, *Des Charités*, 143ff, 160ff.

being a “poetic” confraternity, one innovation was introduced: deceased former heads (“Princes”) of the confraternity had eulogies written for them in French and Latin by the winners of the main French and Latin poetry prizes of the year of their death.⁷

The only difference from other local confraternities was that the confraternity of the Immaculate Conception did not take part in civic or parish processions as an association. The confraternity’s contribution to the community lay instead in the organization of the poetry competition. The poetry revealed a spirituality that was typical of Normandy, that is, very much an external display of piety. The sentiments expressed were almost uniformly optimistic—the poets expressed devotion and admiration for the Virgin. There was no penitence or self-reflection in evidence. There was one difference, however, from the piety of other Norman confraternities. While these tended to look to their patron as an intercessor or protector,⁸ there is little evidence of this in the Puy of the confraternity of the Immaculate Conception. Its poetry, indeed its whole tone, was purely devotional—members never asked their patron saint for assistance.⁹

The confraternity’s devotion to Mary was also typical of Normandy. She was the most popular patron for Norman confraternities, which, true to form, tended to gravitate towards the more joyful of Mary’s feast days, such as the Nativity and the Assumption.¹⁰ The confraternity’s dedication to the Immaculate Conception fits into this pattern. Because of a local medieval legend, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was particularly popular in Normandy. The story went that a powerful Norman abbot had been sailing with Duke William the Conqueror when a fearsome storm came up. The abbot prayed to the Virgin for safety, and she appeared to him, ordering him to celebrate the feast of her conception. Naturally, he survived the storm, and did her bidding in Normandy.¹¹ Thus, the confraternity of Rouen revealed a conscious Norman patriotism in choosing to devote itself to the immaculate conception.¹²

However, if the piety of the confraternity was typical of Normandy, its structure was not. Most Norman confraternities had several hundred members, and included women as well as men. The majority of the members were from the middling groups in civic society, mainly artisans. There was usually an inner core of serving brothers and executives, who did most of the work and thus had more prestige. Only a small number of the brothers, usually the wealthier ones, ever became Master of their confraternity.¹³

7 *Approbation et confirmation par le Pape Leon X des statuts et privilèges de la confrérie de l'immaculée conception*, ed. Edouard Frère (Rouen, 1864; original publication 1520), c1^v-c3^v. (Henceforth *Approbation*).

8 See Vincent, *Des Charités*, 115ff, esp. 131.

9 The main sources of the surviving poetry are five registers from particular years: Oxford Bodleian Library MS Douce 379 (1511); Bibliothèque Municipale de Rouen MS Y 16 (1516); Bibliothèque Municipale de Rouen MS MM 19 (1522); Bibliothèque Nationale MS française 1715 (1533); Bibliothèque Municipale de Rouen MS Y 17 (1544).

10 Vincent, *Des Charités*, 124-128.

11 *Approbation*, a2^v.

12 This is evident in the introduction to the statutes, *Approbation*, a2^{f-v}, where the Norman origin of the feast is emphasized.

The confraternity of the Immaculate Conception, on the other hand, had a uniformly prestigious membership. It was made up of men only, and included some of the most important men in Rouen—wealthy merchants, magistrates of the royal courts, and important ecclesiastics. The membership was much smaller than usual—about 40 to 50 men at most.¹⁴ The head of the confraternity, the Prince, was chosen on a rota system, according to seniority within the organization. Thus, all members could expect to become Prince if they lived long enough, making the confraternity much more of an association of equals. This resulted in a more informal governing structure. The executive was simply made up of the present and former Princes. There were other differences as well. For instance, the confraternity's members were drawn from all over the city and from a variety of professions, whereas most other confraternities were concentrated on a particular parish or trade.¹⁵

The prestige of the confraternity was also reflected in the fees it charged. The entry fee was high, and the yearly fee was about five times the average amount for a confraternity in Normandy.¹⁶ The knowledge that the member would eventually have to pay for the banquet when he became Prince would have been an even more effective selector. This exclusivity was reinforced by the statutes published in 1520, which reflected the influence wielded by its members. These statutes were approved by the pope himself, rather than the archbishop as was usually the case. In them, the confraternity was specifically granted precedence over all other confraternities in Normandy. Furthermore, its members were granted extensive religious rights (such as the possibility of exemptions from Lenten fasting) and extensive indulgences, much greater than usual for members of confraternities.¹⁷

However, despite these extensive religious privileges, one gets the impression that the purely devotional side of the confraternity was secondary. Although some scholars have suggested that the poetry contest was added to an already existing confraternity, it is in fact clear from the available evidence that the confraternity was founded at the same time as the establishment of the poetic contest.¹⁸ In some ways,

13 Vincent, *Des Charités*, 202-208, 217-219, 226ff.

14 The official number of brothers was 72 (*Approbation*, c1^r), but it probably never reached this figure. The only year for which a membership total is available is 1548, when the confraternity counted 47 members, including five who had joined that very year (Bibliothèque Municipale de Rouen, MS Y 186). Membership information depends mainly on this document and Bibliothèque Municipale de Rouen MS Y 18.

15 See Charles Ouin-Lacroix, *Histoire des anciennes corporations d'arts et métiers et des confréries religieuses de la capitale de la Normandie* (Rouen, 1850).

16 The yearly fee was 25 *sols tournoi*, and the entrance fee 100 *sols tournoi* (*Approbation*, c4^v, c1^v). Compare to Vincent, *Des Charités*, 213.

17 The indulgences for those confraternities that did receive them were usually for 40-100 days (Vincent, *Des Charités*, 101, 109-112, 181). The statutes of the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception, on the other hand, list pages of indulgences adding up to thousands of years (*Approbation*, c-d).

18 *Approbation*, a2^v, states that "icelle confraternite avoit des long temps este erigee et commencee par defunct noble et discrete personne, Maistre pierre dare" [sic], who was

the confraternity seems to have been an afterthought. In the statutes, the poetic aspects of the confraternity are described first, and in great detail, while the devotional aspects are relegated to the end, and are described in less detail.¹⁹

POETRY

While it may have taken precedence over the confraternity's devotional activity, the poetry itself was of course devotional. All of the poems were on the narrow subject of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin. This poetry was mediocre by any standard; but I hope to show that the mediocrity of the poetry in fact contributed to the goals of the confraternity.

The Puy's poetry was in the *rhétoriqueur* style, a mode of writing poetry dominant in France in the late fifteenth century that laid much emphasis on adherence to rules. Poetry was generally written in fixed forms, for which the metre, number of verses, stanzas, and rhyme scheme were already set. As would be expected within such rigid boundaries, the poetry tended towards elaborate word-play and complicated rhymes. It focussed on moral and didactic subjects, which it often elaborated through allegory and metaphor.²⁰

For instance, the earliest and most prestigious prize at the Puy was the *palme*, awarded for the *chant royal*, a poem of five stanzas of eleven verses each, plus a final stanza of four verses. The last verse of each stanza was the same repeated refrain. Prizes for other fixed forms, both French and Latin, were added later, all for lesser amounts than the *palme*. The next prize to be established, the *Lys*, was awarded to the second-best *chant royal*. The *signet* was established in 1510 for the *rondeau* and, at about the same time, the *laurier* for the *épigramme latine*. Finally, in 1514 the *rose* was established for the *ballade*. It is notable that all the prizes were named after recognized attributes of the Virgin.

The poems generally took the form of the elaboration of a metaphor for purity, which was then revealed to refer to the Virgin Mary. For instance, in 1511 one poem described a great mason who builds a beautiful, perfect palace. This palace is always safe, because the door is permanently closed, and only the mason himself can enter it, thus preserving it from all blemish. The poem went on to reveal that, unsurprisingly, the mason was God and the palace was the Virgin. In the same year, the Virgin was compared to a laurel tree, the sun, a bridge, an orchard, a flower, a fruit, a tower and more. Other poems simply engaged in straightforward praise of the Virgin's beauty and purity.²¹

Thus, the rules and style were clearly laid out, the subject was straightforward, and the approach that should be taken was well understood. These conditions were

also the founder of the contest.

19 *Approbation*, *passim*.

20 I. D. McFarlane, *A Literary History of France: Renaissance France, 1470-1589* (London, 1974), 31ff.; Henry Guy, *Histoire de la poésie française au XVI^e siècle, tome I: l'école des rhétoriciens* (Paris, 1910), 61-71.

21 Oxford Bodleian Library MS Douce 379.

not especially difficult to fulfil, and they reduced the potential for wide disparity in quality, and consequent embarrassment. As a result, this poetry was very accessible. Anyone with a modicum of talent and education could take part and do respectably.²² This enabled wide participation. Most of the poets, who numbered more than 30 each year, were not professional poets themselves, nor were they actually members of the confraternity. Rather, they were bourgeois and clerics drawn from the local community. This is the way in which the confraternity encouraged devotional activity, in the form of participation in the devotional poetry, and the greater propagation of the doctrine of the immaculate conception. Naturally, given the restrictive subject and structure, and the wide participation, the resulting poetry was mediocre. However, since the devotional purpose of the poetry was achieved through reinforcement and repetition, brilliance and originality were unnecessary—in fact, they would have detracted from the purpose of the event. This mechanism can be seen at play in the many manuscript collections of the poetry of the Puy. The poems are often anonymous, because the point is not the skill of the poets themselves but the pious sentiments expressed in the poems.²³ Furthermore, the simplicity of the poetry had a broad appeal, and the Puy attracted a considerable audience, which included poor clothworkers as well as bourgeois and clerics.²⁴

The actual members of the confraternity in general preferred to sit back and act as patrons of the arts. This function can be seen as similar to that which Catherine Vincent, among others, has suggested for the devotional purpose of confraternities—that, in Normandy at least, one of the functions of confraternities was to allow city-dwellers to emulate collectively the elite's practice of founding private chapels and establishing masses for their souls in a manner that would be beyond their individual means.²⁵ I would suggest that, in the case of the Puy, the same mechanism operated with respect to cultural patronage. The Puy's members, while important, were not wealthy or prestigious enough to be individual patrons,²⁶ but they could patronize literature collectively. Rather than bringing glory to their name or their house, as with an individual patron, this collective patronage brought glory on their city and their province, which itself played an essential role in establishing their identity and status as notable members of the local elite. As the origin of the patronage was collective, so was its object. The Puy's patronage supported, not an individual poet, but a group of poets. This also emphasised the glory of their community, the city, by establishing it as a notable centre for culture and devotion. The success of this mission was attested by two notable authors of the early sixteenth century, Bonaventure des Périers and Jean Bouchet, who commented on the poetic reputation of Rouen.²⁷ This was also demonstrated by the poets of national reputation who came

22 MacFarlane, *A Literary History*, 64.

23 See the bibliography of original collections of Puy poetry in Gros, *Le poète*, 218ff.

24 Jean Lafond, "A travers les manuscrits des palinods de Rouen", *Revue des sociétés savantes de Haute-Normandie* 12 (1958), 15.

25 Vincent, *Des Charités*, 143.

26 There are exceptions to this. Antoine Bohier, Prince in 1515, was abbot of Saint-Ouen and Fécamp, and initiated rebuilding activity of artistic interest in his monasteries.

to participate, such as the court poet André de la Vigne. They were not dissuaded by the systematic mediocrity of the poetry, even if under such circumstances their own poetry was no more remarkable. Many manuscript collections of the Puy's poems were distributed, and there was even one printed edition.

There was, however, also an element of individual patronage within the collective framework. Individual poets won prizes, and were famous for a day. As for the providers of this collective patronage, if they were not unlucky they could receive some of the benefits of an individual patron. When they became Prince, they received considerable attention. Often, competing poets would shape their poems around a play on the name or position of the Prince, just as a court poet might do for his patron. As well, being Prince entitled one to two commemorative poems, in Latin and French, upon one's death. This was almost as good as having a poet of one's own to deplore one's death.

THE BANQUET

The day ended with a grand banquet. This was the social and indulgent part of the day, when the serious tone of the mass and the poetry competition was set aside. All the members of the confraternity gathered to eat and celebrate together, hosted by the Prince of the year, who paid for it. Since Princes came from among the wealthiest and most prestigious inhabitants of the city, and this was a golden opportunity to display their prestige to some of their most important fellow-citizens, the banquet was a very elaborate affair. The Prince in 1546, a magistrate in the *Parlement*, even wrote a Latin poem describing the event. In elegant Latin and with manifold classical allusions, it enumerates three separate services. The first consisted of 32 appetizers; the second, 43 main dishes; and the third, 40 different desserts. This was accompanied by elaborate place settings, bouquets of artificial flowers, and musicians who serenaded the company between each service.²⁸

This luxury eventually led to problems. Since each Prince strove to match or outdo the previous ones, the banquet tended to become ever more expensive. The statutes made provision for a maximum amount the Prince was expected to spend,²⁹ but the confraternity was continuously having to reaffirm this policy and revise the amount. At several points over the course of the confraternity's long history, declines in recruitment were blamed on fear of the expenses that would be incurred when the time came for the member to pay for the banquet. The confraternity eventually ceased its activities in the second half of the seventeenth century at least partially for this reason.³⁰

27 Des Périers said "Vous savez qu'à Rouen on ne parle autrement qu'en rime" (from René Herval, *Histoire de Rouen* (Rouen, 1947-1949), 50); Bouchet wrote to a member of the confraternity "Et de tous ceulx de la terre de France/ Me semble advis (je le dy sans oultrance)/ Que les Normans ont des Muses l'octroy/ De poesie, ainsi le pense et croy" (Jean Bouchet, *Epistres morales et familières du Traverseur* (J. Beard, ed.) (New York, 1969), lxxiii).

28 Baptiste le Chandelier, *La parthénie, ou banquet des palinods de Rouen en 1546* (F. Bouquet, ed.) (Rouen, 1883; original publication 1593).

29 *Approbation*, c3^v-c4^r.

The indulgent side of the banquet was emphasized by some of the cultural activity that accompanied it—a contest of improvised burlesque love poetry. The Prince provided a refrain for two of the shorter types of poem (the *ballade* and the *rondeau*), and the poets had a limited amount of time to write up a poem around this refrain.³¹ The winner received a nice dinner the next day. In 1511, about half of the poets took part, and the tone of the poetry is quite a contrast with the serious devotional works the same poets had presented earlier in the day. For instance, one of the proposed refrains mocked old lovers, resulting in plenty of ribald *double-entendres* at their expense.³² On the other hand, there was also serious, pious cultural activity associated with the banquet—a short after-dinner play that, naturally, celebrated the immaculate conception of the Virgin.³³

The banquet was clearly an important part of the day. It enabled the brothers to act together in a more informal and social setting. It reveals that the confraternity was partially a social club for Rouen's elite. However, for all its indulgence, the banquet also had a serious, pious purpose. Along with the mass, communal eating was the main way in which the confraternity promoted its Christian ideal of fraternity among the brothers. This pious message was further reinforced by the performance of the play in honour of the confraternity's patron before the assembled brothers. The banquet was in fact a part of the confraternity's pious mission.³⁴

Thus, although the purely devotional side of the confraternity seems secondary to the cultural and social sides, that is, the poetry and the food, in fact it informed both of these activities with a strong underlying devotional purpose. Furthermore, the cultural side of the confraternity was also evident throughout the day in the presence at mass of the previous year's prize-winners and in the burlesque verses and pious play of the banquet. Finally, the social aspect of the confraternity was enhanced by the collective participation in the mass and the collective patronage of the poetry, as well as the banquet. While it seems at first that each aspect of the confraternity—moderate devotion, mediocre poetry and magnificent food—had its own separate part of the day, in fact the devotional, cultural, and social aspects were intertwined throughout the proceedings.

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30 Bibliothèque Municipale de Rouen, MS Y 186.

31 Similar contests were held in conjunction with serious poetic competitions in other cities, notably Toulouse (Dawson, *Toulouse*, 12n).

32 See Oxford Bodleian Library MS Douce 379; Lafond, "A travers les manuscrits", *passim*.

33 Three of these plays survive—two are available in an edition: Guillaume Tasserie, *Le triomphe des Normands, suivi de la dame à l'agneau par G. Thibault*, ed. Paul le Verdier (Rouen, 1908); and one is in Bibliothèque Municipale de Rouen MS Y 17.

34 See Vincent, *Des Charités*, 225, 243-246, 257.