Polemic and Literature Surrounding the French Wars of Religion

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Polemic and Literature Surrounding the French Wars of Religion

Edited by
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Introduction. Fighting Words: Contextualizing Polemic in the French Wars of Religion

In March 1560, a group of Protestant nobles attempted to kidnap the French king Francis II in order to protect him from the influence of the ultra-Catholic Guise family. The plot, known as the Amboise conspiracy, failed, and its main organizers were executed. This event, which served as a precursor to the series of conflicts between Catholics and Protestants now known as the French Wars of Religion (1562–1598), elicited the response of several writers.[1] The poet Pierre de Ronsard reacted to the plot by writing an *élégie* dedicated his friend, the poet and Guise supporter, Guillaume des Autels. In the poem, Ronsard praises des Autels for recently having lent his pen to criticize the supporters of the conspiracy.[2] Ronsard's poem lauds des Autels's participation in a textual war whose battlefield is the hearts and minds of the people:

> Car il fault desormais deffendre noz maisons,
> Non par le fer trenchant mais par vives raisons,
> Et courageusement noz ennemis abbatre
> Par les mesmes bastons dont il nous veullent battre.
> Ainsi que l'ennemy par livres a seduict
> Le peuple devoyé qui faucement le suit,
> Il fault en disputant par livres le confondre,
> Par livres l'assaillir, par livres luy respondre.[3]

Ronsard argues that France and the king can be sufficiently defended through writing – and that the king should engage des Autels and, we can assume, Ronsard himself, to be his defenders instead of going to war with his enemies. As Sara Barker has observed, in this passage, Ronsard supports the use of aggressive and persuasive words as weapons.[4] Ronsard characterizes such words with violent terms: verbs such as *battre* and *assaillir* have definite military connotations, and the *bastons* and *fer trenchant* of the battlefield are transformed into *livres*. The lexicon of weaponry implicates all levels of society into the bloody and inky conflict: from the *prince des poètes* and his aristocratic dedicatee and readers to the (easily duped) *peuple*. In the elegy, then, instead of calling for an actual physical war in these troubled times, Ronsard uses his own violent words as a substitute for real war, as a way of resolving religious differences without actual bloodshed. His words of war thus function as

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a "simulacre de guerre," an expression proposed by Jean Mesnard to describe polemical discourse.[5]

Ronsard's poem ascribes another role to the printed text in this elegy when he relates how the conflicts he describes took root because written texts created dissenting communities of readers. Ronsard's elegy indicates that reading and writing are the source of the current and growing conflict. As a group, the *"peuple"* have been seduced by the writings of the king's Protestant enemies and have subsequently formed a community that ruptures the religious unity of the realm; des Autels and Ronsard can fight the effects of those writings with their own powerful reply, thus re-establishing national unity through shared religion. Printed matter is therefore capable of contributing to or even creating a group identity that coalesces around religious and political beliefs. And, as the future would reveal, such words ultimately encouraged the communal divisions that devolved into the armed conflicts of the Wars of Religion.

In its focus on violent words and their effect on communities of readers, Ronsard's elegy anticipates many of the concerns of this volume. The contributions here explore the relationship between the printed text and the wars on the battlefield. They address a series of questions: How did these texts create these conflicts, and how did the conflicts create the texts? How did writers participate in an unprecedented moment of religious conflict taking place in a textual and physical world? How did these texts form, sustain, and destroy communities of readers on both sides? To answer these questions, the contributions consider sixteenth-century texts whose functionality might classify them as polemic, above all in the sense that they adhere to Jesse Lander's definition of polemic as a "social and cultural practice, a practice devoted to the constitution of particular communities."[6] However, this collection also challenges the traditional definition of what one might consider to be "polemic" respective of the time period. While contemporary critics often restrict the term "polemic" to pamphlets, libels, and broadsheets – works often considered to be temporal and poorly written – we argue that many kinds of writing *function* as polemic in the early modern period. The meaning of the word *polémique*, from the Greek word for war ("polemos"), first developed in French while these wars ravaged in the sixteenth century, and, indeed, early examples of the word do refer to contemporary theological and political controversies about religion.[7] They do not, however, constitute a recognizable genre or category during the early modern period. For this reason, the volume considers polemic in a broader sense as "fighting words." We agree with the recent work of Natalia Wawrzyniak who suggests that we should approach traditional polemical texts (pamphlets, libels, and broadsheets) from a literary perspective; at the same time, we propose that a wide range of texts – literary, judiciary, political, and paratextual – should be

approached as part of a larger category of polemic.[8] Our choice of that word in the title of this volume thus embraces an opening up of the sense of the word "polemic" to focus more generally on manifestations of fighting words – words of war that take part, implicitly or explicitly, in the larger context of the Wars of Religion.

The contributions in this volume provide different perspectives on the text as a way of "doing" war. "Fighting words" represent far more than a mere substitute for war: they are expressions of violence that can give rise to actual physical violence. Many of the contributions show how words could provoke armed conflict or silence and discredit those involved in the conflicts. Such words often aim to kill, sometimes inflicting more lasting harm than physical acts of aggression. As Shoshana Felman has observed: "le discours polémique est toujours, à un certain niveau, un discours sur la mort, de la mort, un discours sur l'acte de tuer."[9] However, as this volume demonstrates, fighting words can also seek to mitigate, respond to, or end violence as well.

Not unlike the genre of polemic, then, what we are calling "fighting words" are, themselves, multifaceted. Some can be used to start or continue wars by calling for the destruction of the other side; others can call for the cessation of hostilities. Despite their different goals, all of the texts analyzed in this collection delineate various communities by drawing distinctions based on perceived religious differences. They tend to "assert more than they argue."[10] Sometimes these assertions are guised in political or poetic garb. At other times, they take the form of personal attacks. In terms of time, the texts under consideration here sometimes anticipate (looking forward to) or remember (looking back on) the Wars, or they consider the conflicts contemporaneously from both Catholic and Protestant sides of the disputes. They also assume diverse postures when it comes to the notion of identity: these works *reflect* what it means to be "French" or "Catholic" or not. But equally, they *project* an image of their authors and those against whom (or to whom) said authors write. Whether alienating enemies by defaming them directly or identifying their authors' own communities through self-estrangement, as George Hoffman recently argued regarding Protestant satire, this volume asserts that, regardless of the form they take, these texts demarcate groups and should be included in our study of "polemic."[11]

In his essay, "Forging Satire from Scripture: Biblical Models and Verbal Violence before the Wars of Religion," Christopher M. Flood considers the issue of satire in polemical writings just before the outbreak of the Wars of Religion. He argues that satirical authors on both sides of the theological divide in the 1550s used Biblical imagery to cast their opponents and themselves in differing lights. In this way, the text of the Bible itself and the writings it inspired served

as the battlefields of ideas in the decade before physical fighting broke out in the countryside. Not only does Flood analyze how the Bible uses satire to draw distinctions between groups of people, but he also shows how Protestant and Catholic writers expanded on Biblical models to affirm contemporary personal and communal self-perceptions. Taking for examples Théodore de Bèze's *Epistle of Master Benedict Passavant* on the Protestant side and the anonymously published Catholic response entitled *Passevent parisien respondent a Pasquin Rommain*, Flood examines how minority groups used Biblically-based satire to defend themselves while those who were doing the persecuting justified their actions through the same lens of scripture.

Amy Graves Monroe's contribution, "Skirmishes in the Margins," illustrates the wartime development of the kind of polemic that Flood explores before the Wars. Focusing on the title pages of polemical texts, Graves Monroe demonstrates how paratextual elements contribute to the religious conflict to which the content of the texts speaks. Places of publication, for instance, can entice certain groups of readers to purchase a text based on their religious affiliation. Even the titles themselves can aim to attack from the very first words. Often, printers include scriptural references and quotes on the title page. Supporting what Flood notes in his contribution, title pages with Biblical citations clearly demarcate the lines between religious adversaries and authorize the continued use of violence against those who would oppose the "truth" the particular text promotes. Finally, authorial attribution also plays a role in strengthening the impact of a text by using pseudoanonymity to subtly manufacture the identity of the combatants in the textual wars.

Conversely, Charles-Louis Morand-Métivier studies a poet who entered into polemical territory in a public and identifiable way when he considers one of the most famous examples of polemical poetry in sixteenth-century France, Pierre de Ronsard's *Discours sur les misères de ce temps*. Ronsard adheres to a strict division between the polemic register and other forms of poetry; indeed, after the *Discours*, he rarely ventured into the realm of polemic again. Ronsard's criticism of Protestants in the *Discours*, written during and immediately after the first War of Religion, spurred a series of reactions, and Morand-Métivier's contribution focuses on the relationship between Ronsard and one of his most notorious respondents: the Protestant writer Antoine de Chandieu. He explores the war of words between these two figures as a verbal extension of the Wars of Religion, one that develops as an *ad hominem* attack. An analysis of this literary exchange reveals a truth behind Chandieu's critiques of the Prince of Poets: even as he uses Ronsard's own words to derail the message of his *Discours*, Chandieu's imitation is also a form of admiration. By considering the literary exchange from this perspective, Morand-Métivier argues that the two authors share similar concerns

for France and its future in spite of their ultimately irreconcilable approaches to religious difference.

While Morand-Métivier looks at Ronsard's reaction to the First War of Religion from the perspective of a national poetics, Jeff Kendrick focuses on a local and legal response to the same war. Jean Bégat, a member of the parlement in Dijon, chose the remonstrance as his preferred mode of communication. In his *Remonstrances*, Bégat addressed the king directly to criticize the royal concessions to Protestants in early edicts of pacification. As Kendrick reminds us, as texts that were both legal and polemical, remonstrances demanded specific political action on the part of their addressees. Kendrick analyzes remonstrances that Bégat wrote in response to the Edicts of January (1562) and Amboise (1563), where the Dijonnais lawyer framed his criticism of the king as an expression of respect for royal power and authority, all the while sending a clear message that the royal approach to religious plurality was unacceptable. Placing Bégat's critiques of the king within a larger context of the early Wars of Religion, Kendrick illustrates how Bégat used the genre of the remonstrance to reject the idea that France could exist as a realm with more than one religion. In this sense, although he composes at the same time as Ronsard, Bégat's legal documents are more explicit and pragmatic than those of the poet with respect to the dangers of a religiously divided realm.

If texts like Bégat's *Remonstrances* addressed political issues regarding the Wars directly, other forms of literary works could send similar messages and guidance through analogy. Brooke Di Lauro's chapter on the "Martial Muse" shifts our focus away from texts written exclusively to address the Wars of Religion and toward images of war in the works of Maurice Scève, Pierre de Ronsard, and Joachim Du Bellay. Di Lauro suggests that the bellicose imagery in the poetry of Scève and Ronsard inspires and responds to Du Bellay's exhortation to cultural imperialism and appropriation – and traces the use of this imagery into writings about the civil wars. Scève's *Délie* anticipates certain precepts laid out in Du Bellay's *Deffence et illustration de la langue françoyse* through its distinctively violent imagery that differentiates it from Petrarch's *Canzoniere*. Similarly, Ronsard's work captures and reflects the violence during the Wars of Religion. The Prince of Poets's texts blur the lines between literature and polemic; Ronsard sees the literal fighting in the Wars of Religion and his own engagement in the textual conflict as simultaneously (re)defining and defending French literature and national identity.

As perhaps one of the most well-known, controversial, and enduring examples of polemic literature to emerge from the Wars of Religion, Agrippa d'Aubigné's *Les Tragiques* serves as the basis of discussion in the next three contributions to this volume. *Les Tragiques*, although a long poem, regularly

defies the classification of epic, and often embraces tragedy, the genre indicated by its title. Kathleen Perry Long's essay on *Les Tragiques* serves to complicate distinctions between polemic and literature. Aubigné's epic is both beautifully lyrical and jarringly argumentative. For Long, these disjunctions call attention to the fact that the poem is both a rejection of the epic genre it ostensibly represents and a repudiation of the violence that it portrays with exquisite realism. Literature in the new context forged by the horrors of the Wars of Religion must reflect those horrors without neglecting to cultivate a certain style. Focusing her attention on Aubigné's depiction of the 1562 massacre at Tours in both his historical account of the Wars, the *Histoire universelle*, and his poem *Les Tragiques*, Long considers how changes in style result in vastly different renderings of the same historical facts. One seeks to present them in a matter-of-fact way, while the other provokes and horrifies the reader with its sheer awfulness – inserting polemic into his masterpiece. As he does this, Aubigné challenges contemporary notions of appropriate literary style and transforms language in a new and powerful way.

Marcus Keller considers *Les Tragiques* as, above all, a work about civil war. His contribution focuses less on the religious nature of the civil wars that ravage France at the end of the sixteenth century, and more on the internal nature of the wars, the *guerre intestine*. Like Long, he studies the tragic, rather than epic, nature of this poem of war. He demonstrates the ways in which Aubigné leverages a metaphorical and allegorical register to illustrate the particularly devastating effects that this war had on the French realm in these years. Yet, at the same time, Keller underlines an essential irony to Aubigné's writing about this particularly destructive war, in which all participants are losers: this form of war gave birth to an impressive amount of complex literary activity.

For Ashley Voeks, Agrippa d'Aubigné's "Chambre dorée" provides a means for dealing with the upside-down world created by the violent struggles that characterized the Wars of Religion and their aftermath. By mapping instances of injustice and chronicling victims, Aubigné's text provides one way of navigating the new social landscape of the author and the persecuted minority group for which he claims to speak. Beginning in Paris, "La Chambre dorée" gradually expands its reader's awareness of and sensitivity to the perceived injustice that dominated royal courts and to the corruption that extended throughout France and even beyond the kingdom's borders. Voeks argues that the architectural structures described and personified in Aubigné's work permit readers to visualize injustice as a living, breathing monstrosity. Moving from architectural analysis to a discussion of geography, Aubigné, from his unabashedly sectarian vision of a Protestant past and future, suggests this same injustice is capable of infecting and attacking the

entire world if left unchecked. In this way, a work of art is at once literature and polemic – the line between the two being difficult to designate.

The final two essays consider more traditional iterations of epic – the poetic genre that takes war as its primarily subject – to connect them to issues relevant to contemporary warfare. In "Atmoterroism in the Humanist Anthropocene," Philip John Usher focuses his attention on early modern iterations of atmoterroism. Challenging recent assumptions that biological, chemical, and other forms of environmental warfare are modern inventions, Usher develops the idea that premodern versions of such bellicose aggression can help us think about climate chaos in our own time. Usher unpacks early modern works by André Thevet and Pierre de Ronsard to support his thesis. Three texts by Thevet demonstrate the workings of attacks on the atmosphere by divine Providence: God makes "being" impossible through earthquakes, storms, and various natural disasters that destroy humankind's ability to exist. Depending on one's religious affiliation such phenomena were interpreted differently as God's judgment on or approval of various acts of human aggression. Turning next to Ronsard's *La Franciade*, Usher demonstrates how pagan gods transform weather into weapons in a way that prefigures warfare in a time of climate change and disruption of ecosystems.

If the fighting words studied here are both at the origin of armed conflict and the shattering of communities, as Natalia Wawrzyniak notes, even the most violent polemic can be said, at some level, to be seeking an end to the conflict, even if that end is a violent one.[12] Thus, polemical texts of the Wars of Religion also suggest ways to move forward or ways to keep the memory of the wars alive. As a coda to these explorations of warring words, Katherine Maynard's contribution considers the role of epic to contemplate and reframe religious conflicts in the years following the Wars of Religion. She studies the works of the Vervinois author, poet, and explorer Marc Lescarbot, whose travels to New France served as inspiration for his travel narratives and his epic poem. She argues that Lescarbot's own adherence to the legislation of forgetting of the Edict of Nantes plays a significant role in his approach to the Amerindians he encounters in the New World. In his *Histoire de la Nouvelle-France*, Lescarbot suggests that, because of their own success in forgetting past offences, the French are exemplary peacemakers; they are thus well positioned to help the Amerindians move away from their own vindictive practices and toward a forgiving, Christian model. However, Lescarbot's epic poem reveals the problematic influence of the French on the Amerindian populations they claim to save; his epic uncovers the inescapable and destructive effect of French trade and technology, above all, in terms of the weapons of war that amplify, instead of cure, Amerindian vengeance and violence.

Modern historians such as Luc Racaut and Tatiana Debbagi Baranova have demonstrated that polemical texts represent important historical documents that contribute to our understanding of this critical time period in French history.[13] These writings shaped the ways in which the Wars were ultimately understood by those who experienced them and, of course, by those who study them now. The early modern documents considered in this volume serve as evidence of the power of language, literary and polemical, to construct ideological frameworks and to form communal identities. The polemical texts taken up in the following pages do not simply comment on or react to the contemporary political and religious turmoil surrounding their composition. They are part of the battle: deliberately designed, perfected, and marshaled to engage the enemy. They illustrate Felman's observation that "la polémique est un *acte*, et non seulement un *discours*."[14] Sometimes, these acts backfire, and those attacked use the same weapons meant to destroy them to counterattack. At other times, the texts seem to fight against themselves, creating victims of friendly fire. More often than not, their aim is to clearly delineate opposing ideological camps by characterizing one community and pitting it against another, and in this respect, they are generally successful. Seeking to shape contemporary and future "history," these documents – through prose, verse, paratexts, and judicial responses to royal edicts – create and embody narratives that will influence not only their immediate communities but those for years to come as well. To use the language of Hayden White from his study of nineteenth-century historiography, these narratives explain what the different groups are by representing them.[15] Language has the power to mold our perception of reality and even our perception of our place in that reality. From these perceptions flow actions: the actions that perpetuated a culture of violence throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in France. Furthermore, they skew our modern retrospective of what actually happened during this contentious period. Our neat groupings of texts and ideologies become troubled when, as Kathleen Long suggests, "the events of history themselves are born of narrative."[16]

Endnotes

1. Throughout this volume, these wars will be referred to interchangeably as the French Wars of Religion or the French Civil Wars.
2. Earlier the same year, des Autels wrote the "Harangue au peuple français contre la rebellion."
3. "For from now on, we must defend our homes not with iron that slices but with quickened reason and courageously beat back our enemies with the same weapons with which they desire to attack us. Since the enemy has used books to seduce their depraved, false followers, we must use books to confound them, books to launch our assault against

them, books to answer their claims." Pierre de Ronsard, *Elegie à des Autels* 15–22, in *Discours*, ed. Yvonne Bellenger (Paris: Flammarion, 2000), p. 53. Translation ours.

4. Sara Barker, "'D'une plume de fer sur un paper d'acier:' Nationalism and War in the Poetry of the French Wars of Religion," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 220 (2013), p. 161.
5. Jean Mesnard, "Conclusion," in Traditions polémiques, ed. The Centre V.L. Saulnier (Paris: École normale supérieure de jeunes filles, 1984), pp. 127–29.
6. Jesse M. Lander, *Inventing Polemic: Religion, Print, and Literary Culture in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 35.
7. The word's first known use in the English language was in 1626 (https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/polemic). The first attested use of the word in modern French is in Blaisede Vigenère's translation of Philostratus in 1578, where it referred to one of many possible types of songs played on a flute (http://www.cnrtl.fr/etymologie/polémique). One of the word's earliest uses in the French language appears in Jean Benedicti's defense of Catholicism *La somme des pechés*, which first appeared in 1584. See Jean Benedicti, *La Somme des pechez et le remede d'iceux* (Paris: Arnold Sittart, 1587), p. 425. In a telling fashion, the passage in question relates to contemporary debates about the Eucharist, with the Catholic Benedicti dismissing objections raised by Protestants as "polémiques," disputes in which he does not care to take part. Another early example of the word *polémique* in French comes from an author featured several times in this collection, Agrippa d'Aubigné, who qualifies his own works as "polemique" on two different occasions. The first appears in the preface of *Les Tragiques* when the Larron Promethée describes the contents of his theft of his master's writing; the theft includes "polemiques" (*Les Tragiques*, ed. Jean-Raymond Fanlo [Paris: Honoré Champion, 2003 and 2006], p. 15). In addition, when Aubigné laments that his enemies have been buying up his "livres polemiques" in order to silence him by throwing such books to the fire (*Œuvres complètes*, ed. Eugène Réaume and F. de Cassaude, vol. 1 [Paris: Lemerre, 1873–1877], p. 383).
8. Natalia Wawrzyniak, *Lamentation et polémique au temps des guerres de Religion* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2017), pp. 13–16.
9. Shoshana Felman, "Le discours polémique," *Cahiers de l'Association internationale des études françaises* 31 (1979), p. 187.
10. Almut Suerbaum, George Southcombe, and Benjamin Thompson, "Introduction," in *Polemic: Language as Violence in Medieval and Early Modern Discourse*, ed. Suerbaum, Southcombe, and Thompson (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 6.
11. George Hoffman, *Reforming French Culture: Satire, Spiritual Alienation, and Connection to Strangers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 7.
12. Wawrzyniak, *Lamentation et polémique,* p. 12.
13. See Luc Racaut, *Hatred in Print: Catholic Propaganda and Protestant Identity during the French Wars of Religion* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), and Tatiana Debbagi Baranova, *À coup de libelles: Une culture politique au temps des Guerres de Religion (1562–1588)* (Geneva: Droz, 2012).
14. Felman, "Discours polémique," p. 182. Emphasis in the original.
15. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), p. 2.
16. Kathleen Long, "Fathers and Sons: Paternity, Memory, and Community in Théodore Agrippa d'Aubigné's *Histoire universelle*," in *Memory and Community in Sixteenth-Century France*, eds. David P. LaGuardia and Cathy Yandell (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2015), p. 96.

Christopher M. Flood

1 Forging Satire from Scripture: Biblical Models and Verbal Violence before the Wars of Religion

> "They come against us with only sword and fire. . .
> but we, we battle armed with only a sword,
> which is to say the Word of God."[1]

Introduction

"Satire," Gilbert Highet wrote dismissively in his seminal study of the genre, "is the literary equivalent of a bucket of tar and a sack of feathers."[2] Though satirists can, at times, get swept up in a certain brutishness, their art is more commonly characterized by erudition and precision – as Dryden famously qualified it in his *Discourse of Satire*, the fine stroke that "separates the Head from the Body, and leaves it standing in its place."[3] Even at its coarsest and most indiscriminately violent, however, satire offers a uniquely broad and candid look into the society of the individuals producing it. Amending Highet's vivid, if limited, metaphor, it could be said that the careful reader of satire can discover not only the intended victims, but also what heated the cauldron, who stirred the boiling tar, and how the feathers were selected. In no context are these unique perspectives more valuable than in Reformation-era France and Geneva, where, before massacres and wars, an unprecedented preponderance of satirical literature typified the intensifying conflict between Protestants and Catholics.

Among the most intriguing and revealing aspects of French Reformation-era satire is the manner in which theologically opposed authors drew upon their shared, albeit disputed, primary religious text, the Bible. The Bible was a textual battleground in doctrinal disputes as polemical authors on both sides invoked scriptural authority while drawing from its almost inexhaustible stock of condemnatory language and violent imagery. Alongside those expected borrowings, some authors adopted a typological approach, adapting biblical narratives to imbue their current circumstances with a validating sense of sacred precedent and legitimize emergent militancy. While this rhetorical strategy has been recognized and studied in other genres, where it enabled authors to add nuance to factional self-representations and trajectory to mounting tensions, it has been largely overlooked in satire.[4] Satire offers unique insights into the

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culture that created it, but the additional perspectives to be drawn from a study of carefully interpolated biblical parallels offer a more complete understanding of the cultivated self-perceptions that those parallels were meant to represent. This understanding, in turn, will give a more intelligible form to the verbal violence that paved the way for carnage and civil war.

This study will focus on how the biblical models adopted by satirical authors simultaneously reflected and influenced factional self-perceptions. More specifically, I will argue that the choice of biblical models, in itself, offers insights into the divergent circumstances of the opposing sides, including their capacity for armed conflict and their desired public perception. To this end, I will consider two prominent examples from the decade leading up to the outbreak of physical hostilities: the 1553 *Epistola Magistri Benedicti Passavantii*, in which Théodore de Bèze takes David and the coalescing kingdom of Israel as a model for Calvinists; and the 1556 *Passevent parisien respondent à Pasquin*, an anonymous response to Bèze's satirical epistle modeled on the story of Judith. Before considering those texts, however, it will be useful to discuss the complex and perhaps unexpected relationship between satire, scripture, and early modern Christian society in France.

Satire, Scripture, and Sixteenth-Century Christian Factionalism

Satire, at its most fundamental level, is based in the notion that language can alter social realities. Anthropological approaches locate satire's beginnings in humanity's basic impulse to impose order on a chaotic and dangerous world; in ancient times this was manifested in ritualistic chants aimed at repelling evil influences.[5] As societies evolved, so too did this impulse, its manifestations, and its targets: where malevolent supernatural forces would have been the focus of early rituals, later expressions reshaped the social group by targeting individuals or practices perceived as dangerous, exposing and suppressing or expelling them. In classical Greece, this evolving tradition engendered the mocking invective of Greek Old Comedy, as practiced by Aristophanes, and Cynic philosopher Menippus's eponymous satirical form. Passing to Rome, it gave rise to the poetic form of literary satire focused on social criticism, as displayed in the works of authors like Lucilius, Horace, and Juvenal. As Rome was replaced by Christendom, it was primarily this Roman tradition that informed medieval concepts of satire. Refracted as it was through the prism of complex cultural and social changes, the satirical tradition translated into a general

spirit manifested in a variety of medieval forms, among them farce, sottie, roman, and fabliau. With the eventual rise of Renaissance humanism and consequent revival of classical culture, scholars recombined these various practices and traditions into a new, overarching concept of satire still largely subordinated to the Roman concept. Though the methods, forms, and focus changed throughout this long evolution, the essential motivation remained the same: exposing perceived wrongs in the pursuit of correction, condemnation, or expulsion – and all of it underscored by a belief that the right words, used properly, can change realities. This is why Joachim Du Bellay called satire an "œuvre industrieux" (painstaking labor) whose purpose, he argues while promoting Horace as a model, is to "taxer modestement les vices de [son] temps."[6]

Inspired by similar perspectives and motives, the authors of the Bible likewise attributed a performative power to words. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, simple imperatives like "let there be," "see," or "come forth" are sufficient to create the earth, restore sight, and raise the dead. In opposition to these cases stand numerous examples of the destructive potential of words. A common biblical metaphor characterizes words as weapons: for example, the Psalmist imagines his enemies whetting their tongues like swords, and Paul describes the word of God as "more piercing than any two-edged sword."[7] While biblical instances of creation and healing depend as much on the special status of the speaker as on the words themselves, anyone can do harm with words. This is why the author of the New Testament book of James warns his reader, describing the tongue as "a fire, a world of iniquity" and "an unquiet evil, full of deadly poison."[8] This destructive power attributed to words in the Bible is not limited to spoken communications. The Old Testament book of Numbers, for example, contains a passage instructing a priest to write down the curses heaped upon a suspected adulteress by her husband, after which he is to run "bitter waters" through the written text and give it to the woman to drink; if guilty, it is promised that her womb will then swell and her thighs rot, rendering her barren and undesirable.[9] This vivid image of written curses being ingested – even if indirectly – and subsequently having a physical effect on the victim gives powerful witness to the perceived efficacy of words in the biblical context.

The power of words, both creative and destructive, was still keenly felt in the Christian context of early modern France, where it influenced the public and official receptions of satire. Looking back at the French Wars of Religion and writing shortly after the assassination of Henri IV, Nicolas Pasquier observed of religious speech in his day: "The ability of a preacher to speak well is an attractive and valuable gift of nature which, augmented and cultivated by extensive use and study, provides clarity and beauty to the fair conceptions of