

## The Gaming Table as Social Equalizer

by  
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In the latter part of the seventeenth century, the French money play provides an important link in the evolution of dramatic literature. The role of society in general becomes more relevant as the playwrights seek their inspiration in the complex economic and social conditions of the period. As wealth earns more power for those who possess it, it becomes a focal point of the comedies. At the same time the newly-obtained wealth rearranges the previous social strata, creating rich nobodies, poor nobles, powerful servants and weak masters. The obsession to gain that wealth knows many forms, but the one that holds our present interest is gambling.

Call it a past-time, an addiction, an obsession, or a fact of life, gambling can also serve as a quick way to riches. Many interesting, amusing and relevant forms of behavior manifest themselves because of games of chance. Its attraction is so strong that under its spell, gamblers put aside all prejudices. In this sense, gambling creates a very real sense of equality, since all gamblers share equal risks and hopes.

In this study, we shall take a brief look at two little-known seventeenth-century plays: *La Joueuse dupée* (1664) by La Forge, and *La Désolation des joueuses* (1687) by Dancourt. As the titles indicate, these plays deal with women gamblers in particular. We shall analyze their behavior and that of the other characters from a social perspective, noting how the activity itself tends to blur or erase the fine lines between social classes.

*La Joueuse dupée ou l'Intrigue des Académies*, a one-act comedy in verse, is the first play to be based entirely on the practice of gambling. Its style tempts



On les y voit tousjours tenir le meilleur bout.

(sc.

iv)

This sentiment appears in other plays of the seventeenth century. In *L'Avare*, Marianne does not gamble, "ce qui n'est pas commun aux femmes d'aujourd'hui" (II, 6). In Poisson's *Les Femmes coquettes*, the women gamble continuously and uncontrollably and cannot imagine, "rester quatre jours sans jouer" (II, 4). In *Le Joueur*, Regnard shows the mixing of social classes that occurs during games, "La femme du banquier, dorée et triomphante,/ Coupe orgueilleusement la duchesse indigente" (III, 6).

La Forge further elaborates on the cheating techniques of women of all classes: winnings can be concealed easily under skirts, all the while crying the losses, so that the gentlemen can be duped into a false sense of superiority, or even sympathy. Others band together to cheat openly, hoping that the respect for their sex will protect them from detection or at least accusation. Still others seduce the poor men:

D'autres joignant l'amour avecque leurs

[adresses,

Des pauvres idiots se rendent les maistresses,

Et caressant des yeax leurs amoureux niais,

Reçoivent leurs écus, et ne payent jamais. (iv)

Dishonest practices transcend the gambling academies, for the need to repay gambling debts has given rise to a strong lending class, a group of "maltoutiers" who collect taxes, have the monopoly on the sale of cards and, of course, lend funds at exorbitant rates to the losing victims, many of whom lose even more because of cheating. As the vicious cycle continues, the avarice of the lenders seems to justify the cheating of the gamblers. The most accomplished cheaters are the *faux marquis*, forever present in places where money can be made quickly and not so honestly. Usually members of the bourgeoisie or of the lower classes, they usurp the title

of marquis to gain entrance into the private Académies where the games and the unsuspecting potential victims await. When Clidamant wants to get even against well-known cheats, he says, "J'ay pour les abuser un marquis dans ma manche" (ii). He further explains the existence of this colorful character:

C'est un de ces marquis si connus au théâtre,  
De la façon desquels le peuple est idolâtre,  
Et qui convient leurs noms d'un noble  
[marquisat  
Pour attraper la duppe, et se mocquer du fat.  
La mode dans Paris en est toute commune.  
Ils sçavent par adresse attirer fortune. (ii)

Although Clidamant has no qualms about hiring a "marquis" to distract his future mother-in-law, he does not feel that he himself could behave like a marquis, for he would not only have to use a false title, but also,

Mentir adroitement, railler avec esprit,  
Des cartes et des dez connoistre tous les pièges,  
Parler à tous momens de combats et de sièges,  
Sçavoir entretenir et Bacchus et l'Amour,  
Hanter l'Académie, et paroistre à la cour. (ii)

This false marquis adds a sense of actuality to the play by his elaborate rendition of the cheating process during a game of *hoca*. The very fact that he belongs to one social class while representing another helps blur the distinctions, but to complicate matters further, he alludes to other levels of the nobility, real and non-existent, that share the gambling and cheating spirits. Aglante, a *joueuse*, had boasted that she could "outcheat" anyone, so he must "show" his superiority, not only in gambling, but in society. He refers to her as a *baronne*, although at the time that title no longer existed in Paris. He explains that "elle est demy marquise,/Mais je me mocque d'elle, et je la baronnise" (iii). His comment reflects the ever-increasing erosion of the lines separating the ranks of the nobility.

In *La Joueuse dupée* we also see the beginnings of a situation that will develop further in later French plays: the increasing importance of the servants, now financial advisors as well as confidants. As they learn to control the finances, they learn to control their masters at will. In this play, the amount of money given to the *suivante* is small and the valet still uses his talent mostly for the good of Clidamant.

A playwright after all, La Forge cannot let gambling be the only occupation in his work, so he offers a parallel with the theatre. In addition to the two comparable uses of the French expressions *jouer un jeu* and *jouer une pièce*, there is also the dual meaning of the word *jeu*, a comedy and a game, and the similar duality of the term *joueur*, or *joueuse*, to refer to the gamblers as well as the players. Furthermore, the "game," whether of chance or of stage, conveys a sense of illusion, aided by the faith of the gambler or the imagination of the audience. In addition, cheating can turn the odds for or against the gambler in the same manner as another skill, that of acting, can render a performance unforgettable or poor. As a final parallel between gambling and theatre, the author refers to the society "created" by the stage:

C'est à la comédie où l'on voit le beau monde,  
 Attiré par les vers d'une Muse féconde:  
 Les sçavans de leur art y rencontrent les loix,  
 Et les Princes enfin y vont ouyr les Roys. (v)

This comment reinforces the similar role played by gambling in the rearranging of social classes.

*La Désolation des joueuses* by Dancourt is a one-act play in prose, staged for the first time in 1687. Dancourt's interest in gambling manifested itself in two other plays, *Les Bourgeoises à la mode* and *Le Chevalier joueur*. In our comedy, there are more characters than in *La Joueuse dupée*, and among them we find l'Intendante, le Caissier and le Chevalier (d'industrie), all symbols of the increasing importance of finances in society and on stage. The cast also

includes a Comtesse, a valet, a suivante and, of course, a marquis.

The play owes its very existence to gambling, for Dancourt wrote it as a reflection of contemporary society: a government decree had prohibited the game of *lansquenet*. The playwright builds his work around the impact that the law has on characters representing the various social classes. We see no gambling in progress, since it has been outlawed, but we follow instead how the play studies the different social types.

The plot is quite simple. Dorimène, the *joueuse*, wants to marry off her daughter, Angélique, to a rich gambler. The latter proves to be an impostor, so the daughter is allowed to marry Dorante, provided he learns to gamble. By minimizing the intrigue, Dancourt gives a large picture of gambling and more developed characters than La Forge. The prohibition provides the unifying force in the comedy, and the economic consequences of gambling act as the social equalizer, since everyone is affected, favorably or adversely by its existence and disappearance. As we shall see, most opt to address their misfortune by cheating or assuming false identities.

When gambling moved inside private residences, through the Académies, it caused major social changes, since it affected the normal household routine, destroyed any sense of privacy, and allowed anyone with enough money to enter the home, regardless of class differences. As Angélique comments, her home is "une Académie ouverte à toutes sortes de gens" (i). Indeed, the games represented a kind of social "arrivism" because the gamblers could climb the social ladder, unobtrusively, simply by gambling. As the people with the money sought opportunities to gamble, and the homeowners looked at the games as a means to attract the "right" people to their house, the servants began to play a very important role. Confidants at first, but with their own developing sense of ambition, the formerly-loyal servants now begin to serve themselves. Too wrapped up in their own games to

notice, the masters continue to confide in suivantes and valets that have developed into plotting members of the household.

Lisette and Merlin routinely lie or misrepresent the truth; Merlin himself uses disguises to make his way, even as a servant, into a house where gambling and therefore money, reign. A former "marchand de boeufs," he has used many identities, but the one that serves him best is valet, an indication that the servant class has gained, if not respect, at least power. This power has been obtained by their ability, as confidants, to know about financial situations and to control them. We have not yet arrived at the servant that completely betrays his master, but Merlin and Lisette definitely show a remarkable step in that direction. They serve, but make no sacrifices, as earlier servants would have done. It is in their best interest that their master and mistress marry, so all obstacles must be removed.

The chevalier de Bellemonte, a *chevalier d'industrie*, must be unmasked, and thus eliminated as a rival. The characters recognize that the times create fakes because false identities help reach the desired social level. Merlin summarizes the situation, "on change de personnages dans le monde. Tantôt on est marquis, tantôt chevalier, puis marchand, quelquefois abbé, financier souvent" (iii). Identities must be replaced to suit the moment and seize the financial opportunity. Gambling has made this possible, since it allows all these classes to mingle freely for the games, and since it has created a need for quick money to repay gambling debts. Gamblers themselves are now members of a "class", since knowledge of the games and ways to influence their outcome can provide financial security.

As the playwright continues his theses on the games, we learn about its repercussions in the economy. Topase, a money lender, makes a living because of gamblers. He lends money at outrageous rates and then sometimes resells the merchandise for three times what he paid. But with the prohibition of *lansquenet*, all

will change. Not only he, but most of France will suffer financial ruin, "le lansquenet défendu nous coupe la gorge, et voilà le commerce ruiné en France" (iv). Other characters agree with that dismal view, "Cela est vrai. Paris va devenir désert, assurément, si l'on ne réforme pas cette défense" (iv). Travel will benefit, however, from this law because many Parisians will go to England and Holland, where gambling can still provide a comfortable income ...successful gambling, that is, aided by cheating.

La Forge allows his characters to discuss differences among the social classes, but their discussion and opinions serve to emphasize the class similarities. When a bourgeoisie loses money at the games, the others express their shock, after all, "leurs manières sont bien différentes de celles de gens de qualité" (vi). When the Comtesse learns that she cannot play *lansquenet*, she cries out in disbelief, "cela ne se peut pas...c'est comme si l'on défendait de dormir" (vii). But when she finds out that the decree has been "posted," she explains:

Publier, c'est autre chose. Ces publications sont pour le peuple, pour les laquais, pour la canaille, à qui l'on fait bien de défendre certains jeux qui ne sont faits que pour les gens de qualité. (vii)

Unfortunately, the prohibition, i.e., the negation of the gambling *is* for everyone, serving as an equalizing force. As the Intendante says, "que me sert-il d'en avoir la qualité? Ai-je plus de privilège que les autres?" (viii). Lisette, witnessing the reactions sums up the social implications, "Madame a raison: quoiqu'elle soit femme de qualité, le lansquenet n'est-il pas aussi bien défendu pour elle que pour sa belle-soeur, qui n'est que la femme d'un apothicaire?" (viii). To add humor to their ridiculous situation, the suivante must revive the poor woman by waving a pack of cards in front of her face.

Finally, the prohibition will have a disastrous effect on family relationships, for one of the advantages of *lansquenet*, shared by most, was that it could justify or excuse certain forms of behavior. A woman could receive a valuable jewel from her lover and explain it to her husband as a result of the game. A young man could squander borrowed money, and his father would think that it was won and lost at the table. Even those that did not gamble would blame the game for expenses. Eraste, for example, entertained twenty ladies at once, but *lansquenet* guarded their reputations. Now, "voilà vingt femmes perdues de réputation" (x).

Many factors help create or destroy class distinctions. Money and its power or, for that matter, the sense of helplessness created by its absence, has played a major role in the rearranging of these classes. As the nobility lost its riches, the bourgeoisie, titleless, became the money class, and even the lower classes benefitted from this change. Gambling offered the lower classes an opportunity to rub elbows with *gens de qualité*, and the impoverished nobles a chance to try to recapture, if not the finance, at least the glitter. Sharing ambition, greed and risk, these varied classes gladly put aside the traditional divisions for the sake of a game. In their own simple ways, *La Joueuse dupée* and *La Désolation des joueuses* give us a brief glimpse into their troubled world.

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