Littérature I: "La Representation des classes sociales" Commentary/Summation

by
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Just when it seems that the Academy has reached the limits of its critical discourse, a new perspective is invariably offered to make us realize that ours is happily a never-ending dialogue, that there is always something new and different to say. Such has been the case in the four presentations that we have heard this morning.

Certainly, Professor Montbertrand's comparison of Louis XIV to an alpha-chicken and of the court of Versailles to a henhouse is unique in conception and deserving of consideration. Because of the humor it evokes, the analogy may even be deemed appropriate in a discussion of Molière's comedy. More intriguing, however, is the use that Professor Montbertrand makes of *la biocritique* to bring a new reading to Molière's theatre and the relationship of that theatre to the social order. In his essay, Professor Montbertrand focuses on what he perceives as the common denominator of Molière's comedies that are based on a tri-partite confrontational structure of two lovers and an obstacle. The obstacle most often assumes a tyrannical role, that of a pseudo-alpha: a poor imitation of a true alpha, who is, of course, at least in this instance, the monarch. And it is through the dramatic function/representation of that character that Molière's theatre is most easily inscribed in its contemporary social context.

As Professor Montbertrand works through his argument, it appears at times that his *biocritique* is providing little more than the type of structural analysis that dominated the critical scene 20-25 years ago; a different terminology is being used, but the conclusion toward which he is working seems

predictable. Yet Professor Montbertrand's approach does open up an area of investigation that earlier structuralist theories did not account for: namely, the basis of the audience's reaction to the comedy—the laugh. That basis is read here as the space perceived by the audience, and including the monarch (from whose point of view Molière situated his comedies), between the virtues of the alpha and the flaws of a pseudo-alpha in a hierarchical social structure. The laugh the audience emits is a "manifestation of the instinct of survival," an applause for the defeat of the reign of disorder, a reign which understandably cannot endure in the domains of a true alpha, a monarch, a Sun King.

In her analysis of *La Joueuse dupée* and *La Désolation des joueuses*, Professor Alvarez-Detrell demonstrates that once again the comic theatre can provide a constant forum that readily and easily adapts itself to the context of a changing social reality; that the comic stage is peculiarly suited to unmasking and ridiculing the flaws to which the social entity too often falls victim. At the same time, the two plays that she examines, little-known though they may be, bear witness to the sometimes unpopular critical notion of literary history and genre evolution.

From Professor Alvarez-Detrell's presentation, it seems obvious that *La Joueuse dupée* and *La Désolation des joueuses* could be classified as *comédies de moeurs*, a form certainly not without precedent in the seventeenth century and that will become increasingly in vogue during the eighteenth century. The more dominant roles played by the servant characters mentioned by Professor Alvarez-Detrell will also be an important feature of eighteenth-century comedy. We have only to consider the theatre of Marivaux and, of course, Beaumarchais, where Lisette, Arlequin, and Figaro are certainly as dramatically consequential as the noble masters they serve.

The two seventeenth-century plays reveal a growing social concern for money, financial gain, and a realization of the absolute power of the almighty *sou*.

A rise to power or a fall from grace is but the turn of a wheel away. Privileges or barriers by birth disappear at the gaming table, since fortune and chance do not know class distinction. The lifting of social restrictions and the indiscriminate mingling of hitherto segregated peoples, democratic yet it may seem, is motivated by the single impulse of avarice and greed that must finally undermine the very foundations of a hierarchical regime and bring it tumbling down on itself.

Professor Deloffre's reading of the *Agréables conférences* reaffirms the central role played by literature in the representation of social history, and shows once again that there does exist a necessary basis for cooperative dialogue between the two disciplines. Beginning with the certainty that "all literature reflects a social state," Professor Deloffre sets forth the case of referentiality. Literature is neither written nor read in a vacuum but is instead a stylized inscription of an external structure of reality.

To support his thesis, Professor Deloffre reads the *Agréables conférences* against Marc Venard's economic history, *Bourgeois et paysans au XVIIe siècle*, and shows us in the process that while providing different perspectives on a same subject, literature and the social sciences are not mutually exclusive discourses but can, instead, be viewed as complementary. Moreover, and as Professor Deloffre points out, the literary text can often emphasize more clearly and more poignantly, than can a study like Venard's, certain historical, social phenomena: in this case, the dominating role of Paris that in the process of national centralisation had come to usurp the power of the *seigneur* who had once governed the life of provincial localities. Professor Deloffre does conclude, and correctly so, that the literary text, as a stylized form of mimesis, can never replace the historical, retrospective study in the latter's function as a means for the compiling, sorting and interpreting of certain types of scientifically gathered technical and statistical data. Yet the literary text remains a vital source of information of an historical

order because it offers a perspective that the strictly historical text cannot: a contemporary view and representation of an immediate social state.

Professor Lafouge's paper on Yves de Paris' *Le Gentilhomme Chértien* is the result of the very "meat and potatoes" aspect of our vocation—the spending of long hours in the darkest recesses of library stacks to bring to light hitherto little-known texts. Such work is of undisputed importance, I would argue, especially if we are to consider the humanities not in terms of a few selected works to which we sometimes reverentially refer as the Canon, but as a discipline that embraces the flow and exchange of ideas from one text to another, from one period to another.

Works such as *Le Gentilhomme Chrétien*, if they do indeed fall outside the critical conventions of literariness, can nonetheless prove to be valuable sources of information about the historico-social context in which they were intended to be read. In his detailed explication of Yves de Paris' work, Professor Lafouge underscores certain characteristics and preoccupations of the elitist audience to whom the book is addressed. The observations, suggestions, and recommendations that Yves de Paris sets forth are assumed to be readable and ultimately (or hopefully) intelligible by that audience, a premise from which we may be able to derive more accurate conclusions about the profile/make-up of a particular social class at a given moment in time. Armed with such knowledge, we can only then be better equipped to address the question of the contextual referentiality of canonical works whose authors may may been inspired by (as Professor Lafouge suggests) or shared a same readership with more obscure writers, providing thus another basis on which to assume the continuum of humanistic exchange.

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