Des choses heureusement inventées: Verisimilitude in *Clélie*

by
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Throughout the seventeenth century, the relationship between the novel and verisimilitude was a troubled and troubling one. Criticism of the baroque sentimental novel for lack of verisimilitude is particularly sharp, although even after the rise of the historical novella in the 1660's, the *Princesse de Clèves* controversy testifies to the persistence of the disquiet. I would like to look at the meaning(s) of verisimilitude in a text from Madeleine de Scudéry's *Clélie.* My reading will lead to a discussion of the relationship between the status of the novel as a feminine and feminized genre and Scudéry's concept of verisimilitude.

Before turning to *Clélie*, however, some general considerations are in order. In his article "La vraisemblance—problèmes de terminologie, problèmes de poétique," A. Kibédi-Varga showed convincingly how the word verisimilitude covered a range of meanings in seventeenth century texts. More recently Janet Morgan has attempted to explain how this word, so important in seventeenth century aesthetic theory came to be used in different ways. Morgan suggests that discussions of verisimilitude center around two separate critical issues. Verisimilitude is used in rhetorical discussions and designates the belief that the credibility of a work of art is essential to its ability to touch its audience. This use of verisimilitude is more prevalent in the first half of the century, and the word itself means true-seeming. The other use of verisimilitude brings Aristotle's conception of mimesis into play to justify a lofty view of poetry, especially tragic and heroic works. One finds this second use more frequently in the latter part of the century, and here *le vraisemblable* is opposed to *le vrai* as a superior

order of being (293). Morgan is concerned principally with theoretical texts, and with the verisimilitude of the theatre. However, her description of the two uses of verisimilitude is useful in understanding what Scudéry has to say in *Clélie*. But, as we will see, Scudéry stakes out her own territory.

Toward the end of *Clélie*, in part IV, the "Histoire d'Hésiode" and its framing conversations are the occasion for a long discussion of literature (IV, 793-1149). The story itself is a foreign one, a Greek tale which must be translated for the "Roman" characters of *Clélie*. As Amilcar begins to read, Plotine interrupts him, objecting that events which happened so long ago can scarcely interest her. Clélie intervenes, saying that she can be moved even by invented tales, as long as they are invented with verisimilitude. Clélie concedes Plotine's point that those events which we ourselves see or which concern those known to us have the most emotional impact. Nonetheless, she contends, once we leave that intimate circle, all events have equal potential to touch. In Clélie's view, there is an essence in each event which is atemporal and atopical, and that essence is the center of her interest:

> car ce sont les choses en elles mesmes qui touchent, & non pas precisement les lieux, ni les personnes, puis que tout ce que vous ne connoissez pas vous est esgal, & ne vous doit pas toucher plus d'vne façon que de l'autre (IV, 795).

Readers are touched by the representation of the characters' passions and indeed it is sensitivity to the portrayal of such events which is an indicator of intelligence: "à mon advis plus on a d'esprit, plus on se laisse surprendre aux choses heureusement inuentées" (IV, 795). The reader of the novel or hearer of the tale is expected to seize the universal human essence embodied in a particular example. This concern with abstraction echoes Aristotle, as filtered through scholasticism, and taken up again by such theorists as Chapelain (Morgan 300-301). As readers we penetrate

to "les choses en elles mesmes," and there find our pleasure. This act of *noesis* is the hallmark of intelligence, and is revealed in works of fiction, "choses heureusement inuentées."

In *Clélie*, the telling of Hésiode's tale will serve to test Clélie's views. The story has two parts and begins with a vision which Apollon brings to Hésiode in his sleep. In it Hésiode sees all the poets who will come after him, down through the seventeenth century in France. This catalog is followed by the tragic story of Hésiode's passion for Clymène, a lesson in how ambition can destroy love. In addition to Hésiode's vision of the future of poetry, the tale contains other elements which might strain the credibility of the seventeenth century audience, such as the description of Hésiode's body being returned to shore by a school of dolphins, the fact that his wounds began to bleed again in the presence of his murderers, and the ability of Clymène's pet dog to identify the killers.

Nonetheless, when Amilcar has finished reading, all "les belles" who heard the story are moved by it, and each explains what touches her most. Plotine, who had initially objected to a story about people so far removed from her own circle, now admits she is touched to the point that her compassion is even moved for Clymène's pet dog (IV, 1119). Plotine may be touched emotionally, but she fails Clélie's intelligence test. It is not the essence of the thing which moves Plotine, but rather a detail which has no real importance. This exaggerated pity, which makes everyone laugh becomes the jumping off point for a discussion of the art of inventing a tale, and the central issue of verisimilitude.

Anacréon considers the story of Hésiode to be almost entirely an invention of its author, and not a work of historical accuracy. This however does nothing to diminish its value. On the contrary, says Anacréon "ie la [l'histoire] trouue plus belle que la verité, mais encore plus vray-semblable" (IV, 1120). Anacréon compares the "historical facts" about Hésiode

with the story, showing the basic outlines to be the same. What the comparison makes clear, however, is that all the motivation for the events is missing from the historical account. Providing it is the job of fiction. Anacréon concludes

> qu'vn homme qui auroit inuenté ce que l'Histoire dit de cette auanture, auroit fait vne mauuaise chose, & que celuy qui a composé la Fable qu'Amilcar vient de lire, en a fait vne qui est selon les regles de l'Art (IV, 1124).

Providing motivation, and making the facts of history make sense as a coherent human story rather than a concatenation of seemingly unmotivated events is clearly the essence of art here. And extraordinary events can have their place only in such a context. That is why the historical account is finally inferior to the fictionalized one. Here again we detect the influence of the *Poetics*. As Aristotle's text became more influential, and began to be better understood, the notion of art's superiority over history came to the fore, and the *vraisemblable* came to outshine the *vrai* (Morgan 298-99). In this, Scudéry anticipates what will become the dominant understanding of verisimilitude in the latter part of the seventeenth century.

In the comments of other characters we see the juxtaposition of this use of verisimilitude with the other, the concern with credibility. In Herminius' view, nothing is better than history to provide grounding for a fiction. These historical bases "font receuoir le mensonge meslé auec la verité" (IV, 1125). For Herminius, history and fiction must be mixed together so well that it is almost impossible to distinguish the one from the other—the only difference between the two being that fiction must be more verisimilar than history, "car enfin il est permis au hazard de faire des choses incroyables, mais il n'est iamais permis à vn homme sage d'inuenter des choses qu'on ne puisse croire" (IV, 1125). Herminius addresses the question of what makes fiction work, what makes it credible,

and adds another voice asserting the superiority of fiction over history. Anacréon expresses a similar opinion, noting that those who compose fictions want to be believed. In sum, he says, "le veritable art du mensonge est de bian ressembler à la verité" (IV, 1129). We are touched by what seems possible to us, hence the necessity that fiction resemble history. However, fiction must have a kind of cohesion which is superior to that often offered by history.[1]

Anticipating Genette's reading of 300 years later, Valérie objects that if a tale is limited to what can easily be believed, then one will be reduced to saying "des choses assez communes, & qui ne diuertiront gueres" (IV, 1129). Amilcar's answer to this objection is to propose a third way, avoiding the traps of both extravagance and banality.

> Les choses merueilleuses bien loin d'estre deffenduës, sont necessaires, pourueu qu'elles n'arriuent pas trop souuent, & qu'elles produisent de beaux effets; & il n'y a que les choses bizarres ou impossibles qui soient absolument condamnées (IV, 1130).

Authors must invent things which are "merueilleuses & naturelles tout à la fois" (IV, 1131). Here the requirement for coherence comes into play to limit but not eliminate *le vraisemblable extraordinaire*. Scudéry's position on the question of ordinary and extraordinary verisimilitude is clear. To restrict literature solely to what is commonly accepted would make for very dull reading, and thus she admits the admixture of the *merveilleux*. Like her contemporaries, Scudéry finds a way to subsume the marvelous under the verisimilar, a necessity which will be felt as less pressing later in the century (Morgan 295-296).

However, imagination must have its limits, as a work of fiction will strain credibility if it comes only from that source. Plotine asks why, if authors can invent a diversity of characters, they cannot also invent places and events. Here again Anacréon objects, saying

that the reader's pleasure will be lost in such circumstances, because if the imagination is confronted only with new things, it will begin to doubt all. For Anacréon the ideal historical frame for a fiction is

> vn siecle qui n'est pas si esloigné qu'on n'en sçache presque rien de particulier, ni si proche qu'on sçache trop tout ce qui s'y est passé, & qui le soit pourtant assez pour y pouuoir supposer des euenemens; qu'vn historien a pû vray-semblablement ignorer, & n'a pas mes mesme deû dire; il y a lieu de faire de bien plus belles choses, que si on inuentoit tout (IV, 1134-35).

The historical frame is the basis of credibility. The mixture of the known and the invented disposes readers to the text's seduction and makes them accept its "lies" along with the "truth."

Concluding this part of the discussion, Anacréon summarizes the qualities of a good fiction. An accurate portrait of the passions complete with the small details which reveal human character combines with wisely and naturally invented adventures, well-grounded extraordinary events, diversity without confusion, a mediocre style, respect of decorum, vice condemned and virtue rewarded. Such a composition will please readers more than history, and will be more useful to them (IV, 1137). The novelist's knowledge of the world, of character and of writing styles must far outstrip that of the historian. And the novelist's moral duty remains paramount:

> Mais sur toutes choses, il faut sçauoir oster à la morale ce qu'elle a de rude, & de sec, & luy donner ie ne sçay quoy de si naturel, & de si agreable, qu'elle [la Fable] diuertisse ceux à qui elle donne des leçons (IV, 1141-42).

This latter view, exemplified notably in such works as Le Moyne's *Peintures morales*, owes much to Horace (Morgan 297). The many threads which make up the

cloth of verisimilitude are woven into this formulation. The concern with character portrayal and decorum, representing a typical seventeenth century modification of Aristotle's emphasis on action in the *Poetics* (Morgan 296-97), combines with a characteristically Aristotelian sense of the superiority of art to history, and a Horatian emphasis on the moral end of art. For Scudéry all of these elements combine to justify the much maligned novel.

Indeed, the "Histoire d'Hésiode" and its framing materials make both implicit and explicit defenses of the novel. In the catalog of poets, Homer is praised for certain specific traits, all of which are shared by *Clélie* itself. Apollon notes that some of the characters in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are portraits of famous individuals, or of people whom Homer knew. He also mentions Homer's invention of the beginning *in medias res*, the diversity of his characters, and his "grand & merueilleux genie, auec vn caractere naturel, facile & agreable" (IV, 805a). These are qualities which *Clélie* shares with Homer. The story begins *in medias res*, the characters are the avatars of the individuals who people Madeleine de Scudéry's world, and there is a great mass of characters whose diversity arises from the different nuances of viewpoint they represent.

The explicit defense of the novel, found at the end of the tale, argues love's centrality to the major events of life, and the morality of the novel which can show that love can be both innocent and delightful. The novel can provide experience, furnish standards of judgment, which in this version are more likely to make women critical of real lovers than too accepting of them, and provide the kind of social sophistication which makes one an agreeable member of society. In his defense of the novel, Herminius notes that whatever the differences of custom or nation, the reader can always draw a useful moral lesson from the behavior of the characters (IV, 1146). And indeed, at the end as at the beginning of this sequence, Clélie behaves as the ideal Scuderian reader, who extracts the

essence from the fiction, and uses that truth as a referent in judging her own life.

In Scudéry's presentation, there is no novel without verisimilitude, and the fantastic text is one which cannot be read, because it advertises its imaginative nature in a way which centers all the reader's attention on that aspect of the text rather than on what is useful and important. Verisimilitude is a complex entity designating both the text's efficacy and its ontological status as superior to history.

But what is the nature of the superior order which verisimilitude offers? What is the truth which the Scuderian novel provides, the *vrai* in her *vraisemblable*? Scudéry's answer is a rich one. There is to be both moral usefulness and pleasure, and there are to be other kinds of instruction as well. Scudéry's distinction between the novel and history is particularly instructive in this regard, for in it she justifies not only the superiority of the novel, but her own pedagogical program. The novel as she conceives it provides not only the pleasure of the text, the coherence and motivation which historical accounts so often lack, and palatable moral lessons, but also offers its female audience much much more. The novel will offer women models of love which will allow them to judge wisely in the conduct of their own amorous lives. Deprived of the kind of formal instruction which men receive, the novel will offer women an ersatz version, like the catalog of poets at the beginning of the story of Hésiode. And since a woman's only way of gaining power and influence is through social life, the novel will also offer valuable models of the social graces, letter writing, elegant conversation, and so forth. The reader's understanding of her world will be guided by the maxims which can be derived from the behavior of fictive characters, and the adducing of such maxims is the mainstay of many of the conversations which punctuate *Clélie*. Such are the truths of *Clélie*. These truths are quite different from what Aristotle imagined when he spoke of the superior truth of art. What

Clélie offers is knowledge, in the Foucauldian sense of the shift from truth to knowledge.

A parallel can be drawn between this sense of *vrai* in *vraisemblable* and the social shift taking place in France in the seventeenth century. The old aristocracy was founded on the belief that an essence was passed down from generation to generation and that this nobility constituted each aristocrat's fundamental identity. As we all know, during the late sixteenth century and all of the seventeenth, the bourgeoisie made its ineluctable rise, using its money to displace the old aristocracy. Money replaced birth in the social world as knowledge replaced truth in the intellectual world. And the rise of the novel began, as did the rise of women's influence in society. Carolyn Lougee has persuasively argued that if the "woman question" was debated with such determination in the seventeenth century, it was because a parallel was perceived between the increasing influence of women in society and a breaking down of a kind of stratification which had been seen as the natural social order.

In seventeenth century eyes, the novel is a feminized genre. The corrupting influence of novels and the corrupting influence of women seem to go hand in hand. For many writers, the novel both nourishes and reveals the corruption of women, and the concomitant disordering of society. Indeed, the issue of verisimilitude and the novel is intimately tied to the question of woman's place in seventeenth century polite society. As Caren Greenberg writes, "The salon was to the world around it what the novel was to history: verisimilar by some evaluations, monstrous by others, but always structurally related and referentially problematic" (38). The novel which dares to posit a different order, a different role for women, or a different conception of a woman's possibilities, as would *La Princesse de Clèves*, is taxed with a lack of verisimilitude. The truth which the novel offers, in Scudéry's version, is the knowledge requisite for a woman to lead a successful social life. It is the coin which will buy a better life. And it can be possessed,

as the bourgeois possesses capital, as the mind possesses knowledge.

In her study of verisimilitude, Morgan suggests that throughout most of the seventeenth century, in aesthetic theory, the reasonable remains more acceptable than the empirical. It is in the latter years of the century that the moralists will begin to chip away at this notion, by insisting on the degree to which the empirical differs from the ideal, or normative (Morgan 303-304). Because Scudéry's novel is both social program and work of art, her doctrine of verisimilitude insists on both the plausibility and the superiority of the world which she proposes as an alternative to the imperfect empirical one she sees around her. In *Clélie* she uses verisimilitude as the linchpin of her defense of the sentimental baroque novel, and in so doing defends a changed role for women. As Clélie says,

> Il y a des choses veritables...qui sont si peu agreables, & si esloignée [*sic*] de toute vray-semblance; & il y en a d'inuentées qui sont si diuertissantes, & si vray-semblables; qu'on peut dire que quelquesfois le mensonge est plus agreable que la verité: & qu'il ressemble mieux à la verité, que la verité mesme (I, 1383).

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Notes

1 Scudéry talks about fiction's superiority in terms of motivation and cohesion. Its moral superiority, its ability to correct the injustices of history is not emphasized here as it is in such writers as Segrais II, 237, 240. Cf. Kibédi-Varga 328.

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