## Plots and Plausibilities in *Les Précieuses ridicules*

by
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I wish to discuss today the function of Magdelon's monologue in orgainizing Molière's 1659 comedy, *Les Précieuse ridicules*. This monologue is usually not given much attention, but in fact much of the comedy, and much of the play's theoretical interest, lies in its contrast to the rest of the text.

In scene 4, Magdelon attempts to explain to her father how a courtship should proceed in the form of a chronological narrative:

> Mon père, voilà ma cousine qui vous dira, aussi bien que moi, que le mariage ne doit jamais arriver qu'après les autres aventures. Il faut qu'un amant, pour être agréable, sache débiter les beaux sentiments, pousser le doux, le tendre et le passionné, et que sa recherche soit dans les formes. Premièrement, il doit voir au temple, ou à la promenade, ou dans quelque cérémonie publique, la personne dont il devient amoureux; ou bien être conduit fatalement chez elle par un parent ou un ami, et sortir de là tout rêveur et mélancolique. Il cache un temps sa passion à l'objet aimé, et cependant lui rend plusieurs visites, où l'on ne manque jamais de mettre sur le tapis une question galante qui exerce les esprits de l'assemblée. Le jour de la déclaration arrive, qui se doit faire ordinairement dans une allée de quelque jardin, tandis que la compagnie s'est un peu éloignée; et cette déclaration est suivie d'un prompt courroux, qui paroît à notre rougeur, et qui, pour un temps, bannit l'amant de notre présence. Ensuite il trouve moyen de nous apaiser, de nous accoutumer insensiblement au discours de sa passion, et de tirer de nous cet aveu qui fait tant de peine. Après cela viennent les aventures, les rivaux qui se jettent à la traverse d'une inclination établie, les persécutions des pères, les jalousies conçues sur de fausses apparences, les plaintes, les désespoirs, les enlèvements, et ce qui s'ensuit. Voilà comme les

> choses se traitent dans les belles manières et ce sont des règles dont, en bonne galanterie, on ne sauroit se dispenser. Mais en venir de but en blanc à l'union conjugale, ne faire l'amour qu'en faisant le contrat du mariage, et prendre justement le roman par la queue! encore un coup, mon père, il ne se peut rien de plus marchand que ce procédé; et j'ai mal au coeur de la seule vision que cela me fait (I:268-269).

The reader will no doubt have recognized the "plot": it matches the structure of Mlle de Scudéry's long novels *Clélie* and *Le Grand Cyrus*; but also that of her shorter *Célinte* and Mme de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* (both in the courtship of the Prince de Clèves and in that of the duc de Nemours). This narrative blueprint for a courtship is dismissed by Gorgibus, Magdelon's father, who responds, "Quel diable de jargon entends-je ici? Voici bien du haut style." Magdelon's cousin Cathos continues with a critique of the appearance and behavior of their two suitors, La Grange and Du Croisy, to which Gorgibus responds "Je pense qu'elles sont folles toutes deux, et je ne puis rien comprendre à ce baragouin" (scene 4).

*Les Précieuses ridicules* provides an early example of a tradition addressing the corruptive force of the emerging novel, a force which inspires the plot of two later novels, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Zola's *Le Rêve*. (It will be recalled that in this lesser-known novel by Zola, the heroine, who dreams of marrying the man who is inspired by her romantic visions, indeed succeeds, but dies at the moment of the first kiss on the church steps.) Attacks on the unsuitability and danger of novels to the female (and to children) before the nineteenth century however were common. Nicole in the first *Imaginaire* of 1665 made perhaps the most famous of these earlier references: "Un faiseur de romans et un poète de théâtre est un empoisonneur public, non des corps, mais des âmes des fidèles." Certainly Nicole's allegation of poisoning of souls applies in *Les Précieuses ridicules*: in the play's last scene, Gorgibus berates his daughter and niece and condemns them to a convent with his "Allez vous cacher, vilaines; allez vous cacher pour jamais," followed by an indictment of novels and verses, "et vous, qui êtes cause de leur folie, sottes billevesées, pernicieux amusements des esprits oisifs,

romans, vers, chansons, sonnets et sonnettes, puissiez-vous être à tous les diables!" (scene 17).

In 1728 the Marquise de Lambert, in her *Avis d'une mère à sa fille*, also states that,

> La lecture des romans est plus dangereuse [que les tragédies de Corneille]: je ne voudrais pas que l'on en fit un grand usage; ils mettent du faux dans l'esprit. Le roman ne s'étant jamais pris sur le vrai, allume l'imagination, affaiblit la pudeur, met le désordre dans le coeur; et pour peu qu'une jeune personne ait de la disposition à la tendresse, hate et précipite son penchant (in May, 2455).[1]

The Marquise de Lambert could also have been writing about Magdelon and Cathos: the phrase "le roman ne se prend jamais sur le vrai" contrasts their wishes with the perception of the suitors and father; "le roman allume l'imagination" points to the ideas they have about how things should go, despite their inexperience; "le roman affaiblit la pudeur" recalls how they threw themselves on the valets; and "le roman met le désordre dans le coeur" refers to their inability to listen to or understand Gorgibus, the voice of authority and right reason, and to their cringing at the idea of marriage at its most basic ("Comment est-ce qu'on peut souffrir la pensée de coucher contre un homme vraiment nu?" [scene 4]).

But let us take a closer look at the implications of the courtship model--central as it is to my reading of the play and of the point of view of the two women--and its role in the comedy. The plot of the appropriate courtship, according to Magdelon and Cathos, should follow a precise set of rules, all set by women as it happens: by Scudéry, by the cousins, by the *nous* of the narrative. In that world, there would be no *jouissance* (a notable absence from the *Carte de Tendre*, as opposed to Tristan L'Hermite's contemporary *Le Royaume d'amour*, where Jouissance is the capital), no marriage. Life would be a romantic novel and not the business-like world where commodities such as women are bought and sold, by the *marchand*-father (Magdelon claims that, "il ne se peut rien de plus marchand que ce procédé [scene 4]). In the play, the suitors' valets are the only ones who attempt to plat out the desire of Magdelon and Cathos--it is their desire also: Mascarille, La Grange's valet, is an "extravagant, qui s'est mis dans la tête

de vouloir faire l'homme de condition. Il se pique ordinairement de galanterie et de vers, et dédaigne les autres valets, jusqu'à les appeler brutaux" (scene 1). The implication in this situation is clear: the sort of relationships the two cousins seek to develop is the stuff of domestic servants, as is the *précieuses*' project of developing a sensitivity to love. The cousins are clearly shown to prefer and cavort with a lower-class mentality. The result of this topsy-turvy world is that the valets will be better received than their masters.

The interest of the *précieuses* in creating new words and expressions, names, and novels, was a way of carving out a world, existence, or reality which would be of women (Stanton 107-134). So it is important not to miss that these women need masters of all kinds to regulate their lives for them; for example, Gorgibus's only recourse in view of his daughter's and niece's insubordination is to proclaim himself "maître absolu" of their destiny, which is, "ou vous serez mariées toutes deux avant peu, ou, ma foi! vous serez religieuses: j'en fais un bon serment" (scene 4). But the women have other masters: the prospective husbands, their valets, even their own servants, who do not understand their mistresses' linguistic affectations--"je n'entends point le latin," and "il faut parler chrétien, si vous voulez que je vous entende" (scene 6). The world represented by the courtship model is that far from real life.

Odette de Mourgues discounts accusations of anti-feminism on the part of Molière with "Molière anti-féministe? étrange reproche si l'on prend la peine de remarquer que dans le théâtre de Molière les rares personnages intelligents sont des femmes (404)." Certainly, the project of rethinking literary of cultural history in terms of feminist issued is fraught with difficulties, and may yield little that is definitive. Molière's play however raises many interesting theoretical issues which can be discussed without broaching the issues of whether Molière is a "feminist" or an "antifeminist." Nancy K. Miller's work is of particular interest here (46). Miller focuses on objections to feminine plots--specifically to *La Princesse de Clèves*--which assume that women writers cannot or will not obey the rules of fiction and more particularly of *vraisemblance*, which she translates as "plausibility." She points out that, "the fictions of desire behind the

desiderata are masculine and not universal constructs," just as Magdelon's vision is not universal with a change in context, "... the maxims that pass for the truth of human experience, and the encoding of that experience in literature, are organizations, when they are not fantasies, of the dominant culture."[2]

Clearly in *Les Précieuses ridicules* Molière critiques women's (specifically Scudéry's) fiction. The word *roman* appears several times, all in the context of that courtship model presented by Magdelon: 1) she tells her father that, "si tout le monde vous ressemblait, un *roman* serait bientôt fini!" 2) she also states that arranged marriages turn novels upside down, "prendre justement le *roman* par la queue!"; and 3) finally Magdelon begs her father to allow her and her cousin Cathos to "faire à loisir le tissu de notre *roman*," implying her goal to live life as a novel, "et n'en pressez pas tant la conclusion" (scene 4, emphasis added)--a humorous reference no doubt to Scudéry's 10,000-page novels.

Women's fiction--as represented by the direct allusions to Scudéry throughout scene 4--has no ties to reality as defined by the context as we have seen above and is, in a word, ridiculous. Whereas *La Princesse de Clèves* was said to be implausible, specifically with reference to the scene of the *aveu*, though feasible as a true story, the courtship model of Scudéry's novel in Molière's play is attacked by Gorgibus, the suitors, and the servants as being inapplicable to life, as defined by the context of the play. In both cases, women's fiction is problematized. Let us return to Odette de Mourgues's article for a moment. She presents a reading of *Les Précieuses ridicules* which is convincing: as *préciosité* depends on a group, the salon, the comedy of Molière's play and characters stems from the absence of such a structure--Cathos and Magdelon do not yet belong to a salon, and the two male protagonists are themselves disguised valets (404). I would add to this convincing hypothesis that the comedy of Magdelon's monologue lies in its having been divorced from its usual frame, the *roman d'aventures*, and placed in a bourgeois milieu. Boileau enforces this notion of the genre as acting as frame or context with "Dans un roman frivole aisément tout s'excuse; / C'est assez qu'en courant la fiction amuse; / Trop de rigueur alors serait hors de saison: / Mais la scène demande une exacte raison, / L'étroite bienséance y

veut être gardée" (*Art poétique*, III, 119-123). Also apparent in these verses is the seeming lack or order in novels compared with the involved rules which control the stage.

The romance, or *roman*, was commonly held to be an inferior genre, largely written and read by women, for one because it posited a fiction (so close to "lie") which seems to have no place in reality. Selma Zebouni distinguishes between the *vrai* and *vraisemblance*as analogous to one between "truth" and knowledge of reality, or shared experience.[3] The play *Les Précieuses ridicules* provides a framework of reality, or *vraisemblance* (as system of knowledge) incompatible with the plot that Magdelon presents. Its structure is such that plot or vision is completely excluded as a feasible scenario. Marriage, to Gorgibus and the suitors, is a sort of business transaction. But marriage, according to Magdelon and Cathos, is a pursuit between two people which has been coded and institutionalized by Scudéry's novels. The epistemological bases for the two are incompatible. That, of course, informs the humor of the play, as Odette de Mourgues points out, but the definition of the dominating frame also determines the measure of *vraisemblance*: the theatrical frame provides the criteria for validation and the internal courtship plot the aberration.

I would like to dwell for a moment on Gorgibus's last qualification of Magdelon and Cathos. Before sending novels and verses to the devil in the last scene, he says, "Nous allons servir de fable et de risée à tout le monde, et voilà ce que vous vous êtes attiré par vos *extravagances*" (emphasis added). Let the use of the word, "extravagance," be noted. It occurs once earlier in reference to La Grange's valet, Mascarille: he is an "*extravagant*, qui s'est mis dans la tête de vouloir faire l'homme de condition" (scene 1). In both cases, the word is used to express deviation--from common sense perhaps, embodied in the values of marriage and social rank as defined by Gorgibus, Du Croisy, and La Grange. Descartes uses the word in his *Discours de la méthode* to designate deviation from reason, straying from "le droit chemin." Pascal also uses the word in *Les Provinciales*, to object to Jesuitic opinions, propositions, and arguments, in addition to other words like it, as in the example below:

> Il me fit voir ensuite, dans ses auteurs, des choses de cette nature si infames, que je n'oserais les rapporter, et dont il aurait eu horreur lui-même ... sans le respect qu'il a pour ses Pères .... Je me taisais cependant, moins par le dessein de l'engager à continuer cette matière, que par la surprise de voir des livres de religion pleins de décisions si horribles, si injustes et si *extravagantes* tout ensemble. Il poursuivit donc en liberté son discours.... (406)[4]

Finally, theorists of *art poétique* such as Boileau, Rapin, d'Aubignac, and La Mesnardière use it to emphasize the importance of *vraisemblance* or plausibility in fictional works. The same word (among others such as *étrange, fantastique, horrible,* and so on) expresses therefore transgression of reason and common sense, morality, father and doctrine, and literary conventions.

Molière therefore frames his portrayal of Magdelon and Cathos with the term *extravagances* in the first and last scenes, which serves as a critique of their bad fiction (the courtship plot), their violation of common sense and class, and their questioning of the eminently moral and profitable institution of marriage. Miller herself states that, "sensibility, sensitivity, 'extravagance'--so many code words for feminine in our culture that the attack is in fact tautological--are taken to be not merely inferior modalities of production but deviations from some obvious truth" (p. 46). I would go further and say that it is by looking at *Les Précieuses ridicules* as an attack on certain novels (written, as it happens, by women), that we find "deviations from some obvious truth"--a truth which moral, sanctioned by the church, the *docteurs de Sorbonne*, and the state, but also by the *Académie*. But Molière is never simple. His own plots, on the stage, follow Magdelon's and Cathos's rule that one does not begin with marriage, but rather ends with it after many adventures, of course.

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## Notes

[1]Rousseau makes a similar remark, that "jamais fille chaste n'a lu de romans."

[2]For another reading of desire and fiction in *La Princesse de Clèves* see Kamuf (67-96).

[3]Selma Zebouni, "Classical Episteme: or "Le Vrai peut quelquefois n'être pas vraisemblable," paper delivered at the Southeast Society for Seventeenth-Century French Studies (Athens, Georgia, September 1987).

[4]Philip Wolfe addresses a similar question but without the emphasis I place here on the use of poetic terms to judge moral issues, "Langage et vérité dans les *Provinciales* XI à XVI," *Actes de Tucson* (Tübingen: Biblio 17, 1984) 79-88.

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