Poisson's Portrayal of Women in *Les Femmes coquettes*

by
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Les Femmes coquettes, Poisson's only five-act play, appeared in 1671 and enjoyed a successful run at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Written sometime in 1670, it was first performed at Versailles, but never outside of the greater Parisi region. The genesis of the title itself points toward the author's intent *Les Pipeurs*, then changed to *Les Pipeurs ou les Femmes coquettes*, and, finally to *Les Femmes coquettes ou les Pipeurs*. As Poisson thought his play through, he decided or realized that it treated the domestic and social behavior of the *coquette* to a greater degree than the cheating of the gamblers.

Gambling is, of course, an important theme in the work, one which we have studied elsewhere in great detail. But our present intention is to look at the characters, especially the female characters and to analyze how they are portrayed by the author. It is this portrait that gives the play its intrinsic sociological value as a document, if not of Parisian society in the latter third of the seventeenth century, at least of the way in which the poet saw that society.

The picture we see is not too pretty, for although a comedy, the situations have become a bit more serious than in the *Précieuses ridicules*. Since *coquetterie* and *préciosité* are no longer fashionable, those manifestations of behavior seem like vices, complicated by avarice, envy and cheating in general. Lack of honesty prevails, extending from the gambling table to human relations. Egotism, self-interest and deceit control the actions of most of the characters. Love no longer exists and the characters even read Boccaccio!

One wonders whether Poisson meant to divide his characters into such neat behavioral groups. The women in the play have no redeeming qualities. Indeed, the title, *Les Femmes coquettes* covers them all with a generic description. As we look at the cast, Flavie, Ste-Hermine, Ste-Hélène and Aminthe, the names are followed by the word "coquette." We continue to search for more manifestations of feminine behavior and meet Aymée, the

maid, a spy, therefore dishonest, only interested in monetary gain. Our perusal leaves Dame Anne, the cook, in a traditional female role, too busy in the kitchen to have any awareness of life. The one time she ventures into the living quarters (IV) Flavio sends her back with an "Est-ce ici ta cuisine?" So much for the women.

The men, on the other hand, enjoy much more varied portrayals. True, Docile is too credulous and Colin too innocent, but Poisson also gives us the funny and cunning Crispin, the two cheats (dishonest, but good at it) Du Manoir and Du Bocage, and Flavio, the only sensitive one in the lot, much maligned, but who finally designs and executes a worthy revenge, or punishment. The main theme of the play is precisely this revenge or punishment, and how we look at it, for revenge might be justified by the abuse Flavio has suffered, but punishment would imply that he has the right as husband to expect and demand certain obedience from his wife.

A quick glance at the plot reveals its simplicity. Flavie, a *bourgeoise* with aspirations of nobility, wants to live a splendid life, surrounded by riches and luxury. Her expensive tastes are funded by Flavio, a very patient husband (one wonders why he has let her behave this way for so long) and Docile, a gullible uncle who gives her money for her many "charitable" projects. As the play unfolds, we learn how Flavio slowly unmasks his wife's real character and englightens Docile. The selfish Flavie, her shallow friends (the other *coquettes*) and the greedy Aymée are punished at the end in a way that only lovers of Paris could understand: they are banished to Italy! Once far from the corrupting influence of the capital, the husband supposedly will be able to re-assume control of the household.

The play becomes a window through which we watch some aspects of bourgeois life under Louis XIV. We question the accuracy in general terms: were all *bourgeoises* shallow and unhappy, all *bourgeois* easily duped and pushed around, all servants opportunists at that time? One can easily understand the desire to be better off financially, to be able to enjoy a better life, to be *à la mode*. One can sympathize with the temptations which the aristocratic Paris offered the lesser Parisians. As the eighteenth century approached, and money and finances

became more and more important in everyday life, people found faster, more effective ways to strike it rich, not all legal or honest. These are the qualities that make the play quasi historical, in the sense of general accuracy of observations.

Let us now look at the domestic side of society, at the behavior within the microcosm of Flavio's family, paying particular attention to the author's comments on love, marriage and the sexes. Flavio and Flavie has a mixed marriage, for he is Italian and she French, and to them, their different nationalities present a problem. She says "quoique Italien, il s'est fait à la mode" (I,1), indicating that Italy remains far from France culturally. He, on the other hand, cries "Je suis Italien, et me marie en France,/ Je prends femme à Paris, O la haute imprudence!" (I,5). We never really learn what is so bad about French women, other than the fact that they are not Italian.

But the couple's problems go deeper than national boundaries. As a coquette, Flavie does not, cannot lover her husband. Her "code of conduct" instructs her to despise all men, but husbands in particular. From the beginning of the play, this fact is emphasized, even in her reading taste. Flavie and Aymée have been reading the *Decameron*, a book, as most people know, where husbands do not fare well. Flavie believes that they deserve the treatment they get and enjoys the stories. She denies that Flavio loves her, although she hints that he once did: "Ce n'est plus le lien de l'amour qui le lie" (I,1), and to Aymée's suggestion that he still loves her for he suffers in silence, Flavie answers curtly, "Moi, je ne l'aime pas... Une femme peut-elle aimer son mari?" She refuses to speak further of her husband, but will gladly speak of her uncle because he represents a generous and limitless source of funds.

Poisson portrays Flavie as cunning and resourceful. She has told her uncle that her husband is a terrible being, suspicious, and cruel. Docile has been easily duped by her and thinks of her as a female St-Martin. He offers to speak to Flavio, to help straighten out the young man. Flavie cannot allow that conversation, so she explains that if Docile were to talk to Flavio, "Il vous dirait que j'ai tous les vices qu'il a/ Que je mange son bien, que je suis trop joueuse,/ Que je suis trop coquette, et trop impérieuse..."

Flavio, too, likes the uncle, and tries unsuccessfully to explain the marital situation: "j'aimais votre nièce, et l'ai trop bien traitée/ Mon trop d'amour pour elle est ce qui l'a gatée" (I,6). In his explanation, he uses the very same words as Flavie: "elle est trop coquette, et trop impérieuse,/ Donne de grands cadeaux, fait la grande joueuse." The uncle has been warned and does not believe him. It worries Flavio that others could take advantage of her inexperience as a gambler. Nevertheless, he has not changed his kind ways toward her: "L'air dont elle me traite, et sa grande dépense/ N'ont point encore pu lasser ma patience." When left alone, however, he says "Je pourrai me venger de ma femme aisément." The question returns: does Flavio want revenge or punishment? Does he have the right to either or both?

The reader realizes that Flavie has deceived her uncle and, for a while had deceived the husband. One feels sorry for the uncle and the husband, without stopping to analyze their weaknesses. Poisson has succeeded in making us judge Flavie as deceitful, dishonest and avaricious. Poisson has portrayed her that way and give evidence to support his portrait. We must now look at the reasons, so that we can at least justify her behavior in terms of her society. None of her actions results in injuries, death or serious offense. Her honor and that of her family has never been endangered. She is just trying to survive.

Flavie, Ste-Hermine, Ste-Hélène and Aminthe are trapped in a society that tempts them, but offers them nothing. They have married dull, middle-class men and are, therefore, caught between the freedom of the aristocracy and the freedom of the poor. They are close enough to see and hear the good life, but not touch it. Paris surrounds them with the luxury of the theatre, carriages, gambling, etc., while their husbands surround them with routine, predictable lives. All they want is a chance to experience what they think is the Parisian lifestyle.

They say they hate men because men control their source of funds. For Flavie it is either her husband or her uncle, both men, who can give her the money she needs to have some freedom. The women are not gamblers, but they give gambling parties because that is one way in which they can invite people for get-togethers. Gambling

to them is a social activity, not a means to power or riches. Money interests them only insofar as it can buy them what they need to belong in society, but they do not long to amass great fortunes. Without anyone to guide them as to proper social behavior, since their husbands do not show interest in this society, they are content to imitate what they perceive to be evidence of the "right life," e.g., the color of the horses or the style of the carriage. But these details cost money, and, since their husbands do not share their interests, the least they can do is pay for them. Fournell mentions that these *coquettes* "voient dans leurs maris les animaux les plus fâcheux de la création" (251).

Once husbands become simply a source of money, their importance emotionally is reduced considerably and love disappears in the world of the *coquette*. If husbands cannot provide what is needed to be *à la mode* (at the time of the play, it is gray horses, gambling parties, plays, dances and outdoor festivities), they are obsolete and ought to be replaced with young unattached *favoris*. The key word here is unattached, for that is the attraction of these men; were they attached, they would be husbands and the magic would be lost. These *favoris* will eventually become the infamous *chevaliers d'industrie*, idle, handsome young men without a *sou* to their name, members of the *petite noblesse* who prey on bored wives, especially if they are wealthy. Since they hold no job, they have lots of time to spend with the women who have lots of money to spend on them. The *coquettes* like these men because they do not depend on them financially; the husbands supply the money which the wives give to their companions.

Flavie and her three friends realize that social respect can be bought by entertaining the right people the right way. Their very reason for being is to eat, drink and live the right way. The "accepted" roles that society allows them as middle-class wives give them no satisfaction as human beings, for they remain totally dependent on their husbands. The women are looking for something to do, for an identity. They might be cruel at times, but they are not malicious. They lie to survive, so they have no remorse. They remain completely unaware of the consequences of their actions. Call it selfishness if one will, they do not consider themselves selfish at all. They honestly believe that it is their husbands who are selfishly unable to comprehend the social pressures of the times.

The men take no interest in their wives' concerns or worries. For the most part, they do not initialte action, but are content to react to their wives' behavior. Antoine Adame suggests that Poisson presents:

> non pas des types éternels d'humanité, mais les formes particulières que la vie contemporaine, que la réalité sociale de l'époque donnaient aux caractères traditionnels de la comédie. Flavie était froide, coquette, égoiste. Mais cette droideur, cette coquetterie, cet égoïsme offraient des traits particuliers qui la rattachait de façon précise à la société française de l'époque. (V, 279).

Poisson's picture portrays a kind of morality tainted lightly by immorality, as he does not try to hide the unpleasant traits of a cold society. In general, however, corruption confines itself to financial matters. *Bourgeois* values prevail, as Flavie's behavior never puts her honor in jeapardy. Marital infidelity is suspected many times, mostly as a ploy for quick humor by means of *double-entendre*. When reporting on how Flavie spent a typical day with the two gamblers, Colin says "Deux Monsieurs ont joué sur son lit tout le jour" (II,1). He eventually mumbles the name of the word game they were playing. And, of course, a detailed description of a *lavement* is *de rigueur*. In spite of Crispin's insistence to doubt Flavie's marital honesty, the husband is not too worried: "Ma femme est coquette, et... c'est tout" (III,1). Later he says: "Elle est impertinente, et coquette, et joueuse:/ Avec tous ces défauts, je la crois vertueuse" (III,7). Although Flavie lies to get the funds she needs, she does not for a moment consider compromising her reputation and takes offence when her virtue is questioned. Her virtue does give the husband the assurance that all he has to worry about is a depleted purse. Adam again comments on this portrait:

> On y voit, sur une intrigue qui pourrait être celle d'une farce, une peinture très poussée de la Parisienne à la mode, sans coeur, sans scrupules, intéressée, vaniteuse, mais prudente et froide, et qui ne fera pas la sottise d'avoir une aventure. (V, 416).

Their faithfulness must afford the husbands small consolation for the attacks to which they are subjected. They laugh because a friend has admitted being in love

with her husband for a full month; that is strange behavior, even if the man is handsome. Flavie explains: "Fût-ce un Ange/ Un Narcisse en beauté, je soutiendrai toujours/ Qu'on ne peut pas aimer son mari quinze jours." Ste Hermine adds "Quinze jours! que je me meure/ Si j'ai jamais aimé mon mari plus d'une heure" (III,3).

If Flavie excels at deceit, Flavio has mastered the art of spying unobserved. His last attempt in Act V has particular interest:

> Je veux voir ce qu'on voit rarement;
> Des femmes en débauche, et qui fort librement
> Se disent leurs secrets, et qui n'ont nulle honte
> De dire de bons mots, et de faire un bon conte.
> (V,1).

Why is Flavio, and therefore Poisson, so fascinated by feminine behavior? Why don't the men talk to the women if they want to know more about them and their intentions? Had there been any communication in the play, the hiding and the spying would not have been necessary. Let us not forget that poor uncle Docile went into hiding back in Act I, scene 5, and has just come out in Act V, scene 2, just in time to hide again!

When the *précieuses* get together alone (or so they thing), they talk about their husbands, how they do not need them, how they can manipulate them. Obviously, they do care about the men in their lives, but they resent the dependence that society creates for them. They envy the relative freedom enjoyed by their male relations, the fact that they can work, and earn a living, while all the women can do is amuse themselves and while away the time. Their comments bear repeating:

STE HELENE:

> Quand on prend un mari ce n'est pas pour l'aimer.

FLAVIE:

> Vraiment non, l'on le prend pour se faire estimer
> Dessous ce nom de femme, et faire nos affaires;
> Pour nous fournir enfin cent choses nécessaires,
> Et nous donner l'argent dont nous avons besoin. (V,1).

Poisson shares this view of women and marriage with his audience. There is no love in these marriages, at least not

very mature. The arrangement benefits the social status of the woman, who can call herself a wife, with whatever freedom that title grants. Husbands are a financial necessity, a necessary nuisance in order to enjoy a life of leisure. But perhaps there is some psychological insight in this farcical behavior, for when Ste Hélène adds: "Le plus méchant régal du monde est un mari," Flavie explains:

> C'est que loin de chercher les moyens de nous
> plaire
> Par quelques petits soins, ils sont tout le contraire.
> Faites à la traverse un ami là-dessus,
> Ils deviennent si sots qu'on ne les aimes plus. (V,5).

For a brief moment, we have a view into the soul of the *coquettes*. The problem lies with the husbands' lack of awareness of their wives' trapped condition within the social rules and their own domestic traditions.

Unfortunately, this light does not shine for long. Flavio will get the revenge he longs for, or is it punishment? For, after all, the husband can and will control his wife's destiny, taking her out of Paris as punishment for her actions, which he could have controlled at any time had he wished. The punishment seems to far exceed the crime and there is no guarantee of recovery or improvement, only forced obedience.

Poisson seems to tell us that women cannot be trusted, that they are shallow and selfish, that one can easily take advantage of them and that, therefore, they must be closely watched in order to protect them. Nowhere do the male characters really listen to the women or attempt to understand the reasons for their actions. Communication is not an issue because it was not relevant to their behavior at the time. To Poisson, his public and his reader, the women must be frozen in the immature, brittle world of the *coquette*, who is a descendent of these caricatures of *précieuses* immortalized by Molière.

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