Social and Legal Codes in *le Roman bourgeois*: The Signifier Gone Berserk

by
Dianne Guenin-Lelle

Le Roman bourgeois is a text which focuses on the act of storytelling even as the narrator, who is the central organizing force of the narrative, claims to present the lives and loves of the novel's "bourgeois" characters. The central interest of the narrative is less on the characters themselves than on the narrative devices and strategies in the text, which are emphasized, exaggerated, and commented upon by the narrator. The focus on the fictional framework of the text, as well as on the fiction-making process itself, would link *le Roman bourgeois* with what has been referred to as the "reflexive novel" or "metafiction."[1]

One of the strategies typical in *le Roman bourgeois*, as well as in the reflexive novel in general, is to question the representation of "reality" within the text. This is to say that the representation of physical "reality", literary codes, and even subjectivity are made problematic. The point of disruption is one way or another associated with the narrator, who systematically subverts accepted narrative strategies as he underscores the essential fictional nature of the work. The effect of this process is that the reader's willing suspension of disbelief can no longer be operative, since the focus of the narrative is not on the story told, but on the storytelling process itself (Boyd 7). The latter depends on the narrator who is both a fiction-maker and fictional construct, a force of cohesion and a voice of subversion.

As examples of the narrator's subversive strategy within Furetière's novel, we can examine the relationship between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, as well as the relationship between male and female characters within the bourgeoisie. From the very beginning of the work the qualifier "bourgeois" relegates a character to an inferior position, as he is seen to possess negative attributes; and thus he is distanced from the (implied) aristocratic model. This study, however, aims to demonstrate that the distinction between aristocracy and *bourgeoisie* is

ultimately erased, as the subversive play of the narrator effectively collapses of the codes and signs which define the *bourgeoisie*. This same process of destabilization through subversion is mirrored in the relationship between male and female characters in the text. At the outset the *bourgeois* society appears to be strictly patriarchal. Yet as will be seen further on in this study, the principal female characters successfully manipulate and subvert the patriarchy and, in the end, essentially become the writers of their own story.

A study of the patriarchy of Book One of *Le Roman bourgeois* can begin with the narrator's description of the principal male characters. One salient feature is that virtually they all are affiliated with the legal profession. Morally, they are disgraceful, presented by the narrator as deceitful, self-serving, avaricious sorts whose chief aim is to subvert the legal system, which they are supposed to uphold, for personal gain.[2] Vollichon, for instance, is presented as "un petit homme trapu, grisonnant, et qui était de même âge que sa calotte ... la chicane s'était emparée du corps de ce petit homme, de la manière que le démon se saisit du corps d'un possédé." His physical ugliness is mirrored by his moral standards: "Il avait une antipathie naturelle contre la vérité...." (*Le roman bourgeois* 41)

Another *bourgeois* is Bedout, suitor of Javotte and eventual husband of Lucrèce, who is totally devoid of personality and moral fiber: "Il était fils d'un marchand bonnetier qui était devenu fort riche à force d'épargner sa barbe." (85) "Il avait pourtant quelques bonnes qualités: car la chasteté et la sobriété étaient en lui en un souverain degré, et généralement toutes les vertus épargnantes." (86) This awkward character, educated in avarice, continues in the tradition of his father. Avarice with Bedout is just as important an attribute as it is with Vollichon, both being obsessed as they are with acquiring and holding on to wealth at whatever cost.

When a character is not obsessed with money in *Le Roman bourgeois*, he directs his efforts to transcending his social status through aping the aristocracy. Such a character is Nicodème, Javotte's first suitor: "C'était un de ces jeunes bourgeois qui, malgré leur naissance et leur éducation, veulent passer pour des gens du bel air, et qui croient, quand ils sont vêtus à la mode et qu'ils méprisent

ou raillent leur parenté, qu'ils ont acquis un grand degré d'élévation au dessus de leurs semblables. . . ." (34-35)[3]

The bourgeois characters' desire to acquire always more social prominence and wealth serves to distance them from their past condition and experience. Thus being *bourgeois* often means striving to become an aristocrat. According to the narrator, to rise above their situation requires that they try to break with their past. Denying their origin or their social conditioning, they attempt to model their behavior after "des gens de bel air." They want to imitate aristocracy by appearing as aristocrats, thus as different as possible from the bourgeoisie. An ideal situation for the *bourgeois* would then be to imitate the aristocracy effectively by, among other things, dressing "à la mode", and scorning one's past, therby linking appearance and essence so closely that one could pass for noblemen.[4] The signifier would be then the determinate of social standing.

Strangely, as the book unfolds, the distance separating the *bourgeoisie* from the aristocracy diminishes. When an aristocrat can be viewed as a model, he is presented as devoid of any trace of noble or positive traits. The Marquis is the only aristocrat in Book One who enjoys a primary role. He is considered ". . . un gentilhomme des mieux faits en France et un des plus spirituels." (66) His title, however, reflects more his wealth than his birthright: "Mais c'est peu de dire marquis, si on n'ajoute de quarante, de cinquante ou soixante mille livres de rente: car il y en a tant d'innconnus . . . de la nouvelle fabrique. . . ." (51) There are so many marquis that the aristocracy reverts to what the novel originally presents as a *bourgeois* practice, that of classifying an individual according to the amount of wealth he possesses. Thus, with the novel presenting evidence of what the two classes have in common, the aristocracy is seen as essentially like the *bourgeoisie.*

The Marquis' nobility of character is ambivalent. On one hand, he can be viewed as marking the superior position of the aristocracy in the novel. For example, being an aristocrat, the Marquis easily woos Lucrèce, who stands to profit much from such a union. However, the Marquis shows the same concern with appearances as does the *bourgeoisie*, taking great pains and going to great expense to be dressed in the latest fashion. He seems to uphold the idea that "clothes make the man," as the

exterior trappings of his class, wealth and social position, do not represent the "interior" nobility of character, heart, or mind. Since he is motivated by lust, he takes full advantage of his wealth and class and seduces Lucrèce. In fact he appears to be one of the most subversive characters in the novel: not only does he seduce Lucrèce with a marriage contract, but he gives her an exquisite ebony cabinet in which to store it, all the while keeping an extra key for himself; which allows him to steal back the contract and leave her, although she is pregnant. Having enjoyed Lucrèce, he quickly falls out of love with her, as he realizes what this relationship could cost him both socially and monetarily (Wood, q.v.). The speed at which the Marquis falls out of love with Lucrèce equals the speed at which Nicodème loses interest in Javotte once their engagement is officially terminated, as the narrator states: ". . . son amour . . .s'évanouit peu de temps après, car l'amour n'est pas opiniâtre dans une tête bourgeoise comme il l'est dans un coeur heroïque; l'attachement et la rupture se font communément et avec une grande facilité. . . ." (147) Thus, the class distinction between the Marquis and Nicodème disappears in this instance, as neither seem capable of a truly noble love. A "coeur heroïque" is conspicuously absent in the novel.

However, the Marquis can be viewed ironically as a model upon which the bourgeois social code relies, since as the narrator explains the *bourgeois* could only imitate the aristocrats in their faults and ridiculous ways. Thus it becomes evident by the end of Book One that the *bourgeois* characters are indeed capable of modeling themselves after the aristocracy, as both classes are motivated by an overriding concern for appearances, which therefore represent in and of themselves standards in society.

It is in Book Two that a total merging of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie takes place, in the form of the lawyer Belastre who on one hand claims to be an aristocrat, while on the other playing the role of a blundering, ridiculous character, something which would seem to identify him with the *bourgeoisie*. The narrator presents him thus: "Et pour vous faire connaître sa capacité, sachez qu'il était né en Perigord, cadet d'une maison qui était noble, à ce qu'il disait. . . ." (192) Belastre can be viewed then as a paradigm for the problem

of social class differentiation which has totally collapsed as this single character functions both as aristocrat and *bourgeois*.

A similar blurring of social distinctions occurs in the relationship between male and female characters in the novel. The role and function of women depends on the class structure which places men in a position of power over women, since men control the legal system, the family unit, and the distribution of wealth. Men are therefore in a position to manipulate and dominate women.

However, although officially women are relegated to a submissive role, they themselves effectively manipulate and subvert their social status so that by the end of the novel the three principle female characters have transcended their original situation. In Book One this is accomplished by Javotte and Lucrèce using their beauty as a means of escaping their initial condition. The following passage, a reference to Lucrèce, serves to demonstrate the point: "Toute sa fortune était fondée sur les conquêtes de ses yeux et de ses charmes ...." (46) Although women are relegated to the role of objects by men, their seduction of men motivates economic exchange as illustrated most clearly by the dowry. Once again society functions according to the signifier, as women's physical beauty is the major determinant of their place in society.

In Book One women are first presented in their role as objects, which coincides with the role of signifiers. The early scene in the Eglise des Carmes depicts the *quêteuses* who collect money from men for the church. However, the amount of money that a *quêteuse* collects does not reflect generosity to the church on the part of the man making the donation. Instead, it measures the beauty of the *quêteuse* herself. Thus, women are initially presented as a commodity whose worth is decided by men who control the wealth in society.

A woman's beauty also determines whom she may marry. For example Nicodème, is immediately overwhelmed by Javotte's beauty, falls in love and wants to marry her. The strict *Tarif des mariages*, which lists the acceptable pairing of couples in marriage based on the dowry of the woman and the profession of the man, contains one loophole for women possessing extraordinary

beauty (Alcover, q. v.). They are allowed to marry above their lot.

As expected the institution of marriage perpetuates the of women. In the novel, control subordination is passed from father to husband, who himself is chosen by the father. This occurs once again because women function as a commodity, an object of exchange. Vollichon, responsible for his daughter's dowry, finds Nicodème and later Bedout acceptable suitors because they are rich. They, in turn through their role of husband will control their families' fortune. Javotte, however, has no voice in the matter as she has been raised in a state of total ignorance of which her parents are proud. This makes her exceptionally pleasing to Bedout who wants a wife to be "... une fille fort jeune, car on la forme comme l'on veut avant qu'elle ait pris son pli." (90) As a *bourgeoise* daughter, Javotte's role is essentially to be silent in the face of parental authority since within the legal code silence represents agreement: "...nos lois portent en termes formels que qui ne dit mot semble consentir." (90)

However, as we have seen, social and legal systems, far from being absolute, are constantly subverted. The freedom allowed Javotte by her parents after her marriage contract is secured makes it possible for her ultimate escape from the confines of bourgeois society. Before a marriage contract is drawn up a daughter represents a liability for her father, who is responsible for maintaining her "virtue." After the marriage contract is signed, a father's responsibility is eased. Because of Javotte's beauty, she is allowed entry into a *salon* referred to as the *Académie bourgeoise*, where she becomes educated in literature and in love, a situation which parallels Agnès's education in *L'Ecole des femmes*. Her parents lose control of her as her education in the *Académie* grows and she consequently rebels. They react by confining her to a convent. but as the narrator states, "Elle tomba, comme on dit, de fièvre en chaud mal...." (154) Convents are presented as harboring numerous types of rebellious pensioners. There Javotte is able to spend time with her lover, Pancrace, something which would have been impossible if she were living with her parents. The convent ultimately allows for Javotte's final escape from bourgeois society, as she is kidnapped by Pancrace and vanishes from the novel. The reader is left with the

impression that she could no longer be contained by the limits which bourgeois society would impose on her.

The other principal female character of Book One, Lucrèce, also gains freedom through subverting the official purpose of the marriage contract. From the beginning she is unlike Javotte in that she has no parents, being cared for by an aunt and uncle. She therefore has fewer restrictions at home and consequently has developed a stronger sense of her power as a woman. She scorns her *bourgeois* condition and actively attempts to rise above it through marriage. This is ironic since the very strategy is itself seen as *bourgeois*. She effectuates her means of escape by becoming involved with the Marquis since "...elle ne voulait point engager son coeur qu'en établissant sa fortune." (66) She does not limit herself, however, to one suitor as she arranges to have two separate marriage contracts drawn up, one by the Marquis and the other by Nicodème, supposedly as a joke. The marriage contracts become interdependent, since Nicodème's contract, which was thought to be non-binding, becomes binding after the Marquis breaches his own. Lucrèce, who finds herself pregnant by the Marquis, ends by profiting greatly from Nicodème's handsome settlement.

Lucrèce continues to subvert the system as she, like Javotte, profits from her stay in convents. Her pregnancy is not discovered due to her changing convents at the appropriate time; since her move is to a supposedly nunnery, she appears ironically all the more pious and God-fearing. Lucrèce's hypocrisy is so hidden that she is totally convincing in her role as exemplary Christian. From first being a victim of the Marquis' ruse, she succeeds in profiting greatly from manipulating the very institutions which would have ruined her. By her class's social undermining and religious standards she ultimately gains prestige in the eyes of society, as ultimately religious life serves her as a vehicle for finding a husband. Ironically she marries Bedout, who claims to want a young, innocent wife whom he could totally control. Lucrèce is totally separated from her past as she completely enters her new role as wife.

In the same way that Belastre represents a synthesis of the aristocratic and *bourgeois* character, another principal character of Book Two, Collantine, appears androgynous as

she possesses both male and female traits. From the start she is naturally strong-willed, and, as opposed to Javotte, she successfully manipulates language. She is however guilty of vanity, which according to the narrator is a trademark of women in general. Unlike Javotte and Lucrèce, she is not deprived of an education; this, coupled with her physical, moral, and psychological make-up, leads her directly to becoming a *plaideuse*. Whereas Javotte and Lucrèce manifest their power of subversion covertly, Collantine makes a career out of it. She takes on clients, just as Vollichon does, with no consideration for ethics or the cause of justice. She acts under the compulsion to argue for argument's sake, and as such presents a legal system which functions through pure rhetoric, and is devoid of any other relevance.

In her relationship with her two suitors, Belastre and the frustrated author Charroselles, Collantine manifests the same compulsion for arguing. She states: "...le seul moyen de me plaire est de se défendre contre moi jusqu'à l'extrémité." (206) Just as Collantine insists on having the last spoken word, she shows herself to be a master of the written word which she enjoys flaunting: "Quand il (Charroselles) vit qu'il était impossible qu'il fût écouté, il tira un livret imprimé de sa poche, contenant une petite nouvelle, qu'il lui donna, à la charge qu'elle la lirait le soir. Elle ne parut point ingrate, et aussitôt elle lui donna un gros factum à pareille condition." (182) Charroselles shows himself as adept as Collantine at rhetorical play, which provides for their eventual marriage. Their relationship is fundamentally dialectical as the two opposing forces are essentially equal, thus perpetually locked in verbal combat. The novel ends on this note: "(Collantine et Charroselles) ont toujours plaidé et plaident encore, et plaideront tant qu'il plaira à Dieu de les laisser vivre." (255)

Thus the reader is left with the idea that the novel could go on forever effectively saying nothing. The *Roman bourgeois* puts in question the whole idea of what constitutes a novel as it offers no positive models. Social and legal systems are bound by the common thread of subversion which in turn deconstructs the systems themselves. In the same manner that subversion deconstructs social and legal systems, it also deconstructs language itself. All that is left by the end of the novel is rhetorical play gone berserk; language's "meaning," which

is to say the signified, has no place. Thus the *Roman bourgeois* can be understood as an example of the "arbitraire du signe" in that it presents a universe in which the signifier ultimately enjoys primacy.

Albion College

Notes

[1]Several critics explore this concept, in recent works notably Robert Alter, Michael Boyd, and Linda Hutcheon (q.v.)

[2]See Harriet Stone's perceptive study on the subject of subversion in her article entitled "Breach of Contract: Flight from Imitation in Book One of the *Roman bourgeois*" North American Society for Seventeenth-Century French Literature *Actes de Banff 1986*, pp. 389-399.

[3]Ulrich Döring that the bourgeoisie becomes a stranger to itself, and consequently, appears ridiculous.

[4]Catherine Belsey's concept of ideology appears pertinent because it posits ideology in both a real and imaginary relation to the world, "real in that it is the way in which people really live their relationships to the social relations which govern their conditions of existence, but imaginary in that it discourages a full understanding of these conditions of existence...."

Works cited or consulted

Alcover, Madeleine. "Furetière et la stratification sociale: le 'tarif des mariages'". *Papers on French Seventeenth-Century Literature*, Vol. VIII. No. 15 (Spring 1979): 75-93.

Alter, Robert. *Partial Magic: The Novel as Self-Conscious Genre*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

Belsey, Catherine. *Critical Practice.* (London: Methuen, 1985).

Boyd, Michael. *The Reflexive Novel: Fiction as Critic.* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1983).

Döring, Ulrich. "De l'autorité à l'autonomie: *Le roman bourgeois.*" *Actes de Banff* (Paris/Seattle/Tübingen: Biblio 17, 1987): 401-424.

Furetière, Antoine, Abbé de Chalivoy. *Le roman bourgeois* (Paris: Foli, 1981).

Hutcheon, Linda. *The Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 1980).

Stone, Harriet. "Breach of Contract: Flight From Imitation in Book One of *Le roman bourgeois.*" *Actes de Banff* (Paris/Seattle/Tübingen, 1987): 361-371.