

## TEACHING EARLY MODERN GENDER AND IDENTITY IN THE MODERN WORLD: THE EXAMPLE OF SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH THEATRE

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### Abstract

All students of literature must confront the divide that exists between the immediacy of their own experience and the remote implications of texts, long since confined to the page, that live on, absent their contemporary context. The constant challenge for any professor of a distant literature is to bridge this gap. This can be effectively accomplished by inviting students to identify a manageable point of entry into historical material as they contemplate a given problematic such as the modern constructs of gender and identity.

In my experience researching such concepts while trying to integrate their importance into 17<sup>th</sup>-century literature classes, I have found no better "entrée en matière" than that provided by theatre. Rather like an archeological record, the theatre of the "*grand siècle*" can be dynamically read by students as a roadmap to the constant reshaping of social and gender norms, to the multiple and raging moral polemics, and to the heightened atmosphere of socio-political and religious strife. Though the issues were frequently unresolved, such topoi were invariably represented (textually and sub-textually) upon the 17<sup>th</sup>-century stage. Plays offer students the opportunity to interact with an historical document in a way that no other can. By nature, no matter how ancient, they beg to be considered as living texts, sets of instructions for performance and interpretation. With particular reference to the exploration of gender and identity, I would like to discuss my own pedagogical approach and experiences promoting the notion that the study of theatre provides an ideal and tangible link to a microcosmic representation/commentary of its time

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All students of literature must confront the divide that exists between the immediacy of their own experience and the remote implications of literary texts long since confined to the printed page. If we are fortunate, literary documents endure the rigours of time and the implacable judgement of posterity,<sup>1</sup> but in their purest form they do so, *a priori*, still far removed and functionally disconnected from their original context. The constant challenge for any teacher of a distant literature is to bridge this axiomatic gap and to facilitate a meaningful and indelible exchange between, for instance, an undergraduate student living in the Age of Facebook and a text drawn from the Age of Absolutism.

Our goal is to establish an essentially phenomenological<sup>2</sup> link for our modern students so they can realize a creditable intellectual engagement through the study of subjects with which they can directly associate their unique, tangible, and lived experience. Our role is to help students identify a personally relevant and manageable point of entry into a vast hermeneutic or interpretive circle centered on authentic texts that will ultimately allow them to discover and build for themselves the contextual, cultural, and historical framework they require.<sup>3</sup> Given, therefore,

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<sup>1</sup> For a famous seventeenth-century aphorism on cultural posterity, see Nicolas Boileau, *Réflexions critiques sur Longin, VII, Oeuvres de M. Boileau Despréaux* (Genève: Fabri & Barrillot, 1716) tome 2. « Il n'y a en effet que l'approbation de la postérité qui puisse établir le vrai mérite des ouvrages. »

<sup>2</sup> This according to Edmund Husserl's philosophical approach that equates meaning with lived experience.

<sup>3</sup> For a brief introductory discussion on "hermeneutics", see Irena R. Makaryk, *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms* (Toronto: U. of T. Press, 1995), pp. 90-94.

the freedom to consider such modern and fluid constructs as “gender” and “identity”, we need to help them embark upon this process while remaining confident that their link to the text of the past is grounded firmly in the present. This must be achieved by much more than just a cursory textbook reading accompanied by a didactic lecture<sup>4</sup> as is all too frequently the case in our universities. Great literature should not simply be delivered *to* students but rather should be taught in a critical collaboration *with* them.

### **Whither the Pedagogical Advantage of Theatre?**

Of course, it can be argued that a critical collaboration is an intellectually laudable objective, but actually establishing a genuine connection for students between the past and the present comes only by coaxing the theoretical framework into the applied forum of the living and unpredictable classroom. The question is, therefore, how do we achieve this? I will examine the practicalities of just such a mediated process with particular reference to the exploration of the conjoined notions of gender and identity that are central to my own research on seventeenth-century French literature. To this end, my principle contention is that no better *entrée en matière* exists for the student of this period than that provided by dramaturgical texts – by the study of theatre. I will present some relevant aspects of my pedagogical approach in this regard supported by anecdotal experience, as well as a few observations and recommendations drawn from a course where the curricular aim was essentially to introduce Early Modern French literary studies to an audience of generally uninitiated advanced undergraduates at the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>-year level.

Interestingly enough, the problem of engagement for North American students was identified early on in 1935 by Professor I.W. Brock at Emory University who published an article in the internationally renowned *Modern Language Journal* addressing a perceived lack of interest in seventeenth-century French studies and a total inability on the part of the students to even accurately situate the period. It seems many of his students believed, quite erroneously, that the literature of the time was written in incomprehensible “Old French” which hadn’t been spoken since the fourteenth century! The specific problem Brock cited was that a survey course in Early Modern canonical works was, for the Emory degree in French, the prerequisite for all subsequent, modern and supposedly more desirable courses. His proposed solution was to set about *Vitalizing the Seventeenth Century*<sup>5</sup>, by seeking “an imaginative experience on the part of the learner which [would] allow him to look beyond the actual in to the past, and which [would] enable him to secure the unique advantages of vicarious experience.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, despite his innovative approach, the one condition he placed on the curriculum was that it be “restricted to non-dramatic works.”<sup>7</sup> The author fails to explain this constraint, though he lists this enormous textual restriction along with such administrative minutiae as the projected enrolment for the course. The off-handed nature of this dismissal suggests that the exclusion of theatre at this level was perfectly understandable at the time. Unfortunately, even 75 years later, many instructors find the integration of dramatic material too daunting in a survey course attended by L2 language learners. So many of us recognize the literary value, but cling to the notion that students will struggle with the rhetorical structures, linguistic esoterica, and dramaturgical devices that are somewhat unique to dramatic poetry of the seventeenth century.

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<sup>4</sup> “Didactic” here is meant in the traditional sense as unilaterally instructive and perceptive. Not to be confused with “didactics” as the mediated learning process championed by some over the last couple of decades particularly in the field of second language acquisition and the practiced study of cultural awareness. For an interesting discussion on this approach, see Sally Sieloff Magnan and François V. Tochon, “Reconsidering French Pedagogy: The Crucial Role of the Teacher and Teaching,” *The French Review*, 74:6 (2001), pp. 1092-1112.

<sup>5</sup> I.W. Brock, “Vitalizing the Seventeenth Century,” *The Modern Language Journal*, 19:4 (1935), pp. 241-246.

<sup>6</sup> Brock, p. 244.

<sup>7</sup> Brock, p. 241.

This need not continue to be the case as the theatre of the *grand siècle* can be dynamically read by students as a roadmap not only to the constant reshaping of social and gender norms, but also to the multiple and raging moral polemics, and to the heightened atmosphere of socio-political and religious strife. Such recurring topoi were invariably represented (textually and sub-textually) upon the seventeenth-century stage. Judiciously selected plays offer students the opportunity to interact with an authentic historical document in a way that no other can. By nature, no matter how far removed in time, published theatre begs to be considered as living texts, sets of instructions for performance and interpretation that were made explicitly public in an effort to reach across time and speak to subsequent generations. To study the best of them can provide an ideal and tangible link to a microcosmic representation and commentary of their time. The question remains as to how we may best exploit this vast potential for the benefit of the modern and potentially disinterested student.

### **A Classroom Introduction to Induction**

The practical case study I would like to present draws on a seminar course that I first created a few years ago. It was open to 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year students, most of whom were pursuing a major in French, but whose prior exposure to the French seventeenth-century was largely confined to a three or four week unit of a pre-revolutionary survey class. My course was entitled, “*Le Théâtre français du dix-septième siècle: une vérité illusoire?*” I translated this for curricular approval as, “Seventeenth-century French Theatre: Truth Wrapped in Illusion?” The interrogative nature of the title was designed to have multi-dimensional meaning. First, it set a tone of inquiry for the common approach we would take as we studied a succession of plays representing a logical progression through the creatively and socially important moments of the century. As the course was conducted entirely in French with non-native speakers, I limited the curriculum to a manageable handful of plays including Corneille’s *Illusion comique* (1636), Molière’s *L’Ecole des femmes* (1662) and *Don Juan* (1665), Racine’s *Britannicus* (1669), and Antoine de Montfleury’s relatively unknown *La femme juge et partie* (1669). All were chosen because they lent themselves particularly well to such key modern-day issues as gender individuation (as we’ll see briefly in *La femme juge et partie*) along with questions of social, moral and gendered identity and responsibility. As I introduced the material and amplified the syllabus on the first day, I explored with the students what methodological motivation the title of the course might inspire in them. I explained that my intention was not only that they employ some healthy Cartesian scepticism in their reading. It was also to urge them to determine for themselves whether or not they could find elements of humanistic truths in their own interpretations of these dramatic primary texts which trade, by definition, in the problematical economies of illusion, disguise, and equivocation.

I also asked the students to start considering how the notions of identity and gender (to be defined and “constructed” together as the course progressed) may be particularly useful as they meet each character along this journey toward inductively formulating a unique understanding of the socio-cultural fabric of seventeenth-century France. While still establishing the course framework, we discussed what they would like to achieve once they had absorbed the course outline and had a sense of the materials that awaited them. Their goals (condensed here but unprompted) were simply stated as the following:

- Learn about seventeenth-century France and French literature
- Successfully read all of the plays in the curriculum, hopefully understanding a little more with each new text
- Come to understand why the theatre of a particular period is important enough to be the subject of an entire course
- Learn something of production values at the time
- Do well in the course as the grade counts towards the major degree requirements (an inescapable objective...)

In response, I indicated that for a seminar class to function smoothly and for these goals to be realized, it is important to establish a set of principles of investigation that would govern our close textual analysis and serve as a framework on which to organize information and

observations garnered through each reading and interpretive exercise. Before we could agree on these principles, I had, of course, to share with them my own pedagogical bias which would naturally influence the general direction of the class.

The methodology I advocate in this type of course is less Socratic on my part and more demanding of analysis and inductive interpretation on the part of each student. I certainly acknowledge the place of a strong inquisitive tradition wherein the teacher will tease knowledge from the students as they, in turn, consciously try to absorb and reflect back the “meaning” of the text. However, I find it much more effective to place the onus of inquiry on the students so that they may engage immediately with the play. In fact, I go one step further and ask them to abandon pre-conceived strategies for broaching any text. Instead, I try to convince them to view themselves not as disconnected readers but as silent participants in the dialogues and conversations of the play. If they embrace this suggestion, such a paradigmatic and cognitive shift can bring about an immediate bond between the student and the now communicative text. To facilitate this idea and lend it some contemporary legitimacy, I acquaint them with the image of an actual seventeenth-century theatre where, if the majority of spectators sat facing the actors as we do today, dozens more sat upon the stage itself<sup>8</sup> as if to serve as intermediaries between the general public and the privileged players. Perhaps they bridged the gap between the real lives of the audience out front and the fantastical creations of playwrights and actors. Perhaps they too were silent interlocutors seeking to participate, just like us.

While the students were thus prepared to be complicit in the experience of the selected plays, we still had to negotiate the frame of reference or principles of investigation that would guide our reading and mediate the association between modern, meaningful issues and the plots, persons, and problems of the play. Brainstorming was again the democratic discussion technique of choice, yielding just some of the following theoretical questions that students agreed to bear in mind as they effected their interaction with each play:

- What might have motivated the playwright?
- Does each character bear certain traits, mannerisms, personal philosophies that may prove representative/critical of a certain social, political, or gendered type?
- How does each character contribute to your notion of identity? Can you identify with or recognize character types from your own life?
- What might we extrapolate from the various scenarios about norms and attitudes of the day?
- How is gender and socio-economic position represented? Is it meaningful? Have attitudes changed?
- Can you identify cause for controversy? If so, why?
- How do you view the quality of the play? Does the text betray insight on the part of the playwright that would hold up today?
- Can you imagine the production values of the play? Sets, costumes, lighting, delivery? Do the *indications scéniques* provide adequate information or are they lacking for some reason? Needless to say, this is not an exhaustive list, but it demonstrates the thought processes initiated at the beginning of the course, upon which they would gradually build their understanding from within the texts.

### **Putting Theory into Practice**

Most importantly, the students were responsible for posing these questions that would inform their interaction with each text. The conditions of presentation for each play in this course varied. For *L'école des femmes*, we watched a filmed performance, for *Britannicus*, we contemplated important secondary sources in parallel with the text itself. With *Don Juan*, we read substantial portions aloud as though “workshopping” this prose play before production. For the very first and perhaps the most internally informative text, Corneille’s *illusion comique*, I asked them to prepare the first reading of the play in the absence of any historical or contextual

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<sup>8</sup> Barbara G. Mittman, “Make Way for the Mailman!: Spectators on the Stage in Paris Theatres of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *Theatre Survey*, 22 (1981), pp. 1-15.

background. Theoretically, this was an exercise in what Ursula Kelly has defined as unadulterated “critical literacy”.<sup>9</sup> Playing on her concept, Larry Riggs has explained the practice as, “seeing reading itself as an issue; it is accepting responsibility for interpretation as an ethical act, which engages the reader as a contingent, motivated being.”<sup>10</sup>

This approach seemed particularly appropriate, as the students would learn to orient themselves in this fundamental act of reading while integrating a play that is completely consumed with the theory and mechanics of being a play. *L'illusion comique* is constructed as a series of plays within plays where the whole can be viewed as a multi-layered treatise on the possibility that the illusory nature of drama may be as true or indeed false as the intricacies of human existence itself. The students responded to the challenge of Corneille’s work with great creativity and they naturally gravitated to the issue of identity. Relative to Corneille’s manipulation of multiple personalities with many of the characters, the students began to construct a definition of identity as being mutable, though not intangible. They were initially intent upon peeling back the layers and revealing a “real”, black-and-white persona for each player. Soon, however, they convinced one another that reductive reasoning would be far too simplistic if they were attempting to decipher identities in the modern world, so they began to adopt a less normative and more circumspect view of what Corneille may have been attempting to communicate at the time.

With each play, we discussed what the students found most revealing and we slowly extrapolated a contextual vision of the century that we then confirmed or realigned through the more conventional reading of secondary sources and some traditional seminar instruction. However, an integral element of the course, from beginning to end, was a personal journal that each student kept where they recorded their observations, feelings, and instincts. It was through this journal, where no comment could be construed as “wrong”, that they maintained a visceral connection and an ongoing conversation, not *about*, but *with* each play. Ultimately, if the students proved sufficiently engaged, their journals served as a sincere, if rudimentary conduit to the seventeenth-century itself.

With *l'Ecole des femmes* came, quite predictably, a lively discussion on gender roles, marriage, patriarchy, social deviance, and the fiery origins of feminism. What seemed to fascinate students the most was their inability to pin down, with any conviction, Molière’s own opinion of women, particularly once they coupled it with their reading of *Don Juan*. Needless to say such a realization contributed ultimately to a nuanced understanding of modern difficulties when defining gender roles, identity, and bias. As we progressed through the curriculum, some of the students expressed excitement at the prospect of experiencing another play and adding another piece to what they viewed as a cultural puzzle. A few, however, were clearly made anxious by the changeable nature of the game. Though they were all becoming more comfortable with the analytical framework we had devised and tested, each play manifestly reflected a slightly different time and largely different attitudes. Each playwright had a unique style and each genre required a fresh perspective.

Ultimately, this anxiety on the part of a few students translated into a crucial awareness, for all of us, that these plays, chosen in this fashion, and organized in this order could be construed as reflecting a general cultural anxiety.<sup>11</sup> At this juncture, I naturally reinforced this intuitive assessment by providing excerpts of theoretical texts from the seventeenth century that expose the contentious social atmosphere within which these playwrights were stating their own views. This marked a moment of triumph in class as the students recognized the possibility of the much sought after intrinsic and experiential link with the subjects they were studying. Quite

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<sup>9</sup> As explained in Larry Riggs, “Teaching the Seventeenth Century: Modernity, Motives, and Further Reflections on Critical Literacy,” *Cahiers du dix-septième*, XII:2 (2009), p. 71.

<sup>10</sup> Riggs, p. 71.

<sup>11</sup> For a seminal discussion of cultural anxiety with particular reference to gender, see Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

unpredictably, this moment of realization prepared them admirably for the final challenge of the course.

### **The Final Challenge and Reward**

I selected the last play of the semester to serve the dual and antithetical purpose of both reward and test. When Antoine de Montfleury's tragicomedy, *La femme juge et partie* was first performed in 1669, it was very popular and favourably reviewed, yet it had an air of controversy about it. Now, however, it is completely unfamiliar to all but a small group of specialist *dix-septiémistes*. Unlike all of the other examples we had enjoyed during the course, this play was very far removed from the so-called canon of literary masterpieces,<sup>12</sup> though its form and themes made it a strong choice to conclude our journey. It also happens to form an integral part of my own research program because the central character is a woman forced to cross-dress and seek justice when she is abandoned for dead by an overbearing husband who wrongly believes she was unfaithful. The implications of the plot for the study of gender and identity are extremely rich.

Consequently, I presented this play to my students as an opportunity for them to exploit their newly developed critical skills and join me in a genuinely collaborative research effort. There is no modern edition of the play, so I provided them with photocopies of the entire text that I had acquired from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Suddenly, they found themselves in the presence of a copy of the first published edition of a play that relatively few people had read over the last 300 years. The script was strange and difficult to read, the presence of the long "s" and some dated spelling forced them to pause much more frequently as they passed from scene to scene. The physical aspect of the book was unfamiliar and, most importantly, there were no annotations to influence their understanding. The students were essentially alone with this distant text, as few ancillary materials exist. It was up to them to summon the contextual and theoretical framework that they had erected and prove their mettle. With this play, they would encounter the most ambiguous depiction of gender yet and it would coincide with a philosophical meditation on identity contained within the play itself. In their journals, most students concluded that their evolving definitions of these modern constructs were rich, but would, of necessity, remain unresolved. A few decided that this was particularly appropriate as the same was true of their twenty-first-century understanding of the theories of gender and identity.

As the female protagonist of *La femme juge et partie* approaches the dénouement of the play, Montfleury combines the issues of gender and identity for the students as he as her articulate a strong if wistful defense of the traditional role of women while at the same time disguised as a male judge poised to condemn her unwitting husband to death for orchestrating her own supposed murder. The intimate portrait of a socially and sexually conflicted woman forced to choose between violence and mercy resonated with the whole class. In many ways, the students' empathy for the character proved for them conclusively that it is not just the play, but rather our innate understanding of human nature which can ultimately provide the key to bridging that fundamental gap between their present-day experiences and the problematics of a distant literary past.

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<sup>12</sup> Riggs, p. 71. The author discusses the notion that canon texts can cause an impediment to critical reading.

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