Motivation and Interpretation in Several Seventeenth-Century French Literary Works

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Abstract : Focusing on Molière, Racine, and Madame de Lafayette, I will identify passages that can be *interpreted* as lessons in interpretation, as showing the role of motives in the deployment and reception of signs and dramatizing the *responsibility* to interpret, as well as the consequences of shirking that duty. Some characters in these works either assume or try to impose on communication a stability of meaning that is desirable only in relation to their own unavowed motivations.

Keywords: desire – motive – interpretation – perspective – misreading

The seventeenth century has been referred to as the Epoch of Abstraction and the Age of Representations (Sherrard 49; de Certeau 180). Epistemological anxiety and ambivalence about the increasingly pervasive mediations of civilization were endemic to early modernity and are discernible in much seventeenth-century French literature (Watson 5). Louis XIV's construction and exploitation of Versailles was an unprecedentedly effective synthesis of symbolism and power. It was intended as an irresistible architectural statement and an inescapable politico/social enclosure. The will of a man had created an artificial world in which others were obliged to live (for the best articulation I know of the relation between Louis XIV's desire for power and his management of representations, see Marin 184). Louis XIV's absolutist ambition to see, to know, and to control all in his realm is an admirable archetype of the modern transcendent Subject and a disastrous model for the individual in society. Modeled on visual perspective in painting, which provided the illusion of transparent, accurately disclosed space and of a definitive, unitary View, Versailles is a figure for the replacement of reality by representation.

James F. Gaines characterizes French early modernity as "an age of Absolutism that was trying to free itself from the contingencies of ordinary life" (47). I myself have long argued that much seventeenth-century literature explores the temptations and disastrous consequences of absolutist ambitions, in personal relations as well as on the larger scale. Gaines persuasively elucidates the key role of skeptical thought, most

notably Montaigne's, in early modern French literature, and particularly in that of Molière. Montaigne makes use of skeptical thought in his relentless demolition of human *présomption*. The essayist calls presumption, or arrogant pretense, the fundamental human malady, and he associates it with forms of pride and excess ranging from epistemological certainty to imperialism and, perhaps most importantly to Montaigne, religious fanaticism.

The relation between reality and representation was in question, as new forms of notation and discourse expressed a desire to manipulate the world for human purposes. The issue of sincerity and the problematical relation between *être* and *paraître*, as well as the seemingly powerful stabilizing potential of visual perspective and of proto-objective epistemology, were ubiquitous preoccupations in social and literary worlds awash in unstable signs and newly ambiguous identities (see especially Bordo, Cascardi, and Gergen). Mechanically reproduced text, which separated textual production from the body and its reception from the voice, encouraged textual authoritarianism--the illusion of a single definitive meaning--even as private, individual reading inevitably led to multiple ones (Easthope 33). The French moralists, it can be argued, evoked a world saturated with motives, ambiguities, and delusions of epistemological grandeur. In *L'invention du progrès: aux origines de la pensée totalitaire (1680-1730)*, Frédéric Rouvillois elucidates this late-seventeenth-century debate about the power and dangers of the new epistemology and the accompanying ideology of progress. The desire for power and control as an antidote for fear is dramatized in the works I will look at here. It provides an illusion of ontological security which, when shattered, reveals anguished insecurity. The reaction to lack of power and control is, typically, jealousy and/or rage. The would-be transcendent Subject resists the consciousness of his/her own contingency, a consciousness that comes, as Kaja Silverman argues, from the recognition that the Voyeur is, in fact, on view (164). Pierre Force makes an analogous point when he speaks of the dramatic portrayal of vision as a relationship of exchange, rather than a medium of comprehensive knowledge (37).

In this context, interpretation became a particularly deep concern. I will argue that a number of seventeenth-century French works anticipate postmodern and post-structuralist thinking by narrating or dramatizing the critical role of motives – those of both the producers and the receivers of language – in the process of interpretation. Because there is no unmotivated communication, there is no escape from interpretation. Interpretation which takes account of motives and circumstances is both a necessity and a responsibility. The works I will look at – *interpret*--here foreground the issue of interpretation and emphasize the consequences of ignoring or trying to escape the responsibility to interpret and the contingency of all interpretations. Focusing on Molière, Racine, and Madame de Lafayette, I will identify passages that can be *interpreted* as lessons in interpretation, as showing the role of motives in the deployment and reception of signs and dramatizing the *responsibility* to interpret, as well as the consequences of shirking that duty. I will be endeavoring to fulfill my own duty to

interpret these works, rather than pretend to read them definitively. Some characters in these works either assume or try to impose on communication a stability of meaning that is desirable only in relation to their own unacknowledged motivations.

The desire for transparency in others is a desire for a control and security that can be achieved only by exercising abusive power. In fact, even the exercise of such power ultimately fails to provide that security. Thus, the refusal to accept one's immersion in a world of contingent communication is symptomatic of a desire for power over meanings and relationships. Literature and literary criticism are both social activities. Mechele Leon, in her recent study of Molière, admirably shows the role of motives in literary interpretation. Both literature and criticism are made up of performative interactions. Interpretation is always motivated, thus it must not claim to be objective; it is always a relationship between at least two subjectivities. Interpretation should, therefore, not pretend to eliminate ambiguities. It should enrich relations between producer and interpreter; it must reject what Daniel Cottom calls the "imaginary law" permitting certainty. Cottom argues that modern culture creates "truth" by rationalizing forms of power (5) and that the "throne" of culture is always empty (60). We might say that the transcendent Subject is an optical illusion permitted by the metaphysics of perspective.

My enterprise here has implications that go beyond the realm of literary criticism: only the mutual acceptance of motives and desires, combined with concerted efforts at mutual accommodation, can free our own, real-world communication and interpretation from abusive, authoritarian attempts to impose singular meanings. To demand that others be fully, definitively legible is to wish for abusive power. It is to install the myth of a *cognitive utopia*, of a stable, all-seeing Subject and an inert, transparent Object, at the heart of human relations. The myth of the transcendent Subject and the fully disclosed Object is one possible response--and it has long been the predominant one--to the epistemological uncertainties that erupted in early modernity (see especially Cascardi). The quest for a knowledge permitting control has been a central temptation of the dominant modern culture. In an excellent forthcoming article, Ralph Albanese shows that, in *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, Monsieur Jourdain is fundamentally oblivious to motive. He, too, believes in a kind of cognitive utopia; this explains his naïve, literalistic conception of language. His ambition compels him to believe that there is a one-to-one relation between sign and essence, *être* and *paraître*.

To be tempted by definitive knowledge and by definitive reading is to wish for hegemonic power. In my interpretation, the works I will look at represent an alternative to that dominant cultural disposition. I will suggest that what J. P. Singh Uberoi calls the "other mind of Europe" is represented by these writers. Uberoi locates the victory of the "official" version of modernity in the mid-seventeenth century (21).

The modern epistemology that was being established during the seventeenth century tended to regard truth as what is confessed under duress or discovered through a process of coercion, spying, or dissection. This process is, in effect, a penetration.

In fact, Sir Francis Bacon evoked the efficacy of his new science by using metaphors based on torture (Merchant 168; Sheldrake 40). René Descartes moved to the Netherlands partly in order to be able to perform dissections as part of his research. The Object of definitive knowledge must be either dead or deprived of the ability to resist penetration by the Subject. Julie Robin Solomon shows that Bacon's foundational writings on natural philosophy, which came to be called science, are to be understood in the context of his functions and ambitions as Lord Chancellor to the absolutist James I (xvi). She confirms Morris Berman's contention that the new epistemology is a practical and ideological aspect of the social and economic processes of emerging capitalism (150). According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Bacon was important in popularizing the new science and defining its role as a search for power to dominate over nature and not only to understand it. In him can be found the genesis of that aspect of modern science which is concerned not so much with understanding the order of nature as with dominating over it" (135). Jeremy Rifkin makes a similar point, showing that Bacon saw perspective as a powerful model and tool for harnessing and remaking nature (99). In short, modern "objectivity" is saturated in motives, and is therefore a contingent interpretive point of view, not a means of achieving definitive knowledge.

The putative Subject of the dominant, definitive gaze is male, and its Object, female. The first would-be reader of definitive truths about others, and especially about a woman, that I will consider here is Molière's Alceste, in *Le Misanthrope*. Alceste's fear of woman, of his own emotions, and of exchange leads him to demand a transparent, legible Célimène. Max Vernet suggests, in his seminal *Molière: côté jardin, côté cour*, that Molière's comedies could be read as critiques of emerging modern culture. Alceste is an admirably evocative example of the modern would-be transcendent Subject. His demand that others be perfectly sincere reflects the modern conception of knowledge as clarity and control. Others must be definitively legible. Alceste places the abstraction, sincerity, above and outside the social context in which all communication actually occurs. He does that in order to be always able to condemn real communication as insincere, and thus to assert his superiority. He will be the knowing Subject, above and separate from his objects. In fact, however, Alceste's pontifications about sincerity *are* social communications, and they are motivated by his desire for control and distinction and by his fear of loss. This fear and desire are precisely what make Alceste a social being. Sincerity can only be a characteristic of social communication, and therefore it cannot be absolute.

Le Misanthrope is filled with iterations of the lesson about interpretation; these are lessons that Alceste steadfastly ignores. The central instance is the case of Célimène's letter, which is shown to Alceste between Acts III and IV. When he takes a letter allegedly written by Célimène to be clear evidence of her perfidy, Alceste admirably illustrates the poststructuralist idea that the ego is a device constructed for the purpose of *misreading* (see especially Silverman 13, 21).

Silverman argues that the felt need for a unified, coherent ego is a culturally imposed and inevitably tragic delusion. Molière demonstrates that this delusion can also be quintessentially comic.

Alceste's possession of this letter, allegedly written by Célimène to one of his rivals for her love, enables him to think that he has definitive, textual evidence of Célimène's betrayal. He must assume that the text can have only one reading, and thus that interpretation is not an issue. In order to savor this opportunity to unleash his rhetoric of wronged lover, in which he assigns himself the role of Grand Inquisitor, and to retire to a *désert* where the ambiguities of communication will no longer torture him, Alceste must ignore several layers of motive. He must not reflect on the fact that it is Arsinoé, Célimène's rival for *his* love, who has given him the letter. He must ignore the possibility that, *if* she wrote it, Célimène was merely practicing the kind of socially useful flattery – the strategic insincerity – which he has been denouncing. He must also, and most critically, not think about the significance of his own desire to have just this kind of "evidence": "Je cherchais le malheur qu'ont rencontré mes yeux," he says, revealingly (v. 1292). Here, I am always reminded of Peggy Phelan's brilliant evocation of the epistemological trap set by the dream of masterful subjectivity: "The widespread belief in the possibility of understanding has committed us, however unwittingly, to a conventional narrative of betrayal, disappointment, and rage." The illusion of a definitive reading, of knowledge that will constitute us as transcendent Subjects and others as completely comprehensible objects, is inevitably shattered. *When* it is shattered, we feel painfully the loss of what we never had, and we tend to blame the loss on some perversity in or betrayal by the one we hoped to know and control.

Alceste's response could not be better described or explained than by Phelan's sentence. His sense of betrayal, his disappointment, and his rage are his response to the opportunities for *real* communication--a mutually respectful exchange--that he systematically rejects in favor of his invariable performance. His demand that others be transparent objects of his knowing judgment merely objectifies *him*: he is, always, and only, *le misanthrope*. Alceste has been seduced by Arsinoé's offer of evidence that will reveal Célimène fully illuminated (v. 1125-32). This satisfies Alceste's desire that his doubts be dispelled. After all, for him, "les doutes sont fâcheux plus que toute autre chose" (v. 1124); doubt, which is in reality inescapable, is intolerable to Alceste. The idea of a perfect illumination, or clarity, that will conquer doubt could hardly more effectively evoke the epistemology of objectivity and certainty promised by Descartes.

Just before Alceste confronts Célimène and begins his inquisitorial tirade, Eliante asks Alceste whether he is sure of his evidence (v. 1231), and Philinte tries to remind him that letters are subject to misreading (v. 1241-1242). Alceste, who accepts no responsibility for himself as a motivated interpreter, ignores the warnings. He seizes on written words because they seem to exist outside and above the contingent world of oral communication. For Alceste, this is not an opportunity for interpretation that acknowledges the motives of both reader and writer; it is the shameful, involuntary

revelation/confession that he has been looking for. He certainly cannot allow it to launch a real communicative relationship with Célimène.

Molière demolishes the Subject/Object structure by making it clear that communication is always co-performance. He also shows that the will to read others definitively is inseparable from a need to be *seen* favorably. Alceste, in his refusal to leave Célimène's house, and in his endlessly reiterated threats to do so, is the clearest example of this combination of will and need, which Phelan calls "the symmetrical drive of spectatorship" (21). Force's *Molière ou le prix des choses* is useful here. Force analyzes both the illusion of spectatorship in Molière and the fact that vision is inescapably an exchange (see especially 52). So, however rigidly it may seem to be structured, a relationship expresses interdependence. Alceste's misanthropy is a reaction to others' refusal to serve as passive, flattering mirrors of his desired self-image. Moreover, Célimène's satirical portraits, one of whose subjects/objects is Alceste himself, are a disaster for him because they show that she is another competitive gaze, not an affirming mirror. Célimène's maddeningly resistant otherness and her subjectivity are expressed by her portraits. Alceste tries to reduce Célimène to the derivative fixedness of an image, or a text. She does just that to him. He is unable to incorporate her subjectivity into his own. If Célimène's letter is evidence of anything, it is that life is an inescapable interpretive adventure.

In Racine's tragedies, particularly in *Andromaque* and *Phèdre*, the main characters try to alter or misread the stories of which they are products and of which their own motives are among the driving forces. Roland Racevskis emphasizes that the characters in *Andromaque* are struggling to discern the truth and establish coherent identities from within a liminal zone: the aftermath of the Trojan War (Generational 63). It might be said that the fact of inhabiting transitional zones always bedevils interpretation and is part of what makes definitive readings impossible. Things are always in transition. Racevskis's 2008 book, *Tragic Passages: Jean Racine's Art of the Threshold*, elaborates further Racine's placing of his characters between states of being. Again, this could apply to all characters -- and to all real persons – who are striving to establish a coherent, powerful identity. In fact, the lack of a truly cogent ego, and the ego's desire for cogency, underlie the absolutist temptation.

Andromaque begins with Oreste reading, or, rather *misreading*, signs. He is sure that the presence of his good friend, Pylade, is evidence that his destiny will now take a positive turn: the play begins with the affirmation, "Oui" (I.1). Oreste is the willing dupe of the myth of transparent meanings, even as he acknowledges that he has a history of misinterpreting his own motives: "Mais admire avec moi le sort, dont la poursuite / Me fit courir alors au piège que j'évite" (I.1). He has misread his passion: "Je fis croire et je crus ma victoire certaine;/Je pris tous mes transports pour des transports de haine" (I.1). He has thus been fooled by his own dissimulation. It could not be stated more clearly that the self is not coherent: Oreste has not been able to "read" himself accurately.

Oreste's optimistic interpretation of Pylade's presence is made even more doubtful by the hypocritical duplicity of Oreste's mission: he is pretending to represent the Greeks' demand that Pyrrhus fulfill his promise to marry Hermione and that he stop protecting Astyanax, but Oreste's real intention is to take Hermione away with him. Oreste is trying to impose a positive "spin" on his presence in a place where he has come in order to deceive and betray. He is secretly delighted by the delay that humiliates Hermione and enrages her father, Ménélas: "Parmi les déplaisirs où son âme se noie, / Il s'élève en la mienne une secrète joie" (I.1). Lost in this labyrinth of motives, Oreste mistakes his own hypocritical desire for a guiding thread, and he assumes that Hermione will gladly leave with him. Pylade, at the end of the play's opening scene, advises Oreste to play out his dishonest *ambassade* in order to get what he wants: "Plus on les veut brouiller, plus on va les unir. / Pressez: demandez tout, pour ne rien obtenir" (I.1). Racine echoes here the lesson we have seen in Molière: the desiring ego is a device for misreading, and it begins by ignoring the role of its own motives in blinding it to the ironies and ambiguities that bedevil all communication. Even as he works to obscure his own motives, Oreste needs to believe in the transparency of signs. Also, like Alceste, he imagines that a woman will be the passive Object of his desire.

In my reading, *Andromaque* also calls attention to another level of interpretation: the subconscious themes that inhere in language and that encode truths about motive that are too often ignored. In this play, the clichés of the seventeenth-century jargon of gallantry – *flamme, fers, esclave* – evoke war, which is the real past and the preoccupation that weigh on the characters, and especially on Andromaque, herself. When Pyrrhus speaks to her of his flame, she sees and feels the burning of Troy and the slaughter of her family, for which Pyrrhus was responsible. Like Alceste's imitation of a Grand Inquisitor, Pyrrhus's rhetoric can only reveal his lust for power and control. Pyrrhus's figurative language *literally* has different meanings for him and for Andromaque. Racine's tragic vision sees his characters as caught, not only in a maelstrom of motives, but also in the paradox of a language that alienates the object of their desire even as they try to use it as a vehicle of that desire. A psychoanalytic critic might call this the eternal return--or the eternal presence--of the repressed. Communication is an unavoidably risky enterprise. Both production and reception of language are inseparable from motives.

In *Phèdre*, too, we find characters who seek to know the truth and establish coherent identities while hiding or ignoring part of that truth. Like *Andromaque*, *Phèdre* begins with what appears to be an optimistic assertion: "Le dessein en est pris" says Hippolyte to Théramène (I.1). Like Oreste, Hippolyte is trying to disguise his motives: he purports to be launching a mission to *find* his father, Thésée, but his real purpose is to *flee* from himself. He is also fleeing from his role in the story of which Thésée's adventures are only a part. He is desperate to preserve a myth of himself that negates the negative part, in him, of his father's legacy. Hippolyte has taken himself to be invulnerable to the unbridled erotic desire that has marred his father's heroism.

Now, he finds himself in love, and thus in danger of being no better than Thésée. Here, again, we have a character who, like Oreste, would like to escape the weight of the past by editing the story to leave out the paradoxes and betrayals.

Ironically, Phèdre, the woman whose desire for Hippolyte is the secret at the heart of the play, and the horror that will drive Hippolyte to his death--though it can be argued that the tragedy is caused by Hippolyte's own desire, horrifying because it has been denied or repressed/misread--shares Hippolyte's wish for a purer Thésée. In Act II, scene 5, Phèdre's declaration of her love for Hippolyte takes the form of a dreamlike lyrical vision of him as a young, pure Thésée. She, too, would like to change her own story by editing that of Thésée; for her, as for Hippolyte himself, the son has represented that possibility. They are both in love with the same delusional image of Hippolyte. Here, again, we have a motivated misreading whose purpose is to make credible the myth of an integrated, transcendent self. And, once again, the lesson is that desire is ineradicable; in fact, the desire to transcend desire is the most tragic, or the most comic, of all desires! The source and purpose of discourse are inseparable from the storm of motives out of which discourse arises, toward which it yearns, and in which it is heard or read. Hippolyte has failed to see that he is *in* the story that is only ostensibly that of Thésée alone. It is the "story" of every divided, paradoxical, incoherent self.

This play's final misreading is Thésée's own naïve acceptance of Oenone's perfidious suggestion that Hippolyte is pursuing Phèdre. Instead of accepting, at least for awhile, a state of confusion – "Je ne sais où je vais, je ne sais où je suis" (IV.1) – and, instead of allowing the disorders of his own past to inform his reading of the present, Thésée rushes to condemn his son. He reminds us of Alceste, who prefers a horrible conclusion to doubt. Or, perhaps, it is *precisely* Thésée's awareness of his past offenses that does influence his reading. In any case, he misreads all the evidence, and, when he confronts Hippolyte, Thésée pays lip service to mystery while expressing the wish for transparent signs: "Et ne devrait-on pas à des signes certains / Reconnaître le coeur des perfides humains!" (IV.2). Ironically, tragically, it is only after the horses that seemed to symbolize Hippolyte's fierce innocence have killed him that Thésée acknowledges hearing the faint voice of doubt: "Quelle plaintive voix crie au fond de mon coeur. . . Je veux de tout le crime être mieux éclairci" (V.4). This acknowledgement of ambiguity and ambivalence comes too late. In fact, we can see in the symbolism of Hippolyte's horses the essential obligation and responsibility to interpret: the very emblem of his supposed wild innocence is also a rather obvious symbol of powerful desire which, when denied, becomes virulent.

In *La Princesse de Clèves*, we find a woman who is both the Object of intense scrutiny and the Subject of a consciousness whose awareness of complex motives, including her own, gradually increases. Leanna Bridge Rezvani argues that the novel's richness derives, in part, from what Mikhail Bakhtin called heteroglossia: Madame de Lafayette evokes the irreducible complexity of reality, and the impossibility of knowing

it definitively, by respecting the multiplicity of perspectives from which "it" is always viewed and interpreted. In what I regard as a seminal article, Harriet Stone underlines the dynamism, and thus the ultimate inscrutability, of life at the Court (250).

In evoking the context into which the naïve, *sincère* Mlle. de Chartres will be introduced by her ambitious mother, Madame de Lafayette presents a Court where dissimulation is rampant and knowledge is critically important, but always elusive. It is a world of chronically insecure, power-obsessed, deceitful egos. The first thing that we are told about Mademoiselle de Chartres is that she "attira les yeux de tout le monde" (247). She emerges from isolation directly into the brilliantly-lit arena of desire and rivalry. When M. de Clèves first encounters Mlle. de Chartres, his fascination results as much from his not knowing who she is as from her beauty: "M. de Clèves la regardait avec admiration, et il ne pouvait comprendre qui était cette belle personne qu'il ne connaissait point" (249). His desire is thus first awakened by his instinctive fear of ignorance and his desire for full knowledge of others. From that moment on, the young woman is encircled by hungry social wolves who examine her every gesture and expression.

Never having experienced desire of her own, Mlle. de Chartres at first passively serves her mother's ambition and takes what others do and say at face value. Madame de Chartres's moralistic pedagogy has been designed to inculcate in her daughter a false "subjectivity" whose purpose is, actually, to make her an exceptionally valuable Object (for more on this pedagogy, see Riggs). She will have to live the paradox of virtue: her reputation for virtue depends equally on the intensity with which she is desired and the consistency of her resistance: her resistance will heighten the desire for her. In order to believe that he has a virtuous wife, M. de Clèves must believe that she is desired by others. Moreover, the more spectacular her reputation for virtue, the more intense the desire to overcome it and possess her. Like Oreste and Hippolyte, Madame de Chartres thinks that she can edit the story of human motivation in order to make her daughter a spectacular exception. The very desire to be exceptional, however, intensifies the appetite of those who would reduce her daughter to being ordinary. Moreover, like Alceste's desire to be distinguished, Mme. de Chartres's wish to make her daughter exceptional can only be pursued within the society whose relentless pressures work to make her typical.

So, the novel takes place in a Racinian – indeed, it is also Moliéresque! – labyrinth of arrogance, jealousy, pride, paranoid vulnerability, paradox, and power. The Court is presided over by an adulterous, quasi-incestuous couple whose relationship epitomizes the interpretive jungle wherein the Princesse will have to survive. Here, too, a purloined letter, a text, plays a critical role. When the letter becomes an issue, the Princesse has already accepted marriage to a man she does not love and, only then, has experienced the awakening of her own desire. When she falls in love with the Duc de Nemours, she begins to dissemble, and to cast her now desirous gaze on another, whose words and gestures she tries desperately to read.

At the same time, she is increasingly amazed by the complexity and contradictoriness of her own responses and motivations. Just as effectively as Molière and Racine, Madame de Lafayette evokes the impossibility of both being a coherent self and achieving definitive knowledge of others.

As long as Madame de Clèves believes that the lost love letter was written to Nemours, she is swamped by a tide of *affliction*. Like Alceste, she is all too ready to believe that Nemours is a hypocrite and that she, herself, is a fool. That is the most convenient and definitive reading of the letter. It is almost as if, like Alceste, she had been seeking the unhappiness that she now sees confirmed. When she discovers that Nemours was not the letter's *destinataire*, her joy is unbounded and, then, to her, scandalous. The letter was produced and is received in the context of overwhelmingly complex, and even contradictory, motivations. Again, the seeming definitiveness of a text turns out to be illusory. Stable, comprehensive self-knowledge and knowledge of the other are both impossible.

The Princesse's decision to withdraw into something like Alceste's *désert* is precipitated by her husband's death, which is caused by his desire to know the definitive truth about her. His death is the ultimate illustration of Phelan's assertion that the desire for certainty leads inexorably to despair and rage. The Prince de Clèves's jealousy motivates him to employ a spy, and his fear causes him to believe the worst. Here again is the assumption that the truth must be uncovered or extracted against the will of the Object.

There are multiple layers of interpretation here: the spy interprets what he sees, and then reports it to M. de Clèves, who also interprets it. The spy warns M. de Clèves that he has nothing definitive to report: "Je n'ai rien à vous apprendre, répondit le gentilhomme, sur quoi on puisse faire de jugement assuré (372). Like Alceste, M. de Clèves ignores the warning. M. de Clèves already knew that his wife was in love with another man, since she admitted that to him. He seeks the additional unhappiness of knowing who that man is, and, by spying, he "learns" that it is M. de Nemours. However, though we know this is true, the actual evidence is inconclusive. More importantly, M. de Clèves concludes from the spy's report that Mme de Clèves has been physically unfaithful, which is false. He ignores the role of his own motives in influencing his interpretation, assuming that the truth has simply been revealed against his wife's will. In effect, through spying motivated by fear and anger, he has obtained what he takes to be the equivalent of an unwilling confession, and what therefore must be the truth. He has, metaphorically, penetrated and dissected – objectified – his wife.

The grief that causes the death of Monsieur de Clèves is a result of his spying on his wife in order to achieve certain knowledge of her. In this, he resembles Molière's Arnolphe, in *L'Ecole des femmes*, for whom control is an obsession. Arnolphe speaks of recruiting spies all over the neighborhood. Monsieur de Clèves also reminds us of Alceste, who believes dubious evidence of his beloved's perfidy, evidence given to him by a kind of spy, and who thereby finds the unhappiness *he has sought.*

Thésée, too, leaps to an unpleasant conclusion about his own son, believing the testimony of a kind of spy whose motives ought to inspire skepticism.

So, the early modern effort to banish doubt and to resolve definitively the relation of *être* to *paraître* is treated by some seventeenth-century French writers as ridiculous, or tragic. The myths of epistemological potency and textual certainty are undermined by these writers, and we are warned by them, already, of the "post-structuralist," "post-modernist" perception that the transcendent Subject, the unified ego constituted and confirmed by indubitable knowledge, is a dangerous or a laughable delusion. Demanding that others be fully disclosed to our view and completely transparent to our understanding is an abusive denial of their irreducible otherness and of our own incompleteness. There is no Parmenidean "view from nowhere" permitting objective, uninvolved, comprehensive and stable knowledge. No one can really occupy the *perspectiva legitima* or perfect, dominant point of view that Louis XIV sought to construct for himself at Versailles. Timothy Murray points out that the Cardinal de Richelieu had his *salle de théâtre* so constructed that he could be seated at precisely this privileged point, and thereby created a symbol and an instrument of his power (133 *ff.*).

For literary critics, then, interpretation should not be an effort to eliminate a text's ambiguities, thus diminishing it and the reader; it should enrich the relations between the text and its readers, and deepen the readers' self-awareness. However thorough the scholarship, and however clear the argument, a critic cannot pretend to have established a text's definitive meaning. The critic must aspire, through his or her particular combination of scholarship, reflection, and motive – for we, too, have them! – to produce interpretations that are inherently interesting elucidations.

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