SAINT-ÉVREMOND AND PEDANTRY: THE BAROQUE AESTHETIC OF *LA COMÉDIE DES ACADÉMISTES*

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While still only in his early twenties, Saint-Évremond joined forces with the pamphlet campaign that was assailing the recently-formed Académie française and in 1637 mounted a satirical attack that came to be known as *La comédie des académistes*. Adopting the form of a short (817 line) five-act play in alexandrine couplets, Saint-Évremond peopled his scenes with well-known members of the Académie française (as well as with some whom he only assumed to be members) and proceeded to portray them as either talented drunkards or, more usually, as small-minded pedants, whose attempts to reform the language were so poorly founded as to be ludicrous.

Readers have long appreciated the satirical verve of the piece, but since the time of Molière, critics have universally found fault with the play as a dramatic work, despite Molière's own apparent use of it as a source of material for certain celebrated pedantic scenes in *Les femmes savantes*. Most recently, the editors who included the work in the Pléiade edition of the *Théâtre du XVII^e^ siècle* dismissed its literary value, claiming that it has "bien entendu, ni intrigue ni mouvement dramatique" (Truchet 1384). Gabriel Conesa, whose 1995 book on *La comédie de l'âge classique, 1630-1715* echoes this sentiment, sees in it no more than "une suite de sketches practiquement indépendants, de sorte qu'on assiste à une sorte de défilé de personnages que le seul hasard met en présence" and faults its dialogue for lack of coherence due in large part to a lack of linear plot development (Conesa 65).

Certainly one cannot claim that the work attempts to develop a sustained plot line, much less anything resembling the elaborate plots characteristic of so many plays of the 1620s and 1630s, or that the finale resembles in any way a resolution of problems developed along the way. Yet we should perhaps exercise care in condemning the work for these supposed faults lest we be applying standards for dramatic success that do not recognize what Saint-Évremond was attempting to do. We are to some extent able to identify Saint-Évremond's comic aesthetic because a little more than twenty years after writing *La comédie des académistes*, he wrote a series of short, theoretical essais on comedy. One of them, which he devoted to the Commedia dell'arte, is of particular interest because it deals in part with pedantry, the same

subject matter which had provided him with comic material two decades earlier.

Pedantry, in the context of the Italian Comedy, he criticizes roundly, not as subject matter, for he finds it a fertile source of "le ridicule" in the works of other dramatists, but because of the way in which it is portrayed on the Italian stage. Exhibiting nothing of "le vrai naturel" because it substitutes excess for "esprit," Italian pedantry in the guise of the Docteur may provide both "diversité" and "changement," but does so in such a way that, instead of surprising the spectator, it wearies him. Recognizing that to reveal a pedant's "sottise" requires that he turn all conversations toward the science that obsesses him, Saint-Évremond argues that, nonetheless, never replying to what one says to him while citing thousands of authors and quoting thousands of passages with such volubility as to leave him winded, is not the sort of behavior that best reveals the impertinence of such a character. Rather, it typifies "un fou qu'on devroit mettre au petites Maisons" (Saint-Évremond 51-52). It is, he continues, a poor way to "divertir un honnête homme, que de lui donner un misérable Docteur, que les livres ont rendu fou," rather than offering for his delectation the portrayal of a "sçavant ridicule" within the confines of "la vraisemblance." *Vraisemblance* he associates with "la représentation de la vie ordinaire,"—one recalls his own use of the daily occupations of members of the Académie française—in which a pedant becomes a "faux sçavant" characterized either by "extravagances naturelles" or "ridicules affectations."

The most revealing terms in this assessment of the relationship of pedantry to comedy are curiously those which Saint-Évremond takes the least care to elucidate, precisely because for him they represent thoroughly assimilated aesthetic ideals which need no explanation nor justification: "diversité," "changement," "surprendre," "divertir." Interestingly, it is just such terms which appear repeatedly throughout the theoretical works devoted to literature in the latter part of the sixteenth century and the early years of the seventeenth. The German critic, Wilfried Floeck, in his *Esthétique de la diversité: pour une histoire du baroque littéraire en France*, sees in the early 17th-century usage of these terms what he calls "les concepts-clés du goût nouveau." He traces the notion of diversity to the traditional concept of classical rhetoric, the *variatio*, which was revalorized toward the end of the sixteenth century to provide a principle regulating both form and content and reflecting a general change in aesthetic tastes. Diversity, as a unifying principle, combined notions of abundance and variety that

reflected both the richness of God's creation and the quasi-universal Renaissance curiosity that would lead to new progress in the sciences. It could lead to extravagance or "bizarrerie" in its literary expression, and even to pedants whose speech was nothing short of a flood of verbiage, but it always worked against an idea of logical, linear order, which was in some way too simple to account for the truth of things, much less to account for uncertainty. Apparent disorder, which characterizes the organization of Montaigne's essays, was, therefore, a formal goal of this aesthetic since newness and thus surprise and change were seen as the basic conditions necessary for aesthetic pleasure. "Le hasard" became an organizing principle. The very notion of a "divertissement" incorporates the concept "to divert," to steer away from the anticipated path toward new riches, and perhaps new understanding. In the context of this baroque aesthetic, it is significant to note that Saint-Évremond was not blind to the matter of sustained development of action or unaware that it might be capable of improving a comedy. He comments explicitly on its absence in the Commedia dell'arte: "Ce que nous voions en France sur [le théâtre] des Italiens, n'est pas proprement Comedie, puisqu'il n'y a pas un veritable plan de l'ouvrage; que le sujet n'a rien de bien lié . . ." (48). Even in playwrights whom he admired greatly, Ben Johnson and Molière, he notices a similar weakness of plot: " . . . on ne sçauroit nier qu'ils n'aient eu plus d'égard . . . aux gros des sujets, dont la suite aussi pourroit estre mieux liée, et le dénouëment plus naturel" (Saint-Évremond 60). Such lucidity regarding the absence of strong plot development and resolution would suggest that his own failure to attend to the matter, either in *La comédie des académistes* or in his later *Sir Politick-Would-Be*, written while in exile in England, was the result of a conscious decision to adopt "le hasard" as his organizational principle, according to the baroque aesthetic to which, in all other respects, he adhered. Still, one wonders why, if he felt that a stronger sense of organization could improve the dramatic quality of a play, he chose not to write his own differently. Presumably, he felt that theatricality was of little consequence. In fact, he did not write *La comédie des académistes* to be performed, and there is no record of its ever having been so. One might, therefore, go so far as to say that the young Saint-Évremond, who was to become an eminent prose writer excelling in the genre of the dialogue, chose to treat the pedantry of his "Académistes" in the context of a play as much because of his baroque principles as because of his fascination with dialogue. That is to say, he chose to write a comedy, not in order to create a work whose dramatic

rhythm might ensure onstage success (for that was clearly of little concern to him in this case), but rather in order to have at his disposal the diversity of dialogue resources offered by that genre, resources that were otherwise unavailable to a writer of "Conversations," in which generally the same two people would converse together from the beginning until the end.

Viewed in this light, *La comédie des académistes* proves to be a rather interesting text. The standard conventions of the five act verse play provided Saint-Évremond with a structure consisting of successive scenes, differentiated by the entrance or exit of characters. Within different scenes he was free to elaborate a dialogue that would put into practice some portion of the diversity of pedantic manifestations. Within the confines of the genre, any two scenes might involve totally different character groupings without calling for any particular justification on the part of Saint-Évremond, thereby providing for a diversity of situations and numbers of participants.

The first four scenes are a case in point. The play opens with two colleagues, Saint-Amant and Tristan, engaged in a conspiratorial exchange at the expense of their own Academy ("ces petits auteurs, / Qui se font estimer comme rares docteurs"). Their satiric collaboration marks a highpoint of collegiality, which gives way in the next scene to a radically different sort of dialogue between Colletet and the Bishop of Grasse, Godeau, who finds that his title now earns him the overly-obsequious advances of one he was accustomed to address as a friend. In search of a topic to kill the time while waiting for the arrival of the other "académistes," Godeau, in typical pedantic fashion, turns to the subject that most fascinates him, himself, and asks if Colletet has not read his verses, "ces beaux vers qu'on adore." The ever-subservient Colletet agrees to every wildly egotistical statement that Godeau goes on to utter, only to find that when he turns the tables and asks if he is not "un très grand personnage," the compliments are not so easily forthcoming from the Bishop, despite his assurance that they are both "égaux, étant fils d'Apollon." The problem is with Colletet's tactics since a pedant involved in self-congratulation tends to be blind to the attributes of those around him, unless, of course, someone points them out. Colletet's words, "pas un très grand personnage," are enough for Godeau, who agrees he is "pas très grand:" "Colletet, mon ami, vous ne faites pas mal." Reeling with disbelief before his failure to elicit the kind of agreement he had anticipated, Colletet makes his second tactical blunder, blurting out, "Que pourriez-vous encor reprendre dans mes vers?" Pandora's box is open, and the exchange quickly devolves

into a storm of mutual recriminations, for Godeau is at no more loss to point to faults in another than to point to excellence in himself.

When the scene changes, we find ourselves before Chapelain, engaged in a lively monologue while at work on a poem. He, too, reacts with considerable smugness to his poetic efforts ("Que voilà de bons vers! La bonne poésie!"), while he comments on the excellence of the additions and changes he is making to the poem ("Oublier ce mot-là, c'est un péché mortel"). However, the all over effect is not one of poetic genius at work: he admits to himself that one line is lifted straight from Théophile and reacts in mock horror when other less successful lines result from his failure to pay close enough attention to what he is doing, producing either a lame turn of phrase or an unforgivable change in cadence, which he must then attempt to rectify. He emerges from his solitary toiling in the following scene to join three other colleagues who are aflutter over something so horrible that they give poor Chapelain to think that someone has died. But no, it is that "Une race ennemie / Ecrit . . . / Achevez donc," implores Chapelain. Lestoile lets drop the bombshell: "Contre l'Académie." The problem becomes one of identifying someone to rise up in defence of the Académie. Here the mock-heroic tone collapses, and affectation gives way to as honest an assessment of the incompetence filling their ranks as one is apt to find among pedants. Gombauld wails, "Nous n'avons que des sots, et je veux bien mourir / Si le plus suffisant sait l'art de discourir." A quick scan of the horizon reveals some real talent, however, in the guise of Balzac, Racan and Saint-Amant, although the four cronies admit that they would be as apt to ridicule the group as to defend it. However, declares Chapelain, all is not lost, for "Nous avons les faveurs de ce grand Chancelier." Lestoile picks up the banner in triumph: "En effet la faveur nous défend de nous plaindre, / Si nous avons Séguier, nous n'avons rien à craindre." The scene ends, but on an ambiguous note, for no one could overlook the fact that it was Richelieu, and not Séguier, who was the founder and protector of the Académie, and Richelieu had nothing but contempt for Séguier, whom he called a "grand faquin," according to Tallemant des Réaux (Joliat 287).

As befits a baroque text for which the classical unity of organization is eschewed in favor of a dispersal of centers of interest, *La comédie des académistes* clearly defines the basic unit of organization of the text as the individual scene, thus creating some eleven different focus points. Beyond the scene, organization follows the baroque principle of disorder, a fact which has so bothered modern critics. Necessity seems

to play no role in the progression from one scene to the next, and the rare cases in which a character moves from one place to another in moving from one scene to the next involves little more motivation than that of Chapelain, who prefers to leave rather than risk the embarrassment of being caught in the act of composing verse when he hears footsteps on the stairs. Nevertheless, a lack of motivation, characteristic of baroque theater generally, does not preclude other means of scene linkage.

In the case of *La comédie des académistes*, linking occurs thematically, recalling Montaigne's digressions and drawing most often upon something that a character has said toward the end of one scene, which is then reiterated at the start of the following scene in either a parallel or contrasting manner. Before heading off to the *cabaret*, Tristan brings the first scene of Act I to a close, saying, "Non, c'est assez parler d'auteurs et de langage," whereupon Godeau begins scene 2 by speaking precisely about those authors just mentioned, wondering aloud if the "chers nourissons des filles de Mémoire" are all still at dinner. At the end of that scene he watches Colletet abandon their quarrel and mutters, "il ne dit rien qui vaille." Whereupon Act II commences, and we are subjected to more of "rien qui vaille," this time in the form of Chapelain's humorously pathetic attempts to make progress on his poem. If there is "rien à craindre" at the end of Act II, scene 2, then scene 3 shows the Marquis de Bréval beset by fears. If he sees salvation from the horrors of his military life by finding some way to "me fourrer aux affaires publiques," the public affairs of the pedants in the following scene are anything but a cause for rejoicing, as Silhon complains that condemning the works of others is more apt to establish one's reputation as a "sage" nowadays than producing a meritorious quantity of hack writings in the service of God and King. If Baudouin breathes a sigh of relief at having gotten free of the clutches of two scoundrels who were about to lock him up in prison, the next scene shows Saint-Amant's equal pleasure at finding himself "au cabaret" with his friends Tristan and Faret.

Linking takes place from scene to scene, both within an act and between acts. This does not, however, eliminate the act as an organizational unit. With the exception of Act II, all acts comprise two scenes that form binary units. These units may form a parallelism, as in the case just mentioned of Baudouin and Saint-Amant in Act IV or in the two scenes of Act V in which the pedants assemble first to compliment their patron, le Chancellier, and then to set about reforming the language. Conversely, the binary unit may be antithetical

in nature, as in Act 3, in which dissention breaks out in the ranks over whether the Académie should eliminate the word "or." Tempers flare and insults become personal, only to subside into perfect brotherly harmony in the following scene when confronted with the aging Mlle de Gournay who comes to offer her own suggestions for what to keep and what to expunge from the language. Act II comprises a heated debate among four "académistes," placed between two calmer monologues, the symmetry pointing to yet another organizational factor, the alternation between scenes of dissention and scenes of fraternization. This alternation continues almost perfectly from the play's beginning until the final two scenes, in which the order reverses, recalling that the unexpected is a prominent feature of the baroque.

All of this is not to say that the baroque structure of the piece precludes a sense of coherence in the play as a whole. As so often happens in baroque theater, however, it is not a coherence tied to the linear development of action as much as it is a unity of interest, variations on a theme of pedantry in this case. The theme is set in motion in the opening scene as Tristan and Saint-Amant justify their ridicule of the Académie's attempts to reform the language by listing all the "sots" who are involved. In a game of verbal portraits reminiscent of Célimène's celebrated scene in *Le misanthrope*, they pinpoint the weaknesses of each of the different members of the Académie, who will subsequently appear, one after another, in the scenes that make up the rest of the play. Recalling that this text was written to be read rather than performed and that rereading was, therefore, a distinct possibility, one cannot fail to be struck by the exactness with which each pedant illustrates his designated faults when his time comes. This harmony in the work finds its ultimate expression in Saint-Évremond's finale. Replete with verse "compliments" to Séguier adapted from a 1627 *Recueil* of compliments addressed to Richelieu (Joliat 287) and a deliberation on eliminating such words as *car*, *pourquoi*, and *parce que* from the language, it is a suitably baroque means of bringing closure to the play, offering something of a "bouquet final" of pedantic affectation and small-mindedness, thereby expressing the theme in its totality through an emphasis on the abundance of insignificant detail.

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