

Literary and Non-literary Pastimes in a Playful Genre: Self-image in the Seventeenth Century

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The whole *raison d'être* of the frame novel is diversion of various sorts. The present study consists of a brief chronological overview of the genre, and its literary and non-literary amusements are examined. It is found that during the age when *préciosité* prevailed in French society, constraints imposed by the social ethic and literary aesthetics of the time produced texts that are decorous, dignified and formal. A rapid review of painting and portraiture of the time reflects those same constraints.

Die raamvertelling is uit en uit daarop gemik om 'n verskeidenheid van vermaak te verskaf. Hierdie studie bevat 'n kort kronologiese oorsig van die genre, en die literêre en nieliterêre vorme van afleiding, wat dit insluit, word ondersoek. Die slotsom is dat in die tydperk wat die *préciosité* oorheers het in die Franse samelewing, die beperkings opgelê deur sosiale etiese kodes en literêre estetika, tekste tot stand laat kom het wat betaamlik, waardig en formeel was. 'n Vinnige oorsig van die skilder- en portretkuns van dieselfde tyd dui daarop dat dieselfde beperkings vir hierdie kunsvorme as vir die letterkunde gegeld het.

The French frame novel is considered to have its origins in Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1352).¹ Production continues strongly from *the Cent Nouvelles nouvelles* (anonymous) of 1456, through Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron* (1559), Jacques Yver's *Printemps* (1572), Bénigne Poissenot's *Esté* (1583), etc. until a slight reduction in productivity in the first half of the seventeenth century. Until then, all the frame novels, like Boccaccio's, were a mixture of bawdy material strongly related to the *fabliau* tradition, and tragico-serious exemplary tales. The few frame novels that appear during the first half of the seventeenth century, like Charles Sorel's *Les Nouvelles Françaises* (1623) abandon the serious tone and present only bawdy and amusing tales.

¹A group of people are thrown together and pass the time in story-telling. Other amusements may be included in the *cornice* or frame story describing the group and its interaction. Such novels thus have two narrative levels, that of the narrators, and that of the tales they narrate.

By then, French society had adopted the notion that '*Etre grand, c'est paraître grand*' (appearance is all), and both the public persona and the reflection of the literary public required in any literature considered worthy of attention, was highly idealised. Works like that of Sorel and his predecessors were marginalised, because even among the so-called 'tragic stories', having a strong moral message, there are some shocking episodes.² These could not be discussed nor overtly admired in polite society in the seventeenth century.

The genre of the frame novel was reactivated in 1657, by Segrais, with a work patently targeting Sorel, called *Les nouvelles françaises ou les Divertissements de la Princesse Aurélie*. The group of narrators promise right at the beginning that while they are imitating the pastime of Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron*, they will be more 'modest' than that earlier group (36). The second half of the seventeenth century will see numerous frame novels, all as 'modest' as that of Segrais, and culminates in a complete shift of tone away from the puritanical with Sade's erotic *120 Days of Sodom*. The liberation of manners and morals that marks the Regency of the Duc d'Orléans had begun.

LITERARY PASTIMES

No poetics exists for the frame novel. A study of the succession of published texts allows one to extrapolate that bringing variations to the global structure was a first signal of playfulness. This could certainly be a reason for the popularity of the frame-novel during the second half of the seventeenth century, period of the *honnête* society, of the precious ethos.³ The most widely accepted definition of *preciosité* before it came to bear its modern pejorative sense is '[a]n ability to conduct oneself according to

²Combabe, hero of the Second story of the Second Day in Poissenot's *Esté* is a loyal courtier. Fearing the temptation of close association with the Queen when he is chosen as her escort for a journey, he amputates his penis and keeps it in a jar to present to his king. Cases of satyriasis and nymphomania are also common.

³The included stories are not considered in this analysis. They are however one of the objects of the international society SATOR (Société pour l'étude des topoï dans la fiction en prose jusqu'à la Révolution). The correspondence between the activities as games and Huizenga's well-known definition of the concept of game has been examined elsewhere (see D. Godwin). Huizenga's widely accepted definition of 'game' is the following:

a (game is) a voluntary act or action accomplished within fixed temporal and spatial limits, following a set of rules that are freely accepted but strictly obeyed, being its own end in itself, accompanied by feelings of tension and pleasure, and an awareness of being other than in a usual life-situation (34-5).

prevailing norms, while bringing a certain distinction or difference to one's actions, and without ever being pedantic'. Bringing variations to a theme thus coincides precisely with the underlying rule of contemporary *savoir-faire*.

The title is, of course, the thing one notices first. Until the end of the seventeenth century at least, any form of writing was expected to make overt reference to, or to follow, the *auctoritas* of convention and *doxa*. Marguerite de Navarre obviously alludes to Boccaccio's *Decameron* when she calls her work the *Heptameron*. Sade's title, *120 Days of Sodom*, makes a similar allusion. Jacques Yver names Boccaccio in his preface to *Le Printemps* (1752) (Spring). The title 'Spring' is of course a witty choice in view of the fact that his name Yver means 'Winter'. Poissenot in 1583 chooses the title *L'Esté* (Summer) certainly in part to underline the notion of a succession of authors through this reference to the cycle of seasons. We have seen that Segrais 'targeted' Sorel's *Nouvelles françaises* by repeating that title and adding 'ou les divertissements de la Princesse Aurélie'; in 1661, Mme de la Calprenède followed suit with her *Divertissements de la Princesse Alcidiane*.

The reasons for the presence of a given group vary. There is plague in the city and people have taken refuge in a country house; a bridge has been washed away; political exile has removed a princess and a group of friends to the country; one group consists of students on the move, a bit like the *Canterbury Tales*' pilgrims.

Another aspect that explains the predilection of precious society for the genre of the frame novel is the way it lends itself to the inclusion of the games enjoyed in the salon of the time. We shall see more of these, but there is a striking example in the unusual way Mlle de Scudéry presents her characters. In her *Mathilde (d'Aguilar)* of 1667, she makes them introduce themselves by means of a game that was very fashionable at the time, that of drawing one's own verbal portrait. Each person chooses the name of a character from one of two very successful contemporary novels⁴ and justifies his or her choice by explaining the links between their own temperament and that of the literary character selected.

The way of establishing a protocol for the order of narration is also subject to variations. In Poissenot's *Esté*, there is no protocol at all. Individual students react to what they see with anecdotes and stories according to their knowledge or to the fact that something they encounter strikes a chord of memory. Segrais was the secretary of the Princesse de Montpensier, whose *Divertissements de la Princesse Aurélie* (1657) is a lightly veiled description of an episode in the life of his noble patroness.⁵

⁴*Cyrus* and *Clélie*, both by Mlle de Scudéry herself.

⁵A temporary political exile when she had displeased her cousin Louis

He naturally gives her precedence, so lots are drawn to establish the order in which the other members of the group will narrate only after the princess has taken her turn. Mme de la Calprenède chooses to let her characters draw lots by means of the elegant (and precious) variation of flowers hidden in the folds of a skirt (16).

Another striking source of change is a play on *topoi* in the sense Curtius gives to the term. One of the most commonly used is the *locus amoenus*. Poissenot's group of travelling students do indeed visit such a pleasant place, and the description is completely traditional. But their journey gives the author the pretext to add the—almost burlesque—description of a useful garden, complete with vegetables, a water mill, etc. It is significant, that this less 'elegant' excursion dates from 1583; it would not have pleased readers in Segrais' time.

The garden in general, the most common setting for the hours of story-telling, becomes a set-piece in itself. Cordell has shown that there are fascinating parallels between décor and story themes in the frame-novel of the Renaissance. In the seventeenth century Madeleine de Scudéry chooses twice to describe real gardens, that of the King's brother and that of Versailles.

The characters in the frame story usually add further amusements to the telling of stories. These can be the responsibility of the day's narrator, or impromptu. The second half of the seventeenth century sees little that is not literary. Debates are commonly found, as are forfeits requiring the invention of a poem, or the description of a building or garden, or riddles (see Appendix A).

NON-LITERARY GAMES AND PLAYFULNESS

The non-literary amusements in the period of *preciosité* tend to consist of feasts, or something ‘cultural’—a ballet and a concert in Segrais’ work, for example. In such cases the playfulness is added by an imaginative presentation or some elegant touch. Segrais’ concert is a surprise; the narrator had engaged a harpist who remained in hiding until the music came magically from behind trees at her signal.

The sole exceptions are a game of mall,⁶ which we could classify as a sport, and an impromptu hunt (the Princess had not had any warning of the need to provide further amusement). The hunt is described in the sketchiest terms, and all we learn of the game is that the Princess was very fond of it.

On the whole, even in earlier times, real frivolity and romping tended to be excluded or limited to the lower classes. As literature became more idealised, so the lower orders were more and more rigorously excluded.⁷ Poissenot’s group in *L’Esté* is not aristocratic, although his protagonists in the frame story are still gentlemen. The lower classes appear frequently, and occasionally provide an outlet for the students’ youthful energy when they need a break from their books—the meetings of the two social groups often end in spirited fisticuffs.

Yver’s *Le Printemps* reveals a very striking example of an interest in the ‘other’ segment of the population surrounding the aristocratic group. The local villagers bring an element of gaiety when they celebrate spring in a picturesque homage to their chatelaine. The salute takes the form of an ‘*aubade*’ (dawn concert). The villagers

in order to do honour to their Lady and mistress in the customary

⁶Not to be confused with croquet, for which the ball is propelled through hoops ‘according to a prescribed route’. It was imported to France from Italy and from there to England where one famous court has become today’s Pall Mall in London. In French, the word *maille* means the field or court, the mallet used to propel a ball and the game itself. In English, ‘pall’ is a corruption of ball, and ‘mall’ the mallet. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1961 (VII): 399-400) the game required the player to propel a ball from a distance with the mallet through hoops held by ropes. The mallet could also be called in English ‘a beetle’. One wonders if there could be a link with the expression ‘to beetle off’?

⁷In the included stories, as in novels, they are occasionally called upon to fill a particular function in the needs of the plot. They fill the role of confidant, they steal or deliver clandestine letters, and serve as a counterfoil, by their clumsiness and lack of wit, to the quality of the hero or heroine, particularly when the latter is disguised as a person of lesser birth.

way, came very early to the chateau, bearing olive branches, birds in cages, fronds of willow and chestnut, honey and dairy products of all kinds, with rustic pomp and magnificence, causing the air to resound to the tune of mingled flutes, bagpipes and flageols [another type of flute], not devoid of skreaking [onomatopoeic neologism], (573, my translation).

Let it be noted that two elements in the description distance the gentlefolk from the group of villagers: the rather condescending adjective ‘rustic’ applied to the ceremonial, and the fairly cacophonous neologism that describes the musical effect. The idealisation brought by Segrais would appear to be relative rather than radical.

But it was a real tendency, and this is even more evident in a (fairly refined) romp undertaken by Yver’s aristocratic group themselves. The young ladies avenge themselves on the men who won the debates of the previous day with a *rosée* (sprinkling, literally a ‘dew’), but the water they use is not mere well-water, it is scented by handfuls of fennel (552). No such romp could have figured in Segrais’ time.

OMISSIONS

One encounters no sport other than hunting or mall, no card or board games, and no toys. The *auctoritas* of tradition had not always excluded games, sports and toys, for as the Arthurian cycle proves, chess was much played, and Shakespeare’s King Henry played a form of tennis. Presumably these were too frivolous for the prevailing desire for dignity. Toys and games certainly existed, as a reading of a reputable history of toys like Antonia Fraser’s, shows. Appendix B illustrates the vogue for *Bilboquet* (‘cup and ball’) at the end of the seventeenth century, and the clothes of the various people in the scene suggest that all classes and all ages were taken with the game. In 1660-73, the literary historian and critic Charles Sorel used a puppet master failing to hide his strings as a metaphor for poor plot management.

Toys are really, of course, associated with children and children are virtually non-existent in the literature of the seventeenth century. They were in fact viewed as adults in waiting, and not as a separate entity having peculiar needs. In France, it was only with the interventions of enthusiastic pedagogues such as Fénelon and Mme de Maintenon at the end of the seventeenth century that education began to focus on specific needs of the child and include the girl child.⁸

⁸St Cyr was established for girls by Mme de Maintenon, who also had the completely new idea that theatre, if the play were well chosen, would

Among the aristocracy, children seem to have been left totally to the care of servants in the nursery, and they are hardly mentioned in the literature of the period we are examining. Literature of medieval times is not well known to the present researcher, but in the *Amadis de Gaulle* children are part of life at the château and a father undertakes to amuse his son by teaching him to shoot a bow and arrow (32). When the giant Galaor comes to abduct a child, the parents show great emotion. In fact, the place of children, how and when they are born, how and where raised, the attitudes of the people around them, are more developed in this book than in the Renaissance and seventeenth century literature in France (with the exception perhaps of Rabelais, whose tone is nevertheless quite different). During the seventeenth century tales, babies are of interest if abducted from the cradle or lost in other ways, but do not appear to be thought of again until they are recognised in the final plot resolution. This recognition usually depends on a physical sign or a token such as a ring or letter provided by a parent—that is, an adult. Once, however, in Segrais' 'Mathilde', the token is a teething ring made of crystal which is recognised by the old nurse who is still with the sister who had not been abducted (228-29).

PARALLELS IN PAINTING

If one looks at the painting of the age, very few toys and very little play are to be found for any part of Europe. A rapid exploration of the Louvre's holding, surely typical, confirms this. We particularly examined representations of children and found that only common people are portrayed in postures of pure play, and usually before 1600 or after 1700.⁹ The famous 'Children's games' by the Flemish painter Pierre Brueghel the elder (sixteenth century) and 'Boys bathing' by Nicolaas Maes (1693) are illustrative of this.

Portraits of well-born children (mainly princes and princesses) are common. But almost the only concession to youth is the fact that a child holds a piece of fruit or caresses an animal—usually a dog. In rare cases a teething ring or a ball hang from a girl's belt as in Titian's 'Clarissa Strozzi'. Animals other than dogs, like cats, birds, a rabbit, a lamb, are more

provide an ideal training in comportment, diction, etc, and she commissioned Racine to write plays suitable for this purpose, the biblical *Esther* in particular. To comprehend the significance of this idea, one should remember the church's stand against theatre as immoral.

⁹During the seventeenth century in France, success with 'genre' painting of lower classes was rare, although the Brothers Le Nain made a name for themselves despite falling outside the accepted 'canon'.

commonly found outside France, for example in Leonardo's 'St Anne, the Virgin and Jesus' (with a lamb), in Titian's 'The Virgin with the Rabbit' and in Otto van Veen's 'Painter surrounded by his household' in which a child plays with a cat.

One will wait, in fact, for snuffboxes commissioned by Louis XV after 1730, to see children portrayed with, say, a whipping top or a battledore and shuttlecock. There are some surprises: Pierre Mignard's 'Marie-Anne de Bourbon and soap bubbles' dates from 1686. There is also a fifteenth century French painting called 'Madonna and Child' which critics refer to as 'Madonna and helicopter', in which the Babe is holding a toy windmill.

Perhaps the most significant canvas of all, however, is Fragonard's 'Les hasards heureux de l'escarpolette' (the happy chance provided by a swing) in which an adult, not a child, is swinging, and the gentleman pushing the swing—like the viewer outside the canvas—can enjoy a glimpse of petticoat and stocking-top. Segrais and Madeleine de Scudéry would have found it neither dignified nor modest—but then, the canvas dates from 1767....

The frame novel, a genre that persisted from the Renaissance until the seventeenth century in France, has brought another confirmation of the rigorous refinement that literary and social historians have long insisted is the chief characteristic of the French classical period. It was undeniably a skewed view of life. But literary and artistic activity was the domain of the educated rich, and the aristocracy, in their public persona at least, prized dignity. The accepted activities had been studied previously, but the omissions from the pastimes shown in the frame novel had not, until the theme of one of the Renaissance and Medieval Society's conferences changed the focus of the present researcher. The exclusions—of frivolity, of boisterousness, of gratuitous activity—provide a further key to the representation of the *precious* society in France. It is perhaps also significant that one of the marks of the genre is the claim by each author in turn that the work is a mere 'bagatelle', and not to be considered a serious creation.

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ENIGMA

My body is colourless like that of water,
And it changes form according to each encounter,
I make more of given features than I do of the whole painting,
And can give more animation to my scenes than did Apelles.*

I advise the most admirable minds,
And show them only truth,
I teach without speaking the whole day long,
And by night they come bearing torches to consult me.

My Empire lies among the curious,
To kings I point out what no other dares to say,
And even at Court I can neither flatter, nor lie.

Like a later Paris I judge goddesses
Who offer me their beauty, grace and wealth,
And I often increase love's charms.

Cotin

* Painter of ancient Greece, sometimes called Coan. Pliny dates him in 332 BC.

Solution: A mirror.

Source: *Oeuvres meslées contenant énigmes, odes, sonnets et épigrammes* (Paris, 1659) 48; quoted in Cronk 271. Original in rhymed verse; translated by D. Godwin.

APPENDIX B

Illustration 92 ('A contemporary print'), in Fraser
81.