

**Wit and Comic Gestures in “Le Docteur de verre,”  
Act III from Philippe Quinault’s *La Comédie sans comédie***

by  
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Since the publication in 1926 Etienne Gros’ book *Philippe Quinault, sa vie et son œuvre*, there has been a rebirth of scholarly interest in the plays and libretti of this unjustly neglected writer (Gros, *infra*). Several of his stage tragedies including *Astrate* (1664/1665) and *Bellérophon* (1671) and equally important tragicomedies including *Amalassonte* (1657) and *Stratonice* (1660) are now available in well-annotated modern editions (*infra*). His comedies have, however, not been overlooked and researchers can now use Etienne Gros’ 1926 critical edition of *La Mère coquette ou les Amants brouillés* (1665) and Jean-Dominique Biard’s superb 1974 critical edition of the series of four plays within a play which Quinault entitled *La Comédie sans comédie* (1655). The third act in *La Comédie sans comédie* is a comedy called “Le Docteur de verre.” Modern scholars have written much more extensively on Quinault’s tragedies and tragicomedies than on his comedies. The most recent book-length studies on Quinault’s stage plays are Joyce Scott’s 1973 dissertation *Douceur and Violence in the Tragedies and Tragicomedies of Quinault* and William Brooks’s 1986 dissertation

“The Evolution of the Theatre of Quinault.” The very title of Scott’s excellent work (*infra*) indicates her stress on his tragedies and tragicomedies. Although William Brooks discusses at great length Quinault’s comedies, his main purpose was to describe the evolution in quality and depth in the representation of love and politics and the use of dramatic techniques during Quinault’s career as a stage dramatist which began in 1653 with the first performance of his comedy *Les Rivaies* and ended with the first performance of *Bellérophon* in early 1671.

The relative oblivion into which Quinault’s comedies have fallen is perhaps understandable. His early comedies *Les Rivaies* and *L’Amant indiscret* (1654) are not truly original comedies. In *Les Rivaies*, Quinault imitated fairly closely Jean Rotrou’s *Les Deux Pucelles* and *L’Amant indiscret* owes much to Nicolo Barbieri’s Italian comedy *Innavertito*.<sup>1</sup> “Le Docteur de verre” and *La Mère coquette* are, however, much superior in quality to both *Les Rivaies* and *L’Amant indiscret* and reveal Quinault’s refined skills as a comic playwright who utilized effectively physical gestures

and wit. In order to avoid reading a paper which would be exceedingly repetitive, we will limit our discussion to an analysis of "Le Docteur de verre."

Like *L'Illusion comique*, *La Comédie sans comédie* contains a series of plays within a play designed both to defend the theatre against the traditional accusations of amorality and to demonstrate the playwright's talent in several different dramatic genres. Like Pridamant in *L'Illusion comique*, La Fleur has the mistaken idea that actors and actresses lead dissolute lives and portray characters whom upstanding people hold in contempt. He certainly does not want his daughters Aminte and Polixène to marry social misfits such as the actors La Roque and Hauteroche. Although La Fleur believes that he lost all his wealth when his boat sank at sea, he still does not want his daughters to dishonor themselves by marrying actors. He tells La Roque and Hauteroche:

Vous n'estes donc Messieurs que des Comediens?  
 Vous pouvez autrepert aller chercher des femmes,  
 Mes filles ne sont pas des Objets pour vos flames  
 Quoy qu'elles soient sans bien, tournez ailleurs vos pas,  
 Elles ont de l'honneur & vous n'en avez pas:  
 Vous dont l'art dangereux n'a pour but que de plaire  
 Aux desirs deregléz de l'ignorant Vulgaire:  
 Vous qui ne faites voir pour belles actions  
 Que Meurtres, ou Larcins, ou Prostitutions.

(I, vv. 206-214)

One cannot accuse La Fleur of using understatement in his comments on actors and actresses who, in his opinion, are as morally reprehensible as murderers, thieves, and prostitutes. If they ever hope to marry Aminte and Polixène, La Roque and Hauteroche must disabuse La Fleur of his prejudice against actors. Hauteroche admits that La Fleur's negative opinion of the theatre may once have been justifiable, but now:

La Comedie au vif nous sçait représenter  
 Tout ce que l'on doit suivre ou qu'on doit éviter.  
 Quand le crime y paroist, il paroist effroyable,  
 Quand la vertu s'y montre, elle se montre aimable.

(I, vv. 233-236)

Hauteroche presents arguments which are very similar to those developed in *L'Illusion comique* (V, vv. 1645-1670) when the magician Alcandre defends the theatre against the specious charge

of amorality. According to Hauteroche, theatrical performances serve a very useful moral purpose because they praise virtue and condemn vice.

For the edification of La Fleur, the comedians perform four one-act plays. Act 2 in *La Comédie sans comédie* is a pastoral play entitled "Clomire;" Act III "Le Docteur de verre" is a farce which Quinault called "une comédie;" Act IV "Clorinde" is a tragedy, and the final act "Armide et Renaud" est "une tragicomédie en machines." These four plays within a play illustrate very well Quinault's ability to write plays in several different dramatic genres, but the performance of these four one-act plays also convinces La Fleur that he was wrong to have such a poor opinion of actors.

At the end of the fifth act, he consents to the marriage of his two daughters to the actors La Roque and Hauteroche. "Le Docteur de verre" demonstrates very nicely Quinault's creativity as a comic playwright. Isabelle and Tersandre love each other deeply, but her father Panfile insists that she marry a supposedly learned doctor who suffers from a strange delusion. He believes that he is now made of glass and will break into pieces if he is touched. Needless to say, this fear does not make him very attractive to his chosen fiancée. In "Le Docteur de verre," Quinault used word play and visual gestures in order to achieve comic effects.

Panfile is very disturbed because he correctly assumes that his daughter Isabelle will never agree to marry the glass doctor. His worst fears are confirmed when he discovers a letter apparently written from Isabelle to Tersandre. The servant Marine assures him that Isabelle wrote this letter not to Tersandre but rather to her sister, who had become a Vestal Virgin. These two interpretations of the same letter seem incompatible and at first Panfile is not persuaded by Marine's arguments. He proposes the following reading for this letter:

Le peu de soin que tu prens de m'escire, ne m'empesche pas d'estre encore sensible à l'amour, des vertus l'obeissance est celle qui sur toutes me plaist la moins heureuse entre les filles est celle qui n'a point de parens qui ayment le bien: on me presse d'espouser un vieux Docteur en vain, j'ay promis de n'y consentir jamais, sans plus songer, à ma promesse il faut que je satisfasse, mon Pere tache par des remontrances de me faire accepter ce vieil amant que je ne hay point sans raison, ceux

qui m'ayment se feront cognoistre s'ils s'opposent  
à ce mariage. (III, 2)

Panfile's reading of this letter seems eminently reasonable. His daughter is unwilling to marry this "old" fiancé "whom se does not hate without reason." She wishes that she did not have such materialistic parents who consider wealth to be more important than the happiness of their daughters. Isabelle is a vulnerable young woman who needs help from her true friends so that they can prevent this arranged marriage to the glass doctor. Marine assures Panfile, however, that he has consistently placed punctuation marks in the wrong places and this explains his complete misreading of the innocent letter which Isabelle wrote to her sister, who is a Vestal Virgin. Marine read this letter very differently:

Le peu de soin que tu prends de m'escire, ne  
m'empesche pas d'estre encore sensible à l'amour  
des vertus, l'obeissance est celle qui sur toutes me  
plaist, la moins heureuse entre les filles est celle qui  
n'a point de parens qui ayment le bien, on me  
presse d'espouser un vieux Docteur, en vain j'ay  
promis de n'y consentir jamais, sans plus songer à  
ma promesse, il faut que je satisfasse mon pere,  
tache par des remonstrances de me faire accepter ce  
vieil amant que je ne hay point, sans raison ceux qui  
m'ayment se feront cognoistre s'ils s'opposent à ce  
mariage. (III, 2)

Although Marine's reading of this letter is gramatically correct, it contradicts common sense. Isabelle is a sensible young woman who wishes to maintain her independence. It is not credible that she would willingly sacrifice her own happiness in order to obey her father. Despite her protestations to the contrary, Isabelle would have us believe that she will always do whatever her father asks her to do. Panfile is, however, more than willing to accept Marine's preposterous reading because it flatters his illusion that he is an all-powerful father whose daughter loves wealth as much as he does. Panfile conveniently overlooks the fact that her elder daughter also refused to marry a fiancé chosen by Panfile. Quinault amuses his spectators by stressing the artificiality of language and Panfile's gullibility. Sentences must always be interpreted in context and interpretations which clearly contradict a character's previous actions or statements should be rejected.

Fortunately for Marine and Isabelle, Panfile is extraordinarily dense. He will believe anything. When Tersandre disguises himself “en habit de cuistre,” his beloved Isabelle recognizes him instantly, but Panfile remains deceived for as long as Tersandre wears this costume. In order to confuse his future father-in-law and to impress Isabelle with his wit, Tersandre speaks a ludicrously Latinized form of French. Tersandre claims to be the servant of the glass doctor and this is the reason he gives for his profound knowledge of Latin. Here is an example of his style:

Sic je suis moniteur du Morbe qui l'attaque  
 Votre Gener futur est hipocondriaque,  
 Son Esprit qu'Olimpique on pouvoit nominer,  
 N'a plus la faculté de ratiociner.

(III, v 859-862)

For his critical edition of *La Comédie sans comédie*, Jean-Dominique Biard recognized the need to furnish both the Latin equivalents and French glosses for the Latinized vocabulary used first by Tersandre and then by the glass doctor. Spectators sense that Tersandre is describing his master as a hypochondriac who no longer reasons normally. The comic effect of Tersandre's lines is increased because Panfile takes him seriously. He assumes that most students in Latin classes speak like Tersandre. Panfile regrets that “C'est ainsi qu'au College on parle d'ordinaire” (III, v, 864). Quinault certainly does not neglect physical humor in “Le Docteur de verre.” When the deranged doctor finally comes on stage in Act III, scene 6, the stage direction specifies that he is “dans un habit de paille.”

It is obvious that this bizarre outfit makes him immediately repulsive to his chosen fiancée. One can readily imagine that the actor who plays the role of the glass doctor must walk on the stage in a rather artificial and stilted manner. Easy movements of the joints would be impossible for a man made of glass. In a vain attempt to cure him of this delusion, Panfile “luy oste son habit de paille” (stage direction before III, 6, 906). After this violation of his personal space, the glass doctor faints immediately, but the ever resourceful Panfile has water thrown on the glass doctor “pour r'appeler ses sens” (III, 6, 910). The doctor's staged fainting and the water gag amuse spectators because they are obvious comic devices designed to further humiliate the ludicrous doctor in the eyes of his chosen fiancée. Quinault makes extensive use of slapstick in this play within a play.

Now that he is no longer wearing his straw outfit, the glass doctor concludes that he must be dead and he believes himself to be in Hades. Relying on this rather strange assumption, he states that those whom he sees on the stage must necessarily be residents of Pluto's "palais tenebreux" (III, 6, 918), but he is careful to show them all the respect which they deserve.

Albeit deranged, the glass doctor tries to be very polite, especially to influential people such as the god Pluto and Judge Rhadamanthus whom he encounters in Hades. He trembles before Rhadmanthus (i.e. Tersandre); he prostrates himself before Pluto (i.e. Panfile); he compliments Proserpina (i.e. Isabelle) on her physical beauty, but he "roüille les yeux" (III, 6, 961) in terror as talks to Marine whom he takes to be Medusa. One can easily imagine his clumsy physical movements. When talking to Medusa, he cannot look at her "crin serpentifere" (III, 6, 959). He has already been turned to glass and he certainly does not want Marine to transform him into a stone doctor. Marine willingly puts up with his bizarre comments on her hair, but when he calls her an "execrable Megere,/ Maudit tison d'enfer" (III, 6, 960), we can easily imagine that Marine finds it difficult to control her temper. She turns to her mistress Isabelle and tells her: "Madame sauvez-moy de ce fol furieux!" (III, 6, 962). We can safely assume that the actress who plays Marine may well suddenly move away from the glass doctor and her remark to Isabelle leads us to believe that she is hiding behind Isabelle. Marine knows that men who speak so crudely to women have a tendency to commit acts of physical violence against women.

This instinctive reaction by Marine amuses the spectators who realize that the glass doctor is not dangerous, although his remark clearly offend Marine. Although his perception of reality is not shared by the spectators or any of the other characters in "Le Docteur de verre," the glass doctor somehow realizes that his remarks may have hurt Marine's feelings. He offers to make amends by sacrificing a barren cow and two owls, presumably right on the stage (III, 6, 966). One might assume that this pagan practice of animal sacrifice would shock many Parisian theatregoers of the 1650's and the ever sensible Panfile dissuades the glass doctor from sacrificing a cow and two owls on the stage of the Théâtre du Marais.

Once Panfile has convinced him that it would be inappropriate for him to sacrifice animals in front of the very sensitive Marine and Isabelle, the glass doctor then seeks advice from his father-in-

law elect. Like Rabelais' Panurge, the glass doctor has great difficulty deciding whether or not he should marry. Lines 975 to 1003 in *La Comédie sans comédie* constitute an overt textual reference to the famous conversation between Panurge and the theologian Hippothadée in chapter 30 from *Le Tiers Livre*. Every time that Panurge presents arguments in favor of marriage, Hippothadée tells him: "Mariez vous donc" (I, 529), but whenever Panurge expresses doubt about the wisdom of his getting married, the same theologian advises him to avoid marriage. Throughout his *Tiers Livre*, however, Rabelais stresses the obvious bad faith of Panurge who refuses systematically to recognize that any marriage can succeed only if a husband respects his wife as his equal and remains faithful to his marriage vows. Panurge himself admits that he wants to marry only because he has not received "de Dieu le don et grace speciale de continence" (Rabelais, I, 529). The egotistical and crude Panurge believes that there is little more to marriage than sex. Panurge is terrified that he may become a cuckold. The wise Hippothadée tells him that it is relatively simple for a husband to avoid becoming a cuckold. He tells Panurge: "vous l'entretiendrez en amitié conjugale, continuerez en preud'homie, luy monstrerez bon exemple, vivrez pudiquement, chastement, vertueusement en vostre mesnaige, comme voulez qu'elle, de son cousté, vive" (Rabelais, I, 531). Hippothadée's advice is very sensible because mutual love, respect, and trust are essential for a successful marriage. Panurge rejects these recommendations because they would require that he renounce his egotistical and exploitative view of love.

Quinault transformed this fairly nasty exchange between Panurge and Hippothadée into a witty dialogue between a concerned father and a mildly deranged suitor. Unlike Panurge, the glass doctor is a reasonably refined man who respects women and he is not obsessed with sex. On the one hand, he realizes that marriage can bring men and women "des passe-temps bien doux" (III, 6, 977) and Panfile advises him: "He bien mariez-vous" (III, 6, 978). On the other hand, the responsibilities of the married life will cause him to spend less time on his research and moreover he is afraid because in any marriage "on est toujours troublé de nouveaux embarras" (III, 6, 981). Panfile then tells him: "He bien ne vous mariez pas" (III, 6, 982). The glass doctor is still undecided. If he stays single, there will be no one to take care of him when he becomes ill. The "soin considerable/ Qu'une femme se donne alors pour un espoux" (III, 6, 984-985) represents a very real advantage, but he still fears that his wife might become attracted to another man if the glass doctor were to remain ill for an extended

period of time. Panfile then advises him: “He bien ne vous mariez pas” (III, 6, 990). The glass doctor still has difficulty arriving at a final decision. He would very much like to have children lest he die “sans lignée,” but he also does not want to raise a child whose father were another man (III, 6, 991-997). Although he does recognize the real pleasures of marriage, the glass doctor finally decides against marrying Isabelle. He presents a polite but ludicrous explanation to Panfile:

Pluton en soit loué, je suis de chair & d’os.  
 Beau-pere pretendu que Jupiter console,  
 Cherchez un gendre ailleurs, je reprends ma parole:  
 Le grand Dieu des Enfers dont je suis de retour,  
 M’a donné ce conseil en me rendant le jour.  
 (III, 6, 1010-1014)

Once he learns of the glass doctor’s definitive decision, Panfile quickly panics, but all ends well when Tersandre takes off his “habit de cuistre” and asks for Isabelle’s hand in marriage. Although the rather dense Panfile does not fully understand what has happened, he immediately grants Tersandre’s request. Panfile ends this play within a play with these lines:

Elle est à vous Tersandre, & vostre amour l’honore;  
 Mais je suis fort surpris d’un si grand changement,  
 Venez m’en éclaircir dans mon appartement.  
 (III, 6, 1052-1054)

We can be assured that Tersandre will explain everything to the rather confused Panfile before the marriage ceremony takes place. Although Philippe Quinault’s reputation is still based largely on his libretti and stage tragedies, his comedies do not merit the relative oblivion into which they have fallen. His very witty and creative use of word play and comic gestures in “Le Docteur de verre” shows that he was a very skilled comic playwright as well.

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#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of Quinault’s imitation of Rotrou’s *Les Deux Pucelles* and Barbieri’s *Innavertito*, consult pages 181 to 193 in Gros’ book (*infra*).

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