

Ribald Wit in Voiture's "Poésie Galante"

by
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It was in the service of Gaston d'Orléans that Vincent Voiture was first admitted to the ranks of aristocratic society, but it was in a very different social setting—the Hôtel de Rambouillet—that the poet would ultimately distinguish himself. The positive reception of Voiture's poetry appears to have paralleled the growing fame and influence of the Hôtel itself, the mythically famous salon located in the rue Saint-Thomas-du-Louvre and animated by Catherine de Vivonne, marquise de Rambouillet. Widely admired and imitated, the architecture and the décor of the Hôtel, as well as the odd ritual of conversing with guests seated in the space between the wall and the bed—the so-called *ruelle*—would become the "prototype" for French aristocratic society well beyond the seventeenth century (Craveri 28). In retrospect, as cultural historians have observed, what Catherine de Rambouillet invented, what she offered to her guests, and, ultimately, to the nobility as a whole, was nothing less than a new way of life that came to play a crucial role in the redefinition and evolution of noble identity.¹ A

¹ The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries represented a difficult period for sword nobles. The traditional basis of noble identity had been effectively undermined by the Wars of Religion and the absolutist tendencies of the French monarchy. Not only was the virtue of a warrior caste questioned which had devastated the country during the long civil conflict of the previous century; but the crown tended increasingly to sideline the nobility of the sword from the affairs of state in favor of newcomers recruited from the upper ranks of the bourgeoisie. This new administrative nobility, whose wealth, education, and bureaucratic talents were formidable, represented a direct challenge to the landed nobility's claims of natural superiority. No doubt the sword nobility was eager to lay its hands on the dowries attached to the well-to-do daughters of the robe nobility, and the two were in fact highly integrated. Precisely, however, the sword nobility was looking for a new way to distinguish itself, and it found the way of life celebrated by the Hôtel de Rambouillet an available solution to its growing identity crisis. For an account of the tenacious grip which the nobility kept on power

beloved habitué of the Hôtel, Voiture composed verses that successfully gave voice to this much admired ideal. Today the people, the Hôtel, and its conversations have disappeared—at least for the most part. One place where their traces may still be discerned is in the poetry of Voiture. Indeed his poetry provides a fine display of an emerging nobiliary ethos forged in the crucible of what critics now recognize are complex gender dynamics at work in the salon milieu. However, as I will show, while Voiture's poetry embraces and conforms to the mixed-gender ideal of *galanterie*, it not infrequently mocks it from a male-centered perspective.

What I hope to make clear is how *le style galant* as embodied in Voiture's poetry, while representing a civilized and civilizing ideal, at the same time resists sublimated and sublimating interpretations through the use of certain figures and tropes—specifically, syllepsis (the pun), anacoluthon (interrupted syntax), and adynaton (impossible image), to name only three. These figures manage to evoke what in the polite conversation of the Hôtel (I imagine) was literally unspeakable. The unspeakable is quite simply sex or, more precisely, male sexual desire for the female body. The sexual innuendo built into certain of Voiture's poems is an integral part of Voiture's wit which serves simultaneously as a sign of nobility and a sign of masculinity. Voiture's *raillerie* ("mocking," "poking fun") can be seen as a corrective to—or perhaps a defense mechanism against—what Lewis C. Seifert, in his study of masculinity and writing in seventeenth-century France, has identified as the effeminizing potential of falling in love (Seifert 71). Voiture's ribald wit may even be interpreted more broadly as a defense mechanism against the potential emasculation of the whole feminine ideal of *politesse*.

The dual function of Voiture's ribald wit as manifested in the three figures mentioned above becomes fairly clear, though it is far from simple, when one examines his poetry in the light of ethos.

and wealth despite numerous challenges and cataclysmic social changes, see Jonathan Dewald, *The European Nobility: 1400-1800* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Ethos is character, the sort of person one is, and it is a concept that has roots in ethical, political, and rhetorical discourse.² Its primary relevance here is that it bridges the gap between speech and conduct, saying and doing, the social and the literary. In essence, style may be an expression of character, and stylistic traits may be read as character traits, provided that stylistic choices are voluntary decisions.³

² According to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, different kinds of people aim at different kinds of goals (*NE* III.3 1111b5), and the most excellent persons, that is, the most virtuous, aim at the finest goals (*NE* III.4 1113a30). Simply put, your character determines your aim; the nature of your character determines what you seek and whether you seek it in the right way and for the right reasons (*NE* II.6 1106b30-35). In Aristotle's view, humans are not born with the virtues of character but acquire them (*NE* II.1 1103a20-25). Education seeks to form the character through right habituation, and right habituation manages to cultivate virtue by inducing a state of the soul that arises from voluntary decision habitually aiming at and achieving a mean between extremes (*NE* II.2 1103b25). For Aristotle, then, the kind of goal one aims at and the decisions one takes to achieve it say much about the kind of person one is (*NE* III.5 1113b5 & III.3 1111b5). "Ethos" is the kind of person one is; it is your character; and it is intimately connected to the soul through voluntary decision (*NE* II.6 1107a & II.9 1109a20-30). But city-states and whole peoples also have character or "ethos". However, this is not just because states, like individuals, aim at a good, deliberate, and make voluntary decisions (*NE* I.2 1094b10; *Politics* I.i.1), but also because states, like individuals, have a way of life, considered good or the best, which they pursue and seek to preserve (*Politics* III.ix.6). This communal sense of "ethos" derives from the older meanings attached to the term, which evolved from "the idea of 'belonging in' [...] an arena or range" where animals or people are naturally found, to the idea of an innate nature associated with these original haunts (See Chamberlain 97-99). For the profound influence of the *NE* on seventeenth-century rhetoric, ethics, and manners, see M. Fumaroli, "L'Héroïsme Cornélien et l'éthique de la magnanimité," *Héros et Orateurs* (Droz, 1996) and J. Mesnard, "'Honnête homme' et 'honnête femme dans la culture du XVIIe siècle,'" *La Culture du XVIIe siècle* (PUF, 1992).

³ "Ethos" or character is one of the three primary means of persuasion in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (2.1.3). Ethos is persuasive in virtue of familiarity, a

The way of life developed by Mme de Rambouillet and the habitués of the Hôtel, is often considered to have resolved the contraries of manners and literature, life and art, speech and conduct, in and through a certain conception of style, what Sophie Rollin calls *le style galant*. This style is equally evident, for instance, in the décor of the Hôtel, the conversation of its guests, their spirited jokes and quest for pleasure, and their literary tastes, quarrels, and compositions. Therefore, the poetry of Voiture would be concerned to exhibit this style precisely in order to show Voiture himself as the sort of person who belongs in the Hôtel. The whole purpose of ethos is to ingratiate the speaker—or poet—with the target audience,⁴ and to this end, Voiture would have conformed himself, what he says, and the way he says it to the particulars of time, persons, and place (Eden 26). While the conception of ethos is fairly straightforward—“dy moi qui tu hantes & je te diray quel tu es” (ctd. in Shoemaker 15)—this

recognition of commonality, a sense of belonging to the same community; it aims to foster credibility; it recognizes that persuasion is always persuading someone who belongs to a community. But how is the commonality and familiarity of ethos created? How else than through the kinds of decisions being made in the speech? The choice of arguments, the choice of arrangement, and the choice of figurative language all say something about the kind of person the speaker is—precisely because different kinds of persons aim at different ends. On this view, the link between saying and doing is voluntary decision. Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* suggests how a speaker begins with a generic type—such as the noble—and proceeds toward a specification of that type through the stylistic choices being made in the speech (2.12.2). The young do not say the same things, nor in the same way, as the old (2.13.16). One could infer, moreover, that the singular individual may have a singular way of expressing himself. Does anyone quite write like Voiture? Stylistic choices may thus be considered voluntary decisions, and, in this light, characteristic of a type and a species of person, even, perhaps, of a singular individual. If we are willing to accept the logical realism which this account of ethos implies, we may then consider the stylistic traits of speech as a symbolic image of the character of the speaker.

⁴ See Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1.2.4, 2.1.3, 2.13.16; Cicero, *De Oratore* 87-88; Quintilian 13-14.

rhetorical approach has surprising consequences when one examines how Voiture ostensibly chooses to portray himself specifically in relation to the mixed-gender milieu of the Hôtel.

In the first example, "VIII / Pour Minerve / en un ballet" (Voiture 40), Voiture praises the beauty of Minerva, one of three mythological characters appearing in a ballet. The other two are Venus and Circe. The premise of the poem is that Minerva is more beautiful than Venus and more enchanting than Circe—a fact that goes against the traditional attributes ascribed to these mythological figures, and one that is implicitly explained by the actual women playing these roles. Émile Magne, drawing on Tallement des Réaux, informs us that Minerve was played by Mme de Saintot, with whom it was rumored Voiture was having an affair (Magne 44). Voiture uses standard comparisons and stock superlatives to elegantly express the enchanting beauty of Minerva, saving his *bon mot* for the last stanza. Circe, the sorceress, will have to yield her pride of place to Minerva for the following reason (Voiture 42):

Car plus docte Magicienne,
 Vous meritez le maniment
 D'une autre verge que la sienne,
 Et qui charme plus puissamment.

Voiture puns on the word "verge," exploiting its literal and figurative meanings to say two things at once. The more potent wand which the enchanting Minerva deserves to wield is figuratively a penis! This is properly a syllepsis because both literal and figurative meanings are required to make sense of the stanza. This pun seems contrary to the spirit of *politesse*. One has trouble imagining that Mme de Saintot would appreciate the joke at her expense, if the poem were to make the rounds at the Hôtel de Rambouillet. At the same time, the poet takes shelter behind the figurative language, letting the audience "read" into it what they will.

In the second example, "Rondeaux LII," which begins "Les quatre soeurs m'ont pris dans leur lien" (Voiture 134), Voiture

pursues a similar strategy of surprise but uses a different figure of speech. The poem praises the grace and beauty of “four sisters,” whom the poem does not name but who may likely be identified with the four daughters of Catherine de Rambouillet. This conventional compliment paid to “four sisters,” vaguely reminiscent of other female groupings, such as the Muses, the Graces, or the Pleiades, betrays nothing unusual until the second stanza, when the poet announces that his heart is “strangely” attached to all four sisters simultaneously. Here is the last stanza (Voiture 135):

Chacun les aime, on ne dit pas combien,
Et moy qui suis sans force and sans soutien,
Et composé d’assez froide matiere,
En un besoin dedans une heure entiere,
J’entreprendrais de, vous m’entendez bien,
Les quatres soeurs.

This anacoluthon—a figure of speech in which one syntactic construction interrupts a previous one to create an ungrammatical whole—literally leaves unsaid what we are invited to supply. The rhetorical effect of any actual verb is surely less than the effect created by the virtual, unstated verbs that we are running through our minds, trying to figure out what this dirty old man would like to do to these poor girls. The speaker’s arousal from cold to hot, from feeble to virile, is a hyperbolic compliment demonstrating the superlative beauty of these sisters. And yet we can’t help but ask whether Catherine de Rambouillet would have appreciated this ingenious but suspect tribute to her four daughters. Again, however, the poet hides behind his figurative language. Any ribald inference is made the reader’s responsibility. Voiture himself has literally said nothing untoward.

These are two of the figures promised. Each seems to evoke male sexual desire without stating it. So, what is the function of these figures of speech? What is the purpose of this ribald display of wit? To begin to answer these questions, we must recall that salon poetry was a crucial part of salon culture. Reading, commenting, and writing poetry were mainstays of the Hôtel de

Rambouillet, leading to spontaneous poetry slams like the famous Battle of the Rondeaux. Salon poetry was modeled on polite conversation, adopting many of the same stylistic conventions and observing the same *bienséances* ("propriety"), and *raillerie*, it is true, was an essential ingredient of polite conversation. As Alain Génétiot explains, *raillerie* was one of those minor vices cultivated by polite society for the pleasure it procured, livening up what might otherwise have been a rather too stuffy atmosphere (Génétiot 145). The mocking banter of salon conversation, however, was meant to be in good taste, avoiding the lewd gags of farce and the virulent barbs of satire, although we can be sure that the refined mockery of polite speech was all too often put to malicious use. We should therefore expect *raillerie* to show up in the poetry of Voiture, and we should expect that it would serve a similar function. Its levity and playfulness are intended to give pleasure. His flashes of wit liven up what is otherwise a highly conventional poetry.

But I would submit that the entertainment value and pleasure procured by *raillerie* are subordinated to another purpose. Guez de Balzac is telling in this regard: "La bonne Raillerie est une marque de la bonne naissance, & de la bonne nourriture; [elle] est un effet de la raison vive & resveillée; instruite par l'estude, & polie par le grand Monde" (ctd. in Génétiot 146). The sort of person Guez de Balzac is describing here is of course the noble. *Raillerie* is therefore a caste marker. It serves as the distinguishing feature of nobility, whether defined as birth, education, intellect, or the company one keeps. It says as much about the speaker who uses it as about the social setting. It says that the speaker who uses it belongs in that setting. *Raillerie* is thus both a stylistic trait and a character trait. The *raillerie* we find in Voiture's poems serves to designate the speaker as a generic type: the noble. *Raillerie* places the speaker in the aristocratic milieu and marks him as belonging to that milieu—a significant claim when one considers that Voiture was a commoner and often taunted for being an interloper.

This nobiliary ethos, or character type, receives further specification from other stylistic traits. In the second example, the phrase "les quatre soeurs" is a shibboleth that places the speaker

among the habitués of the Hôtel de Rambouillet. More specific still, the conventionally figurative language of imprisonment in the second example, and the stock tropes of deification in the first example, present the image of the *galant homme*, that is, the cultured gentleman who knows how to observe the conventions of *politesse* in amorous discourse. But the two other figures we just examined, the ribald syllepsis and anacoluthon, revise the image of the speaker, specifying it further, transforming the *galant homme*, or cultured gentleman, into *un homme galant*, a flirtatious gentleman or ladies' man.

The dual function of Voiture's ribald wit can now be plainly seen: it seeks to mark the speaker as noble, and it seeks to affirm the speaker's masculinity. The ribald syllepsis and anacoluthon, one could argue, are not aimed at the women but at the other men. Lewis Seifert has admirably shown how men trafficking in *politesse* and *galanterie* could be—and were—charged with effeminacy particularly by other men who adhered to a more normative idea of masculinity (cf. Seifert, Part I, Chapter 2). In Seifert's terms, Voiture needs to assert his dominance not only over women, but also over "effeminate" forms of masculinity. Voiture displays the codes of mixed-gender polite society in his poetry, but he also occasionally reasserts his virility by insinuating—to the other men—that he is or has engaged in sexual encounters with women. Mixing conventional poetic language with ribald wit suggests a kind of superiority over both sexes. Voiture wants us to see him as a seducer, someone who captivates women, and who therefore has power over them. At the same time, as a seducer, Voiture dominates men, asserting his superiority over male competitors. In these examples, Voiture indeed affirms his masculinity by objectifying women, but Voiture is an equal opportunity objectifier, praising (or belittling) both men and women in much of his poetry. No doubt Voiture writes from within the masculinist perspective of the Petrarchan tradition, and it would be interesting to see what a non-masculinist love poetry would look like—indeed whether it even exists in the seventeenth century.

In any event, if we accept the idea that these poems present a symbolic image of a kind of person, namely the noble, and more precisely, *un galant homme* who is also *un homme galant*, we may ask what *social* purpose such an image might serve. What do such poems contribute to the conversation of the salon? Pleasure and amusement, surely, but it can be argued that pleasure and amusement are not ends in themselves here but rather already serve as markers of prestige and social standing. If salon conversation could make or break reputations, salon poetry would have a similar function but extend the range and life of those conversations and reputations. Salon poetry, and Voiture's poetry in particular, imparts an afterlife to the conversations, people, and circumstances of the Hôtel. In so doing, it makes them exemplary. It cloaks the particular—time, persons, place, and values—in the trappings of the universal. I say "trappings" because it is common rhetorical practice to elevate *particular* values and *partial* views to the level of the universal. The rules of logic invalidate such an inference, and any true universal would have to get beyond what feminists label a masculine and masculinist perspective.

What we see in salon poetry is a certain continuity between the ancient rhetorical tradition inherited and practiced by men in public spaces such as the Pulpit and the Parlement, on the one hand, and the contemporary French tradition of conversation practiced by women and men in the quasi-private spaces of the salon. Much like epideictic eloquence, whose function, Aristotle tells us, was to affirm, correct, or modify widely shared values of the community (*Rhetoric* 1.3.5; 1.9.1; 1.9.30), the lyric poetry composed by Voiture and others in the Hôtel de Rambouillet praised the values, tastes, and preferences of the Hôtel and ridiculed whatever fell outside its boundaries. Thus salon poetry had a complex social function, bridging the gap between live conversation and physical absence, extending the range and the duration of the conversations, the doings and happenings, the tastes and preferences of the Rambouillet regulars beyond the confines of the Hôtel's walls, holding up the Hôtel's particular values and judgments for admiration to the wider aristocratic community and thereby making them exemplary. It was this way of life which was held up as the good life, that for the sake of which the state exists.

The final example of Voiture's ribald wit which I have chosen is taken from a poem written to ridicule a particular woman on a specific occasion, as pompously announced by the title: "XIV / Stances / sur une Dame, dont la juppe / fut retroussée / en versant dans un carrosse, à la campagne." The woman remains nameless in the poem, but Émile Magne suggests that the victim of this *raillerie* was Mlle de Marolle, whose arrogance and ambition were notorious. "She honestly believed," writes Magne, "that her nobility was superior to the other ladies-in-waiting who resided at the Louvre. She brazenly sought the most coveted seat at court and, later, the title of duchess. A distant relation of Catherine de Rambouillet, Mlle de Marolle was outraged to hear herself referred to as 'cousin'" (Magne 53). We cannot claim that Voiture's poem in fact killed her reputation, but it does seek to take her down a peg by making her a laughingstock. Its mode is paradoxical because it treats something trivial and common in noble and hyperbolic terms, deftly drawing on a series of Petrarchan conceits (Voiture 54):

Il est vray que je fus surpris,
 Le feu passa dans mes esprits:
 Et mon coeur autrefois superbe,
 Humble se rendit à l'Amour,
 Quand il vit vostre cu sur l'herbe,
 Faire honte aux rayons du jour.

Le Soleil confus dans les Cieux,
 En le voyant si radieux,
 Pensa retourner en arriere,
 Son feu ne servant plus de rien;
 Mais ayant veu vostre derriere,
 Il n'osa plus montrer le sien.

Voiture revises Petrarch: it is not the face but the derriere which outshines the sun, enflaming the senses of the poet and making a prisoner of his heart. The burlesque comparison is pursued to the usual hyperbolic extremes by elevating the object of praise above the brightest celestial object in the sky. Poems of paradoxical praise such as this are excellent pretexts for a poet to display his

talent and ingenuity, and Voiture succeeds marvelously well in doing just that.

But there is also a troubling flash of wit in this poem. It arrives inconspicuously in a stanza which begins as a list noting the reactions of the flowers (Voiture 55):

La Rose la reine des fleurs,
Perdit ses plus vives couleurs,
De crainte l'oeillet devint bleme;
Et Narcisse alors convaincu,
Oublia l'amour de soy-mesme,
Pour se mirer dans votre cu.

That last image comes as a surprise. The first two flowers, the rose and the carnation, are conventionally anthropomorphized, but Narcissus, we realize, is a flower in name only. The name Narcissus conforms to the practice of designating noble persons with pastoral monikers, a fashion popular in early seventeenth-century novels and poetry. It is entirely analogous to Phyllis, the name which begins the poem. Literally, moreover, the image shows a Narcissus who has not yet metamorphosed into a flower. He is still a beautiful young man. So how do we interpret this image?

There is something outlandish, even monstrous, in this image. Technically, it is an *adynaton*, an impossible image, often used to evoke disorder. Do we take "cul" in some figurative sense or is it literal here? The temptation is to resolve the impossible image by giving it some figurative interpretation. He does not literally see himself but only figuratively so. But this is not what the image says. It says that Narcissus literally sees himself. Narcissus, Phyllis, and the mirroring ass are all on the same level. In fact, a non-identity is suggested between Narcissus and the object of his contemplation by the phrase "Oublia l'amour de soy-mesme." There is a self-forgetting immediately replaced by a monstrous mirroring, a non-identical mirroring, as suggested by the verb "se mirer." Is this very funny, highly ingenious trope, an image of

difference or otherness at whose heart sexuality lies? Is it a burlesque image of an erotic encounter?

In the latter case, we might find a purpose for this impossible image. It figures what must be left unspoken for the game of “galanterie” to get under way—the very thing which “galanterie” presupposes. As Lewis Seifert and Donna Stanton have observed, the highly conventional art of “galanterie,” an updated version of courtly love, is at bottom an art of seduction (Seifert 39). Its precondition, for men at any rate, was falling in love, or at least having had at one time or another “quelque légère inclination amoureuse” (Seifert, “L’Homme de ruelle” 104-105). However, as Seifert argues, because falling in love was considered a loss of self-control, “galanterie” contains strategies to ward off effeminacy, one of which is playfulness and feigning. There is much feigning in Voiture’s poetry. But does Voiture perhaps display a complimentary strategy in his ribald wit? Does such an impossible image not find a tongue-in-cheek way of expressing the primacy of sex and male sexual desire that grounds “le style galant” and yet looms as a disruptive force in the salon? Such risqué banter invites the reader to consider Voiture as a man with heterosexual experience. It little matters whether or not he actually had any. Such talk may be only talk, but it aims to create the impression that the talker knows from experience what he is talking about. It is a kind of knowing wink to those in the know, pointing to experience as the basis for authenticity and authority in matters of gallantry. But Voiture lets our intellects and imaginations fill in the blanks: *we* hear the pun on “verge,” *we* supply the missing verbs in the anacoluthon, and *we* picture the impossible image of Narcissus mirroring himself in the exposed *derriere* of that woman. Surely male sexual desire and the male sexual prowess implied by Voiture’s ribald wit were not acceptable topics of polite conversation in the salon. He almost seems to be mocking *politesse* itself.

Voiture’s ribald wit is merely one expression of “galanterie” found in his poetry, which is by turns mocking, playful, respectful, and graceful. Almost no one—unless it is Madeleine de Scudéry—embodies the spirit of *galanterie* better than Voiture.

His lyric poetry was and is widely considered an exemplary expression of *le style galant*, a style inextricable from the way of life that characterized the Hôtel de Rambouillet. However, as Faith E. Beasley reminds us in her *Salons, History, and the Creation of 17th-Century France*, the tendency to consider the salon exclusively in terms of the history of manners and social mores ignores not just the palpable effects which this milieu had on the French Republic of Letters, but also the function of literature in creating and legitimizing a way of life that came to be considered the hallmark of nobility. Beasley's book offers a much needed corrective to a one-sided view of salon culture by recovering what was specifically literary about that culture, and this recovery, I am suggesting, may be usefully re-joined to the history of noble self-fashioning, in which competing ideas of living nobly were invented and tested in the conversation, theater, novels, letter writing, and poetry typical of salon culture. The cultivation of "belles-lettres," and of lyric poetry in particular, had the capacity to produce social distinction, that is to say, prestige, and this capacity was co-opted by the nobility in its effort to refashion its identity and carve out a space where it could display its "superiority." Poetry and letters did not just reflect social behaviors defined as essentially noble, however crucial such a reflection may have been, but were themselves behaviors considered typically noble. In short, literature was an important way of being noble. At the same time, Lewis Seifert and others have shown that we should not consider the salon a utopian space, and even less the poetry of Voiture as the ideal expression of *galant* values and ideals. If Voiture becomes a model for future generations of nobles searching for a new identity, then so does the masculine and masculinist nobiliary ethos fashioned by him. Voiture's poetry anticipates the broader cultural phenomenon that Beasley uncovers and critiques in her book: it effaces the literary production and critical acumen of salon women (with a few exceptions) simply by ignoring them.

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