

## DANCOURT AND WATTEAU

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(see also DANCOURT ET WATTEAU [French version])

It is an established fact that Watteau drew his subject for L'Embarquement pour ythère from Dancourt's Les Trois cousines. It is a generally accepted fact that L'Embarquement is the masterpiece of Watteau, just as it is that Watteau is an "immortal" among the painters. On the other hand, Les Trois cousines and its author have been less fortunate. Almost forgotten, their semi-oblivion is unjust and their rehabilitation overdue. It was Dancourt who furnished the germ that haunted the sensitive Watteau, who painted, as the Goncourts have written, *des enlacements sans impatience, des désirs sans appétits, des voluptés sans désirs,*"<sup>1</sup> and even though intensified and poeticized, the fundamental idea remained the same to the end. Watteau's sustained interest in and his abiding fidelity to the original idea can throw light not only on an undetected aspect of Les Trois cousines but on a whole unexplored aspect of Dancourt. The present proposal is therefore but a further contribution to the study of the rapprochement of Watteau's painting and Dancourt's play, a rapprochement which has already been noted by Louis de Fourcaud and others. Their concern as art critics has remained with the light shed on Watteau by Dancourt's play. Heretofore literary scholars have not considered that Watteau's enduring, even persistent interest in Dancourt's Les Trois cousines might reveal hidden qualities unappreciated by previous centuries but accessible to the twentieth century, particularly in the recent years of its second half. Before proceeding, though, to such a conclusion, it would be well to recall who Dancourt was, exactly, to review the background and subject of Les Trois cousines, and to review the principal conclusions drawn by literary analysts of the rapprochement.

Consider first the fate of this curious dramatist, Dancourt. In 1920, according to Lancaster<sup>2</sup>, Dancourt placed third (first after Racine and Molière) in number of performances of his plays at the Comédie Française. It is true that he has slipped some since then. He is now, by a tally made in 1961, first only after Molière, Racine, Corneille and Regnard<sup>3</sup>. Names that follow his, however, are Musset, Marivaux and Voltaire. His Chevalier à la mode played as late as 1893. Yet one has the impression of hardly having heard of Dancourt. Apparently he was not to the twentieth century taste, although many remain curious about this author who—again to refer to Lancaster—was the most prolific dramatic author after Alexandre Hardy to begin writing plays before the eighteenth century. He wrote, for example, thirty plays from 1690 to 1700, although most of these were one-act. And what of

the quality of his plays? Eighteenth century critics, including Voltaire, Palissot and La Harpe generally thought little of him. Grimm and Diderot ranked him somewhat higher, but it wasn't until the nineteenth century that an attempt was made to classify him. All of his critics beginning with Geoffrey<sup>4</sup>, through Barthélemy<sup>5</sup> and Lemaître<sup>6</sup> and ending with Lancaster<sup>7</sup> seem more or less in agreement that he was best at comedy of manners and depiction of various types of aristocrats, bourgeois and adventurers. He had even begun to dramatize the peasant, although, as Barroux<sup>8</sup> notes, their representation is more or less traditional.. Lanson<sup>9</sup>, although he relegates Dancourt to a place almost as low as does La Harpe<sup>10</sup>, seems uneasy in doing so, and Lancaster concludes that Dancourt succeeded in making himself “more than anyone else in France, the creator of the comedy of manners.”<sup>11</sup> Corneille, Molière, Hauteroche and others had already written comedies that are entitled to this classification, according to Lancaster, but Corneille had gone into no such detail in his study of society, and in Molière manners are overshadowed by character, in Huateroche by intrigue.<sup>12</sup> It is especially Dancourt, continues Lancaster, “who derives his comic element from situations in which rich collections of social types are confronted with one another and in which the peculiar characteristics of his period are set forth.”<sup>13</sup>

For biographical reference, Florent Carton, Sieur Dancourt was born in Fontainebleau in 1661, was received into the Comédie Française in 1685, retired in 1718 and died in 1725. Bibliographically, although Le Galant jardinier and Colin-Maillard were his only plays to remain in the repertory of the Comédie for most of the century, Le Chevalier à la mode persists as his generally accepted masterpiece. Geoffroy devotes considerable space to Dancourt in his Cours de la littérature dramatique, as does Barthélemy in his La Bourgeoisie et le paysan sur le théâtre au XVIIIème siècle. Jules Lemaître, however has the longest single work devoted to Dancourt: La Comédie après Molière et le théâtre de Dancourt, although there is also an unpublished dissertation by W. H. Starr, referred to by Lancaster. For further bio- and bibliographical details, Lancaster has assembled all the important data up to the publication of his study of the seventeenth century theater and Sunset.<sup>14</sup>

Yet even the encyclopedic Lancaster makes no mention of the relationship between Les Trois cousines and Watteau's painting, omitting completely, like others before him, the most puzzling and most original element of the whole play. He does indeed note that Blaise,

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a miller's helper, "proposes a lovers' pilgrimage with other young people of the village."<sup>15</sup> Subsequently he observes, too, that «millers, gypsies and pilgrims dance in the intermèdes.»<sup>16</sup> Yet the final "intermède" hardly resembles the divertissements of the day, the distinction arising from the fact that his divertissement carries out an action begun in the body of the play, functioning less as a disconnected act and more as an epilogue integrated with the play as a whole. It is true that in theory, at least according to Cahusac in the *Encyclopédie*,<sup>17</sup> an operatic divertissement was supposed to function exactly as Dancourt wrote this one; in practice this was rarely if ever the case. A closer examination of this epilogue reveals that the first plan of the young people had been for everyone to leave on a love pilgrimage since they hadn't secured the parents' consent for marriage. Subsequently, though, consent is granted, and still the plan persists, although precisely whither the pilgrimage is bound remains vague. All the characters in the play seem to know what a love pilgrimage is, by the way, but one can't swear that they all have the identical interpretations; The custom was by no means a common one, and its relation as a literary theme to certain aspects of the pastoral novels and to *La Carte du Tendre* are tenuous. Even more curiously, after a false departure, followed by a mass marriage, the new couples set out again. Once married they leave for the ideal *Ile de Cythère*—a bizarre allegory of love, certainly. The whole end of the play has the ring at once of the *Pied Piper of Hamelin* and the "nouveau roman," with its Borgesian idea of multiple possibilities.

Fortunately, if the literary critics and scholars pass over the *pèlerinage* from a mixture of disdain and perplexity, Watteau's art critics are more helpful. In the light of this pilgrimage there are three résumés of the play to be mentioned: 1) that of Louis de Fourcaud, who is credited with having made the discovery that Watteau drew his subject from the Dancourt play, 2) that of Louis Gillet, who has written one of the soundest studies of Watteau and 3) that of Vuafart and Hérold, who, under the editorship of Emile Dacier, have enriched the earlier works with much valuable marginal material.

Fourcaud, after a brief résumé of the play, terminates almost waggishly: "En compagnie des garçons d'alentour, ceux-ci organisent un... [suspension points *sic*] *pèlerinage* assez semblable à un enlèvement général de toute la jeunesse du pays. Ce sera un beau tapage. Du diable si l'on n'est pas contraint de célébrer au plus tôt leurs noces de retour! Les

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choses ajustant à leur guise»...etc.<sup>18</sup> Gillet elaborates upon this idea, although he considers the trip to be little more than a ride on the Bateau-mouche of the day: “Au dernier acte, toute la jeunesse entre en scène déguisée en pèlerins [‘Notez,’ he adds, ‘que les pèlerinages étaient de temps immémorial dans les coutumes populaires et qu’ils forment un ressort essentiel du théâtre depuis Térence’], et tout le monde change l’intermède...avant de partir en voyage pour le temple de l’Amour.»<sup>19</sup> Gillet’s rather weak justification of the pilgrimage explains nothing, but it does at least have the virtue of betraying a certain discomfort with the idea. Finally Vauflart and Hérold have the salutary effect of trying to test Fourcaud’s theory of a connection between the play and the painting, although in so doing they appear to be bent primarily on disgracing Dancourt: “Le pèlerinage à Cythère n’est pas une idée neuve: l’auteur l’a prise dans un ouvrage plus relevé et l’a transposé d’une façon plaisante; mais c’est une parodie. Les spectateurs savaient à quoi s’en tenir et ne pouvaient que trouver ingénieuse l’idée d’avoir fait de ces villageois des pèlerins de Cythère qui, au lieu d’être sentimentaux, étaient pratiques.»<sup>20</sup> However, these critics fail to name any specific example before Dancourt, all their examples dating well after 1700, when Les Trois cousines appears, except for a reference to La Fontaine’s use of the term «Cythère.» Obviously, L’Astrée and other pastoral novels as well as Clélie with its Carte du Tendre contain a conception of the voyage or love trip, but these are not exactly the same as Dancourt’s concept. Be this as it may, Vauflart and Hérold admit that, after all, Fourcaud’s theory is sound and even prove that many of Watteau’s paintings have their point of departure in several of Dancourt’s other plays. This added fact is significant, since it indicates that what holds true for Les Trois cousines might well hold true for other plays of Dancourt. For the moment, concerning Les Trois cousines, the confusion as to the nature of this allegorical or erotic trip persists.

A study of the genesis and metamorphosis of the subject that obsessed Watteau reveals that he held to the idea of the theater as the cadre, even though he reworked the idea of L’Embarquement several times before its final version. The Goncourt brothers realized this in their appreciation of the painting it is surprising to note what they were able to see, without suspecting the picture’s origin: “Une paresse de passion dont rien d’un rire de bouc les satyres de pierre embusqués dans les coulisses vertes.”<sup>21</sup> Nor was Watteau content to keep coming back to “warm up” an old idea over and over again. When the Goncourts add to their commentary: “C’est Cythère; mais c’est la Cythère de Watteau” their comment arouses the

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thought that perhaps Watteau's delicately ambiguous view of the world might actually stem from this same quality in Dancourt. Both artists share a taste for the uncertainty of reality. Watteau possibly did not view the "intermède" of Les Trois cousines, in other words, as does Gillet: "Ce voyage sur la Seine par le coche d'eau ou la patache,"<sup>22</sup> and yet this same Gillet has hit upon the explanation of L'Embarquement which might well explain also the apparently gay and superficial vaudeville of Dancourt. For Gillet, it is the embarkation. In fact, even in the last versions of "pour le voyage, le beau voyage où l'on n'arrive pas. In fact, even in the last versions of "L'Embarquement, as Charles Tolnay<sup>23</sup> notes, not one of the couples has actually set foot in the boat. Is this then not only a trip that never arrives, but which doesn't even start?

Dwelling on the subject of L'Embarquement pour Cythère and the reason Watteau held to this subject for so many years paves the way to the view of a new Dancourt. For Les Trois cousines is not the only play in which the actor-playwright showed an originality overlooked by the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Professor Spire Pitou has mentioned the technical stage innovation of L'Eclipse as well as original elements in the writing itself.<sup>24</sup> The British writer, Frederick Hawkins notes that, in the Impromptu de Suresnes, "Bacchus and other deities...mix with and are known to a swarm of villagers, but the oddity of such a juxtaposition did not prevent the piece from having 26 representations"<sup>25</sup> Lancaster finds these departures from the comedy of manners inferior to what he has established as Dancourt's proper genre<sup>26</sup>, but his is at best a subjective view.

He admits that they were frequently well-received, although this fact of course weighs neither for nor against esthetic excellence.

Les Fées, according to the brothers Parfaict,<sup>27</sup> was on the other hand a flop; yet it, too, in my view has possibilities not unlike those of L'Impromptu de Suresnes. Here the fairies, probably used because of the current popularity of Perrault and the Comtesse d'Aulnay, may not be fairy-like, but the play certainly is removed from reality and in some ways recalls Shakespeare's Twelfth Night. Again the gods mingle with the peasants in Les Dieux comédiens, where Jupiter tries to woo a shepherdess, but fails in Dancourt's play, where he had succeeded with Amphitryon's Alcène in plays of other authors. Finally, the play within the play of the Comédie des comédiens deserves special attention. This is no ordinary

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play within a play, but rather a mixture of realities on three levels inside and outside of the theater as well as on the stage, in such a way as to again call to mind the world of Robbe-Grillet and the universe of Jorge Luis Borges. The analysis of the critics Geoffroy, Bazrthélemy, Lemaître, Starr and Lancaster and the others who share their view has its validity but only if comedy of manners is considered to have dramatic merit. The existence of this frame of values should not prevent us from seeking another valuation under another light, the light of the Twentieth century and its preoccupation with the shifting faces of reality. In this way, although Dancourt has suffered by the passing from fashion of the manners he depicted, he may well become a new matter of interest as an early manifestation of modern ideas. The whole of Dancourt's work might well be re-studied from this new viewpoint, with the result that a new hierarchy of values could be placed on his works to parallel, not to replace the traditional one.

The foregoing review of Watteau's use of Dancourt's idea in Les Trois cousines is not new. It dates from the turn of the twentieth century. However, it serves to stress again that the impression of this play upon Watteau lasted for from eight to fifteen years. That Watteau could find depth in this play has prompted the preceding closer look which has led to the suggestion of hidden springs in Dancourt, not only in Les Trois cousines, but in his other works as well. He is a dramatic writer who deserves a searching reassessment.

1. Goncourt, Edmond et Jules de L'Art du XVIIIème siècle
- <sup>2</sup> Lancaster, H. Carrington A History of French Dramatic Literature, Baltimore, 1952 Part IV, v.2  
"French Literature of the Seventeenth Century."
- <sup>3</sup> Chevalley, Sylvie, ed. La Comédie – Française (monographie) Paris, 1961. p. 32
- <sup>4</sup> Geoffroy, J.L. Cours de littérature dramatique, v.2, p.188.
- <sup>5</sup> Barthélemy, Charles La Bourgeoisie et le paysan sur le théâtre au XVIIIème siècle
- <sup>6</sup> Lemaître, Jules La Comédie après Molière et le théâtre de Dancourt. Paris, 1903
- <sup>7</sup> op. cit. pp768-77
- <sup>8</sup> Barroux, Robert Dictionnaire des lettres françaises
- <sup>9</sup> Lanson, Gustave, Histoire illustrée de la littérature française, Paris, 1923. 10 La Harpe, Jean-François, Cours de Littérature, Paris, 1865. (Ch. VII, Sec. III, 2ème partie, Siècle de Louis XIV, livre 1).
11. Op. cit. p.768.
12. Ibid. p. 816n
- 13/ Ibid.
14. Lancaster, H. Carrington. Sunset, a history of Prisian drama in the last years of Louis XIV, 1701-1715. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1945
15. Lancaster, H. Carrington, A History of French Dramatic Literature, Op. cit.
16. Ibid.
17. Diderot, Denis, éd. Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, Paris, 1751-1772. Art. « Divertissement » par De Cahusac.
- 18/ Fourcaud, Louis de, Revue de l'art ancien et moderne. V. xv ; N°.84 ; mars, 1904 ; p.205, « Antoine Watteau ; scènes et figures théâtrales. »
19. Gillet, Louis de, Un Grand maître du XVIIIème siècle, Watteau. Paris, 1921, p. 110.
20. Vuafart, Albert, and Jacques Hérold ; Jean Julienne et les gravures de Watteau au XVIIIème siècle. Paris ; 1929 ; V.1 « Notices et documents biographiques », p.73
21. Goncourt, Jules et Edmond de, op. cit.
22. Gillet, op. cit.
23. Tolnay, Charles, « L'Embarquement pour Cythère » in Gazette des beaux-arts, V.45, Février 1955, pp.91-102.
24. Pitou, Spire ; « Observations on Dancourt's l'Eclipse » in Modern Language Quarterly, CXXII, pp. 149-152.
25. Hawkins, Frederick . The French Stage in the Eighteenth Century. London, 1888, V.1, p. 109.
26. Lncastser, op. cit.
- 27; Parfait; Claude et François, Histoire du théâtre français. Vol. XV.

- <sup>1</sup> Goncourt, Edmond et Jules de L'Art du XVIIIème siècle
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- <sup>7</sup> op. cit. pp768-77
- <sup>8</sup> Barroux, Robert Dictionnaire des lettres françaises
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<sup>3</sup> Chevalley, Sylvie, ed. La Comédie – Française (monograph) Paris, 1961. p. »é

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<sup>7</sup> op. cit. pp768-77

<sup>8</sup> Barroux, Robert Dictionnaire des lettres françaises