

1985

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Repository Citation

Ekstein, N. (1985). The comic récit: *Les Plaideurs*. *Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature*, 12, 525-540.

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The Comic Récit: Les Plaideurs

by

Nina Ekstein

Récits are a standard feature of the French classical theater. While normally associated with tragedy (e.g. the famous "récit de Thérémène"), seventeenth-century comedy adopted the use of dramatic narrative and adapted it for its own ends. In an examination of the comic recit, two questions arise immediately: how is the récit in comedy different from, first the tragic récit, and second other segments of a comedy?

To begin with, it must be noted that récits appear less frequently in comedy than in tragedy; the eight récits of Les Plaideurs are the fewest to be found in any of Racine's plays. The relative sparseness of narrative in comedy can be accounted for in part by the reduced importance of the predramatic past. In comedy, the action onstage is not based on myth or legend. Expository récits are therefore less numerous and less complex. Récits recounting offstage events are also more rare in comedy than in tragedy. Comic plots are far more likely than tragic ones to be presentable onstage in their

entirety. Fierce battles and bloody deaths are reserved for tragedy.¹ The dramatic conventions of French classical tragedy often necessitate the use of récits; in comedy, the chief function of narrative is most often simply to make the audience laugh. Having a specific effect on the audience is not limited to comic récits, however. A tragic récit may serve, for example, to elicit fear or pity from the spectator. The primary difference between the two is that, in tragedy, the function on the spectator axis is generally consonant with the onstage function. In comedy, one often finds dissonance between the two axes. For instance, characters rarely laugh at récits which are likely to amuse the audience. This discord itself is comic: the inappropriateness or obtuseness of the characters' reactions contributes to the audience's amusement. Not only is there dissonance between the onstage and offstage functions, but the comic effect of the récit on the audience often dominates any onstage function. When Chicanneau recounts his lengthy legal battle (I,vii, 11.201-30), he does so ostensibly to impress the countess. Whether or not he succeeds matters far less than the comic impact of his narrative on the audience. The same is true of L'Intimé's two récits: whether his "brilliant" defense is responsible for the dog's acquittal is hardly crucial to either the action of the play or the spectator.

Récits, of course, are only one of a vast array of possible sources of the comic. Of particular interest in considering comic effect in these passages is to examine how such effects are specifically narrative. My discussion will therefore focus on the following narrative components: 1) subject matter, 2) chronology, 3) pacing,

4) verb tenses, and 5) the role of narrator and addressee.

Les Plaideurs provides a clear instance of the structure of the subject matter as a resource for comic effect. Whereas in tragedy, mythical and dramatic complexity leads to a variety of narrative subject matter, in comedy, the subject matter is often severely limited and reduction provides a significant source of the comic. All of the récits of Les Plaideurs discuss a single subject: the judicial world. This includes Petit Jean's role as suisse, the system of courtroom bribery, the case of the rooster (I,i, 11.3-43); a legalistic response to Petit Jean's request to sleep (I,ii, 11.55-58); Chicanneau's legal difficulties with his neighbor (I,vii, 11.201-230); the countess's courtroom battles against her family (I,vii, 11.237-44); Isabelle's feelings about judicial robes (II,vi, 11.487-88); the spices that Dandin has received as a form of bribery (II,vii, 11.511-14); and finally, the courtroom defense of the dog (III,iii, 11.755-62 and 769-75). Although legal jargon is found throughout the play, it is perhaps most intensively concentrated in the récits ("[p]réseⁿte ta requête," "on poursuit un arrêt," "[l]'on décrète," etc.).

A second layer of repetition reinforces the comic effect: each of the four extended narratives links the world of lawyers to the world of animals. In these récits, the beasts either provoke legal battles (the donkey and the chicken which graze on Chicanneau's land; I,iii, 11.201-30), or are themselves defendants (the rooster which crowed late; I,i, 11.3-43; and the dog that made off with the capon; III,iii, 11.755-62 and 769-75). In each, the legal world, with its sophisticated rhetoric and system of order, descends into the bar-

nyard. The juxtaposition generates comic energy and comments ironically on the relationship between life and the law.

Such unity of narrative subject is not peculiar to Les Plaideurs. Repeated narrative focus often emphasizes comic themes; at times, the repetition itself becomes comic. In Le menteur, for example, five of Dorante's récits are lies (I,iii, ll.175-84; I,v, ll.264-96; II,v, ll.605-74; IV,i, ll.1127-43; V,vi, ll.1761-64). His narrative "creativity" and its consequences are central to the action of the play. Eight of the eleven récits in L'École des femmes discuss either cuckoldry or, more specifically, the cuckolding of Arnolphe (I,i, ll.129-48; II,v, ll.469-73 and 485-537; III,iv, ll.858-81 and 914-15; IV,vi, ll.1144-69; IV,vii, ll.1188-1205; V,ii, ll.1375-1411; V,ix, ll.1740-57).²

Although unity of subject is of interest, it is less intimately connected to the structure of narrative than is chronology. As in Racine's tragedies, the chronology of events within the récits of Les Plaideurs is completely linear. Something, however, is awry: there seems to be a consistent absence of logical and temporal connections. For example, in Chicaneau's lengthy narrative, it is difficult to establish the relationship of one event to another:

Voici le fait. Depuis quinze ans ou vingt ans en ça,
 Au travers d'un mien pré certain ânon passa,
 S'y vautra, non sans faire un notable dommage,
 Dont je formai ma plainte au juge du village.
 Je fais saisir l'ânon. Un expert est nommé,
 A deux bottes de foin le dégât estimé.
 Enfin, au bout d'un an, sentence par laquelle
 Nous sommes renvoyés hors de cours. J'en appelle.
 Pendant qu'à l'audience on poursuit un arrêt,
 Remarquez bien ceci, Madame, s'il vous plaît,
 Notre ami Drolichon, qui n'est pas une bête,
 Obtient pour quelque argent un arrêt sur requête,
 Et je gagne ma cause. A cela que fait-on?
 Mon chicaneur s'oppose à l'exécution.
 Autre incident: tandis qu'au procès on travaille,

Ma partie en mon pré laisse aller sa volaille.
 Ordonné qu'il sera fait rapport à la cour
 Du foin que peut manger une poule en un jour.
 Le tout joint au procès enfin, et toute chose
 Demeurant en état, on appointe la cause
 Le cinquième ou sixième avril cinquante-six.
 J'écris sur nouveaux frais. Je produis, je fournis
 De dits, de contredits, enquêtes, compulsoires,
 Rapports d'experts, transports, trois interlocutoires,
 Grieffs et faits nouveaux, baux et procès-verbaux.
 J'obtiens lettres royales, et je m'inscris en faux.
 Quatorze appointements, trente exploits, six instances,
 Six-vingts productions, vingt arrêts de défenses,
 Arrêt enfin. Je pers ma cause avec dépens,
 Estimé environ cinq à six mille francs. (I,vii, ll.201-30)

This narrative presents a curious mixture of precision and indeterminacy. There are two temporal indicators: "Depuis quinze ou vingt ans en ça (l.201) and "Le cinquième ou sixième avril cinquante-six" (l.221). Both of these lines share a certain imprecision ("ou") which undermines their narrative function. The temporal uncertainty in the first line, where either alternative places the events in the distant past, is ironically less problematic than the second instance, which is unconnected to other moments in the récit and thus useless in establishing narrative chronology. Like the entire récit, the time references are both overly precise and yet vague ("trois interlocutoires", "vingt arrêts de défenses", etc.). The imprecision produces multiple comic effects. The repetition of figures alone is amusing, as is the grotesquely legalistic account in which the organizing principle seems to be repetition ("six instances, / Six-vingts productions, vingt arrêts de défenses," ll.227-28) and interior rhyme ("Grieffs et faits nouveaux, baux et procès-verbaux," l.225) rather than chronology.

The récit contains two narrative progressions. The second, independent action is introduced by: "Autre incident." There is no

indication of how much time has elapsed between the two incidents (the chicken's and the donkey's trespassing on Chicanneau's property). The sense of chronology is further weakened by Chicanneau's avoidance of inflected verbs ("A deux bottes de foin le dégât estimé", 1.206; "Enfin, au bout d'un an, sentence par laquelle", 1.207; etc.); in the end, the narrative line is reduced to a list of substantives ("Quatorze appointements, trente exploits, six instances," 1.227, etc.).

This undermining occurs not only in Chicanneau's récit, but in several others as well. In L'Intimé's defense of Citron (the dog), we find the same telegraphic style rather than fully articulated sentences: "Avocat pour et contre appelé" (1.761), "Jour pris" (1.762), etc. Here the temporal relationship between events, while once again non-explicit, is nonetheless simple to ascertain, since the events recounted take place during the play itself. The absence of temporal indicators makes the transitions between events in the extended récits abrupt (e.g. "L'on décrète : / On le prend"; III,iii, 11.760-61). Even the introductions of the narratives are brusque and artificial: both Chicanneau and L'Intimé begin with the curt and legalistic "Voici le fait" (11. 201, 755).

The symbol of order in this dramatic universe, judge Dandin, is himself flawed; as Petit Jean points out, "son timbre est brouillé" (I,i, 1.30). Order has broken down (the son imprisons the father, a rooster is convicted and sentenced to death, etc.), and the effects of this breakdown are reflected in the chronology of narrative. This is in contrast to tragic récits, where chronological order is far more explicit and integration into the surrounding discourse much

subtler.³

Although devices for achieving the effects may vary, the distortion of chronology is a common characteristic of narrative in comedy. While the risk of tampering with so fundamental a component of narrative may be great, the temptation is greater. Whether the manipulations are subtle or outrageous, narrative chronology appears to offer itself as an irresistible target for comic distortion.

Pacing is another component of the chronological organization of narrative. In tragic récits, the rhythm of presentation of discrete events is frequently employed for dramatic effect. In Les Plaideurs, Racine makes extensive use of the same techniques for comic ends. The first of L'Intimé's récits provides a number of instances:

Voici le fait. Un chien vient dans une cuisine;
Il y trouve un chapon, lequel a bonne mine.
Or celui pour lequel je parle est affamé;
Celui contre lequel je parle autem plumé;
Et celui pour lequel je suis prend en cachette
Celui contre lequel je parle. L'on décrète :
On le prend. Avocat pour et contre appelé;
Jour pris. Je dois parler, je parle, j'ai parlé.
(III,iii, 11.755-62)

There is nothing unusual about the pace of the beginning: 1) "Un chien vient dans une cuisine;" 2) "Il y trouve un chapon." In fact, these two lines establish a norm against which the balance of the récit will be measured. In the third line, legal jargon slows the pace: the dog becomes "celui pour qui je parle" and the capon "celui contre lequel je parle". The four lines in the center of the récit contain only one event ("prend en cachette"). The pace then accelerates abruptly ("On le prend. Avocat pour et contre appelé; Jour pris"), catching up with and even passing the moment of narration ("Je dois parler, je parle, j'ai parlé"). This is an extreme case,

but not atypical; similar acceleration occurs near the end of Chicanneau's récit:

"J'écris sur nouveaux frais. Je produis, je fournis
De dits, de contredits, enquêtes, compulsoires,
Rapports d'experts, transports, trois interlocutoires,
Griefs et faits nouveaux, baux et procès-verbaux.
J'obtiens lettres royales, et je m'inscris en faux.
Quatorze appointements, trente exploits, six instances,
Six-vingts productions, vingt arrêts de défenses,
Arrêt enfin. (I,vii, 11.222-29)

The accumulation that we find in these lines telescopes events to such a degree (many of the verbs are elided) that chronological progression almost disappears in the flurry of legal documents. Such shifts of pace are comic in part because they hinder the very functions which make rhythmic variation so effective in tragic récits. Disruptive rather than supportive of the narrative flow, these extreme shifts impede comprehension and focus attention on the act of narration rather than content. In Les Plaideurs (with perhaps the exception of Petit-Jean's exposition), the content of the narratives recedes to the point where it is peripheral to the action of the play.

Verb forms provide another example of comic distortion of narrative components. In Racine's tragic récits, the historic present is used sparingly, and it underscores moments of dramatic intensity. In Chicanneau's récit as well as L'Intimé's two narrative defenses of Citron, the historic present is used virtually throughout. L'Intimé recounts the events leading up to the trial:

Qu'arrive-t-il, Messieurs? On vient. Comment vient-on?
On poursuit ma partie. On force une maison.
Quelle maison? Maison de notre propre juge!
On brise le cellier qui nous sert de refuge!
De vol, de brigandage on nous déclare auteurs!
On nous traîne, on nous livre à nos accusateurs,
A maître Petit Jean, Messieurs.

(III,iii, 11.769-75)

The historic present calls attention to the dramatic immediacy of the action. The effect is comic because of the disproportion between the melodramatic tone and the subject matter: a dog that has stolen a chicken. The extreme sense of immediacy further weakens the sense of temporal progression. The difference between the past and the present, like the temporal relationship between events, must be ascertained on wholly semantic grounds. Almost all other linguistic indicators are absent.⁴

As we have seen, the act of narration is often magnified by comic manipulation of narrative components to a point where it overwhelms content. Given the emphasis on the act of storytelling, it is not surprising to find that the focus on the narrator and the addressee is also sharpened. Narrators in Les Plaideurs are usually homodiegetic (that is, actors within the récit as well as narrators); furthermore, they seem to deliberately involve themselves in the events they recount. In L'Intimé's two accounts of the theft of the chicken, he creates a role for himself which ironically recalls the dramatic involvement of the confidant-witness in tragedy. In his first récit, "je" repeatedly appears in his legalistic formulations (e.g. "Celui pour lequel je plaide"). At the end of this speech, L'Intimé again turns the focus away from the dog onto himself: "Je dois parler, je parle, j'ai parlé". In his second récit, he adopts a new tactic, itself a parody of legal discourse: the dog is no longer "celui pour lequel je suis", but "nous". Grammatically, L'Intimé shares the role of the defendant.⁵ The narrator's hand is so evident that one has little faith in the veracity of what he recounts.

The interaction between narrator and addressee in Les Plaideurs

is often based upon narrative techniques similar to those found in Racine's tragic récits. Chicanneau interrupts his récit in order to direct the countess's attention to a particularly important event: "Remarquez bien ceci, Madame, s'il vous plaît" (I,vii, l.210), and she, in turn, appeals to him by interjecting "Monsieur" three times in her account of legal woe (I,vii, ll.237-44). He also involves the countess by asking a question that an interested addressee might ask: "A cela que fait-on?". He instructs her, in a sense, in the art of listening. This kind of prompting on the part of the narrator is taken to the extreme in L'Intimé's second récit, where questions precede three of the first four events ("Qu'arrive-t-il, messieurs?", "Comment vient-on?", and "Quelle maison?", ll.769 and 771). While parodying courtroom style, the repeated self-interruption produces a comic perception of the act of narration. The narrative appears to be pushed on almost mechanically by the prompting questions of the narrator.⁶

Narrative interruption is often used in other comedies to focus attention on the addressee. Once again, the events recounted diminish in importance compared to the comic circumstances of the narration itself. In Molière's Le Malade imaginaire, Argan interrupts with questions on eight occasions as Louison recounts what she saw in her sister's room (II,viii). Amphitryon interrupts Sosie ten times, as the latter tries to explain the appearance of his double (Molière, Amphitryon, II,i, ll.718-820); Arnolphe does the same on several occasions: three times during Agnès' récit (L'Ecole des femmes, II,v, ll.485-537), and six during one of Horace's narratives (III,iv, ll.858-81). Orgon interrupts Dorine's double récit eight times,

repeating "Le pauvre homme!" and "Et Tartuffe?" (Tartuffe, I,iv, ll.231-56). Narrative interruption may lead to a reversal of roles. Ergaste, in Rotrou's La Soeur, becomes impatient with Lélie's overly long narrative; after eighty-four lines of a récit that had been presented as requiring "deux mots," he interrupts and finishes it for him (I,iii, ll.223-318). Similarly, in Corneille's L'Illusion comique, Clindor interrupts and takes over one of Matamore's récits; he does not seek to abridge, but merely to mock (II,iv, ll.443-55). All of these comic forms of addressee interruption serve to focus attention on the narrative act.

Récits in comedy shed light on their tragic counterparts and vice-versa through their shared use of narrative components and functions. A distinctive feature of récits in comedy seems to be a frequent tendency to highlight the onstage moment of narration as opposed to the past of the narrated. Surprising pacing of events, unclear chronology, the use of the historic present, the abundance of references to the narrator, and addressee involvement all call attention to the act of narrating, and direct it away from content.

Comic focus on narration rather than the narrated brings us to the issue of context. Récits are told in the context of a particular dramatic situation, to an addressee (with the rare exceptions of monologue récits) and by a narrator, both of whom have other roles in the action of the play. Within certain limited parameters, however, such as the status of a narrator and addressee (main character or confidant), as well as the position of the récit in a play (beginning, end), the narrative contexts in Racine's tragedies are relatively stable. Narrators are always in command of the material

they recount, addressees always listen attentively, and the circumstances are always appropriate. The récits are motivated and carefully integrated into the action of the play.

In comedy, however, narrative context requires further examination. Not only is it foregrounded in these plays by the consistent focus on the act of narration, but the context is not always stable. In fact, distortion of some aspect of narrative context is a major source of comic effect in récits, and in *Les Plaideurs*, perhaps its primary source. When Petit Jean recounts his exposition récit (I,i, 11.3-43), he does so without a context: there is no addressee and no onstage dramatic justification for its telling. Chicanneau and the countess both employ narrative in order to impress each other, but neither of them is particularly interested in listening to the other's récit (I,vii, 11.201-30 and 237-44).⁷ L'Intimé's two récits are told in the context of a trial. A courtroom is in many ways a perfect dramatic setting for narrative. Typically, the prosecuting and defense attorneys each present a narrative to the judge: two different versions of reality that corroborate (by choice of events, the logical connections between them, and other evaluative features) the guilt or innocence of the defendant. Such récits are dramatically powerful because the judge's decision will be based upon the récit's success or failure to sway him. While no such examples are found in Racine's tragedies, they are found elsewhere.⁸ In *Les Plaideurs*, the context is distorted: the trial procedure is satirized, and a dog is tried for having stolen a chicken. The addressee, judge Dandin, is crazy. Petit Jean acts as the prosecuting attorney, but he barely mentions the dog and his crime ("Tant

y a qu'il n'est rien que votre chien ne prenne; / Qu'il a mangé là-bas un bon chapon du Maine," 11.711-12), and shows no respect, if any understanding, for the purpose and meaning of a trial ("Que la première fois que je l'y trouverai, / Son procès est tout fait, et je l'assommerai," 11.713-14). L'Intimé tells two récits in the dog's defense, but he is almost as incompetent as Petit Jean. Neither is a lawyer; they are playing a role for which they are ill-prepared. L'Intimé's récits, in fact, are a complete distortion of the standard tragic narrative context: the narrator, the addressee, and the situation are all inappropriate.⁹

In conclusion, récits in comedy often parody or otherwise distort features of récits in tragedy. Yet comic récits are not simple variants of their tragic counterparts. They differ from both tragic récits and other comic segments of the play. To venture a hypothesis, I would say that the specificity of the comic récit in French classical comedy has three primary aspects: first, the sharp difference of reactions to the récit between the characters onstage and the audience; second, the distortion of narrative context; and third, the consistent focus on the act of narrating rather than on the content of the recit.

NOTES

¹ When récits concerning offstage actions are employed in comedy, their functions are similar to those in tragedy. They provide simple dramatic economy (for example, in *Le Malade imaginaire*, the meeting between Angélique and Cléante recounted by Louison,

II,viii; or Lyse's seduction of the jailer in L'Illusion comique, IV,ii, 11.1065-1116); they circumvent the technical difficulties of staging (e.g. Dom Juan's near-drowning, Dom Juan, II,i); they emphasize the contrast between the on- and offstage universes (Alceste's legal activities, Le Misanthrope, IV,i, 11.1133-62 and V,i, 11.1487-1520, as well as most of the crucial events in L'Ecole des femmes, II,v, 11.485-537; III,v, 11.858-81 and 914-15; IV,vi, 11.1144-69; V,ii, 11.1375-1411; V,vi, 11.1623-41).

² See my "Functions of the Récit in L'Ecole des femmes," Kentucky Romance Quarterly, 30 (1983), 223-30.

³ Another variation of chronological distortion is found in several other comedies of the period: an overabundance rather than an absence of temporal and logical markers. For example, Pierrot, in his account of Dom Juan's near-drowning, repeats "pis" (puis) on six occasions, five in rapid succession (Dom Juan, II,i):

" . . . et pis j'avons tant fait cahin, caha, que je les avons tirez de gliau, et pis je les avons menez chez nous auprès du feu, et pis ils se sant depouillez tous nuds pour se secher, et pis il y en est venu encor deux de la mesme bande qui sequiant sauvez tout seuls, et pis Maturine est arrivée là à qui l'en a fait les doux yeux."
(Dom Juan, II, i)

⁴ Agnès' récit in L'Ecole des femmes contains a similar use of the historic present (II,v, 11.485-502). Describing her first encounter with Horace, she recounts their courtship ballet of bows and curtsies at great length and with much repetition. Most of the verbs in this section are in the historic present, as if to underscore the emotional intensity that these events hold for her. Again the overabundance of this dramatic intensifier and the disproportion between elaboration and subject produce a comic effect.

⁵ This excessive preoccupation with self on the part of the

narrator is found in both L'Illusion comique and Le menteur. Most of Matamore's and Dorante's récits are fictions created strictly for self-glorification; thus the narrators are naturally the active and "heroic" agents of events. Matamore tells six fictional récits (II,ii, 11.245-49, 261-84, 296-308; II,iv, 11.443-46; IV,iv, 11.1151-58 and 1162-64); Dorante tells five narrative lies (I,iii, 11.175-84; I,v, 11.264-96; II,v, 11.605-74; IV,i, 11.1127-43; V,vi, 11.1761-64).

⁶ Henri Bergson considers the juxtaposition of the mechanistic and the living ("le vivant") to be central to the notion of the comic; "Le Rire: Essai sur la signification du comique," in Oeuvres, ed. André Robinet (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), p. 419.

⁷ The countess is an especially poor addressee. She does not react to the content of Chicanneau's récit except to offer her own narrative. Later in the same scene (I, vii), Chicanneau and the countess have a severe misunderstanding which is a direct result of the latter's comic difficulties as a listener.

It is interesting to note the almost explicit barter system of récits between the two characters. As Barthes has pointed out, narrative is often used in such a fashion in fiction: "Le Récit: monnaie d'échange, objet de contrat, enjeu économique, en un mot marchandise;" S/Z (Paris: Seuil, 1970), p. 95. His example, of course, is Balzac's "Sarrasine;" others such as The Thousand and One Nights, Manon Lescaut, and Jacques le fataliste abound. In the récits in Racine's tragedies, the exchange of narrative for something desired is frequently implicit in the context of the narration. Rarely, however, is one récit offered in exchange for another, as in

this scene between Chicanneau and the countess.

⁸ Corneille, for example, employs the context of a more or less formal trial on several occasions. In the fifth act of Cinna, Emilie, Cinna, and Maxime each recount récits in order to justify their conduct (III,ii, ll.1575-82, 1598-1604, 1628-37; III,iii, ll.1674-83). Auguste is the addressee of all these récits, and their judge. When Rodrigue kills Don Gomès in Le Cid, Chimène and Don Diègue both run to the king, the former to demand retribution and the latter to defend his son. Both tell récits whose form and argumentation are strikingly similar (II,vii, ll.659-68 and 701-18).

⁹ Similarly, in L'illusion comique, the context of Matamore's récits is comically subverted. He is a highly competent, if overly imaginative, narrator, but he tells his récits to addressees whose interest is completely feigned. The role of the narrator is explicitly parodied in several of Molière's plays. The denouement récit in L'Ecole des femmes has two narrators who alternate couplets in a singsong fashion, announcing that Agnès is the long-lost daughter of Enrique, destined to marry Horace (V,ix, ll.1740-57). By doubling the narrator, Molière lightens the tone of the last scene, discourages any temptation the spectator may feel to sympathize with Arnolphe's "tragic" loss of Agnès, and undermines the traditional narrative context which calls for a single narrator. In Tartuffe, we find, not one récit with two narrators, but one narrator forced to tell two récits simultaneously. Orgon, having returned home after a journey, is eager for news of Tartuffe; Dorante, the narrator, is anxious to tell of his wife's recent illness. The result is a récit which alternates between the two subjects in which the narrator and the addressee are comically mismatched (I,iv, ll.231-56).