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The Functions of the Récit
in L’Ecole des femmes

Nina C. Ekstein

Since L’Ecole des femmes was first performed in 1662, much mention has been made of the numerous récits in the play. In La Critique de l’Ecole des femmes, Lysidas criticizes the play because “dans cette comédie-ci, il ne se passe point d’actions, et tout consiste en des récits que vient faire Agnès ou Horace.” Indeed, the entire love intrigue takes place offstage and is reported in the form of récits. Far from being tiresome recitals, these narratives are integrated into the structure of the play on numerous levels.

Amolphe, as is well known, is obsessed with cuckoldry, or more specifically, with avoiding being cuckolded. He rigidly and determinedly seeks an unnatural degree of control over Agnès in order to insure her faithfulness. The vehicle that he employs during the course of the play is speech. As Bernard Magné has noted, for Amolphe, “parler = dominer.” And speak, he does: almost 49% of the lines of the play are his. Amolphe’s project for control, of course, fails, and this failure, as will be shown, is intimately tied to the presence of the récits in the play.

A number of critics have noted that Amolphe bears a certain resemblance to a tragic hero. According to J.D. Hubert, L’Ecole des femmes presents a “typically tragic situation in a degraded form: Amolphe faces a malevolent destiny armed only with human intelligence.” Ralph Albanese compares Amolphe to a tragic hero in combat with a superior force, a tragic hero who mistakes himself for a god and is subsequently, or rather, consequently, defeated. In this combat, it is the récits themselves which serve as the vehicle for the malevolent destiny which brings about Amolphe’s defeat. The traditional functions of the récit in French classical tragedy are to convey offstage and past events on the stage. The récits in this comedy do just that, and more significantly, as the play progresses, they seem to acquire an unsettling degree of autonomy. For no matter who tells them, whether it be Agnès (II. 485-537), Horace (II. 858-81, 1144-69, 1375-1411, 1623-41), Chrysalde and Oronte (II. 1740-57) or Amolphe himself (II. 129-48), the subject matter is, invariably, the developing story of Amolphe’s cuckoldry. In fact, if one reads only these seven récits, a surprisingly coherent and complete story emerges. And repeatedly, throughout the play, Amolphe is shown to be powerless to
arrest the course of this story. Inevitably, Agnès falls in love with Horace, and Arnolphe is cuckolded before he is even wed. The récits thus emerge as the voice of Arnolphe’s fate.

A closer examination of the récits themselves will reveal how Arnolphe’s cuckoldry is seemingly inscribed within the narrative discourse, and will illustrate the wide range of other functions that the récits perform. In the first scene, well before Arnolphe explains his plans to marry Agnès, he presents Chrysalde with a series of six portraits of cuckoldry. He uses no names, designating the individuals involved rather as “l’un” or “l’autre.” Of these six portraits, four are in fact miniature récits describing a short series of actions. One example will suffice:

L’autre, pour se purger de sa magnificence,
Dit qu’elle gagne au jeu l’argent qu’elle dépense,
Et le mari benêt, sans songer à quel jeu,
Sur les gains qu’elle fait rend des grâces à Dieu. (I,i, II. 39-42)

The repetition of the theme of cuckoldry signals that this subject is an obsession for Arnolphe. At the same time, a link is established between the form of the récit and the theme of cuckoldry, a link which will be maintained throughout the play.

In the same scene, Arnolphe tells Chrysalde the récit of how he found Agnès and had her raised in a convent according to his wishes (i,i, II. 129-48). On the one hand, this is a typical exposition récit, almost obligatory in classical tragedy, and certainly not uncommon in comedy. It contains the information that the spectators need in order to situate and understand the action of the play. At the same time, however, this récit is the first part of the story of Arnolphe’s cuckoldry. Arnolphe’s project to insure a faithful wife fails, not only because he brazenly rivals the gods in his quest for control, but also for a number of less exalted reasons. Manifestations of several of these can be found in this récit. First, Agnès’s name is absent from Arnolphe’s narrative, indicative of the fact that he does not consider her to be an autonomous human being. And second, he gloatingly reveals how he has deliberately kept her uneducated and ignorant. This ignorance will, of course, contribute directly to her ingenuous and accepting attitude towards Horace’s amorous attentions.

Ironically, not only does Arnolphe himself begin the story of his own cuckoldry, but he solicits récits from both Agnès and Horace, récits which recount further portions of his downfall. Arnolphe does so in the vain hope that the information thus acquired will enable him to arrest the course of events. After being informed by Horace that Agnès has accepted the young man’s advances, in what is also a miniature récit (I,iv, II. 312-16), Arnolphe demands an account of Horace’s visits from Agnès. She obliges him at some length, detailing Horace’s repeated “révérances” and the old woman’s subsequent visit on his behalf (II, v, II. 485-537). Agnès’s adherence to literal fact results in the extended use of direct discourse and in the multiplication of similar verbal actions (“Je fis,” “il me refait,” “j’en refais,” etc.). This multiplication, however, recalls Arnolphe’s multiple portraits of cuckoldry in the first scene, thus establishing a subtle link which reinforces the common theme of cuckoldry. And this récit indeed marks a new episode in the developing story of Arnolphe’s cuckoldry. The fact that this is the longest récit in the play indicates a proclivity on Agnès’s part for story-telling. This proclivity is doubly dangerous, first, because of Arnolphe’s repeated association of women who betray their husbands with the ability to manipulate both spoken and written language, and second, because narrative has already been firmly linked to cuckoldry in this theatrical universe.

This récit also has comic functions. While the récits, taken as a group, do appear to have a tragic function—the voice of destiny ineluctably intoning the narrative of the hero’s downfall—one must not forget that this “tragic” downfall takes the traditionally comic form of cuckoldry. The récits in this play accommodate both the comic and the tragic and engender an engaging duality of tone.6 And this comic/tragic duality, or tension, is precisely what makes the récits in this play highly dramatic in nature. Agnès and Horace both tell their récits blithely, happily recounting the trials and successes of their blossoming love, totally unaware that their addressee, Arnolphe, does not share their enthusiasm. To Arnolphe, these narratives resemble, rather, the traditional tragic récits of calamitous events which have occurred onstage. The sharp discrepancy in the perception of the content of the récits on the part of the speaker and the addressee, combined with the addressee’s desire to conceal his surprise and horror, contains tremendous potential for onstage comic effects (through gesture, facial expression, etc.). Molière employs this argument to defend the use of récits in this play in La Critique de l’École des femmes via his mouthpiece, Dorante: “Les récits eux-mêmes y sont des actions . . . d’autant qu’ils sont tous faits innocemment, ces récits, à la personne intéressée, qui par là entre, à tous coups, dans une confusion à réjouir les spectateurs . . .” (scene vi). In the récit told by Agnès, this tension is felt strongly, and echoed in Arnolphe’s interruptions: “Ah! suppôt de Satan, exécable damné!” (I. 511) and “Ah! sorcière maudite, empoisonneuse d’âmes! Puisses-t’en payer tes charitables trames!” (II. 535-36).7 The récit is also comic because of Agnès’s childlike narrative technique: she summarizes little, detailing each action and each verbal instance of her dialogue with the old woman.

The comic/tragic tension underlies all of the remaining récits of the play. The speaker and the addressee perceive the content of the récits in a radically different light. The following three récits are all told by Horace to Arnolphe, one in each of the last three acts. In each instance, Arnolphe poses as Horace’s confidant in the hopes of using the information gained in order to put an end to the growing relationship between Agnès and Horace. In the first récit of this series, Horace reports that his latest attempt to see Agnès has failed. In-
stead of a warm welcome, Agnès chased him by throwing a rock (III, iv, II. 858-81). This is an unusual récit because both Arnolphe and the spectators are already aware of its content. In the last scene of the previous act, Arnolphe instructed Agnès that she was to turn Horace away, with a rock, if necessary, and that Arnolphe would watch her do so (II, v, II. 632-38). A récit which recounts information already known to the spectator and to the addressee, even if the latter feigns surprise, is not, in itself, very interesting. Molière deals with this problem very effectively in two fashions. First, Arnolphe interrupts Horace seven times. These interruptions involve either dramatic irony (for example, “Ohi! Ohi comment cela?”) or are themselves comic (“La porte au nez!”). Because four of the seven interruptions are questions requesting further information, the récit becomes highly conversational, closer to dramatic dialogue than to a tirade. Arnolphe is verbally involved in Horace's récit: the former's questions could even be said to direct Horace's account of events. Second, Molière has divided the récit into two parts. The second part, which follows twenty-nine lines later, contains information known to neither the spectator nor Arnolphe:

Oui, ce dernier miracle éclate dans Agnès,
Car, tranchant avec moi par ces termes exprès:
"Retirez-vous, mon âme aux visites renonce;
Je sais tous vos discours, et voilà ma réponse,"
Cette pierre, ou ce grès, dont vous vous étonnez,
Avec un mot de lettre est tombée à mes pieds;
Et j'admire de voir cette lettre ajustée
Avec le sens des mots et la pierre jetée. (III, iv, II. 910-17.)

Arnolphe's mocking self-confidence during the first portion of the récit is swiftly converted to anguish. And Horace and Agnès have overcome the obstacle placed in their path by Arnolphe.

Horace's next récit recounts another episode in Arnolphe's "tragedy." Despite his desperate efforts, Horace and Agnès have seen each other once again. Horace climbed up to Agnès's room and hid in her wardrobe while Arnolphe stomped around her room in mute frustration (IV, vi, II. 1144-69). Here, the informational content of the récit is of interest to both Arnolphe and the spectator. And while the previous récit included numerous interventions on the part of the addressee, here Arnolphe is completely silent. He does not request the récit, he interjects nothing, he even remains silent when Horace finishes. This silence prefigures Arnolphe's final "Ouf!" To a man for whom speech signifies control, this silence is a sign of defeat. The defeat is not yet definitive, however. Horace, after telling his récit, informs Arnolphe that he plans to visit Agnès that same night, thus providing Arnolphe with another opportunity to foil their amorous projects.

The last of Horace's récits in this series deals with this nocturnal meeting, and recounts how he slipped off the ladder and fell. He then goes on to relate Arnolphe's consternation and Agnès's escape from the house (V, ii, II. 1375-1411). Once again, Molière varies the circumstances surrounding the récit. Part of the content is known to both Arnolphe and the spectator: Horace's fall from the ladder. The rest, as well as his presence alive on stage, is a shock to both. Instead of a linear chronological progression, as was found in the two preceding récits, Horace returns four times to the comic moment when Arnolphe, Alain, and Georgette argue about what they have done to Horace (II. 1391, 1392, 1393, 1402-03). The spectator, in fact, witnessed this argument in the previous scene (V, i). The frequent return to that moment within Horace's récit has the effect of making Arnolphe look ridiculous and completely out of control of the situation. As was the case in the previous récit, Arnolphe does not solicit Horace's narrative. It would seem that not only can Arnolphe not prevent the young lovers from meeting, but he is finally helpless to prevent Horace from telling him about his success. The story seems to continue as though in another realm, a realm totally impervious to Arnolphe's will and actions. Try as he might, Arnolphe cannot prevent his own cuckoldry. Its inevitability is reinforced by the fact that the récits as a group recount not only Arnolphe's "tragic" defeat, but also the traditional comic story of the young, innocent couple united after overcoming multiple obstacles (here, of course, provided by Arnolphe).

This series of récits is central to the play. In each, an important event has occurred offstage marking a further stage in Agnès's and Horace's love and in Arnolphe's cuckoldry. In each, the basic dramatic situation is identical: Horace recounts the successful episodes of his growing love for Agnès to Arnolphe, whom he takes to be his sympathetic confidant, while Arnolphe listens, containing his rage and bristling at his impotence. Each of Horace's récits is longer than the last, indicating the accelerating progress of Arnolphe's defeat. And despite Arnolphe's furious activity both on- and offstage, he repeatedly finds himself in the same position: alone on the stage, and ignorant of what, in fact, is occurring. He needs Horace's récits for their informational content, yet he suffers while listening to them and cannot manage to profit from what he thereby learns.

Horace's next récit marks a significant departure from the series of récits just examined. Once again, he begins his narrative unbidden, but contrary to the other three, the content delights Arnolphe: Horace announces that his father has arrived and has told Horace that a marriage has been arranged for him (V, vi, II. 1623-41). The comic/tragic tension is completely reversed: it is now Horace who experiences the content as tragic, and Arnolphe who must contain his glee. This reversal is echoed in several changes of narrative technique. There are fewer narrative actions in this récit (four as opposed to seven, nine, and eleven in the last three récits) and the chronological progres-
sion is not entirely linear. There are also more references to the addressee, which underlines the note of desperate appeal in this récit. But this reversal is merely temporary and functions to prepare Arnolphe's final defeat.

Not surprisingly, the final blow is also delivered in the form of a récit. Arnolphe's power to control Agnès has dwindled as her love for Horace has grown. The only form of control left to him is his legal power to return Agnès to the convent. The récit told by Oronte and Chrysalde concerning Agnès's true identity takes this remaining power away from Arnolphe and reduces him to speechlessness (V.ix, ll. 1740-57). This final récit is highly unusual. It has two narrators who alternate couplets in a singsong fashion, lightening the tone of the récit's content, and calling attention to the typically comic unification of the young couple rather than to the "tragic" destruction of Arnolphe's plans. Yet while the arbitrary and fantastic nature of this denouement is not entirely linear. There are also more references to the addressee, which underlines the note of desperate appeal in this récit. Arnolphe over the head with a bludgeon onstage, it would be no more dramatic than are the récits told to him.

5) Comedy/Tragedy I. From the perspective of the spectator, the récits frequently give rise to a highly comic situation: Arnolphe listening to a récit, the content of which enrages him, unable to show his displeasure or to undo what has occurred. Yet if the spectator suspends the distance he feels from Arnolphe and allows himself momentarily to adopt Arnolphe's perspective (such temporary sympathy is perhaps encouraged by Arnolphe's tragic use of monologue and language), the same situation becomes tragic. Arnolphe's dilemma is reminiscent of Act II of Corneille's Horace: Camille and Sabine are powerless to act and are dependent upon récits in order to discover what misfortune has occurred.

6) Comedy/Tragedy II. As we have seen, L'Ecole des femmes is, on the one hand, a comedy. It is the story of young lovers united after surmounting numerous obstacles. At the end, the blocking character, Arnolphe, is banished, and the happy couple goes off to wed. Simultaneously, it is the tragic tale of a man who dares to strive for wedded bliss without paying the price his peers have been forced to pay: cuckoldry. He tempts fate, and is, accordingly, struck down; his elaborate plans have come to naught. The récits in this play simultaneously provide the vehicle for both comedy and tragedy. These two classic generic stories (Northrup Frye's "Epos of Spring" and "Epos of Autumn") seem to overwhelm the will or control of all of the characters, for they all contribute to its telling. The récits as a group seem to exist a priori, impervious to both Horace's naive foolishness and Arnolphe's determined designs.

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2. Gabriel Conesa, in his article, "Remarques sur la structure dramatique de L'Ecole des femmes," Revue d'Histoire du Théâtre, 30 (1978), 120-26, shows how the static passages (récits and monologues) serve to create an original dramatic rhythm.


6. For further discussion of the tragic elements in this play, vocabulary, monologues, etc., see Hubert, Magné, and Doubrovsky, op. cit.

7. In this instance, Arnolphe demonstrates a bizarre and totally isolated ability to influence the course of events: as Horace informs the audience (III, iv, ll. 970-73), the old woman dies shortly thereafter.

