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The Functions of the *Récit* in *L'École des femmes*

Nina C. Ekstein

Since *L'École des femmes* was first performed in 1662, much mention has been made of the numerous *récits* in the play. In *La Critique de l'École 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."¹ 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.²

Arnolphe, 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 Arnolphe, "parler = dominer."³ And speak, he does: almost 49% of the lines of the play are his. Arnolphe'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 Arnolphe bears a certain resemblance to a tragic hero. According to J.D. Hubert, *L'École des femmes* presents a "typically tragic situation in a degraded form: Arnolphe faces a malevolent destiny armed only with human intelligence."⁴ Ralph Albanese compares Arnolphe 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.⁵ In this combat, it is the *récits* themselves which serve as the vehicle for the malevolent destiny which brings about Arnolphe's defeat. The traditional functions of the *récit* in French classical tragedy are to convey off-stage 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 (ll. 485-537), Horace (ll. 858-81, 1144-69, 1375-1411, 1623-41), Chrystalde and Oronte (ll. 1740-57) or Arnolphe himself (ll. 129-48), the subject matter is, invariably, the developing story of Arnolphe's cuckoldry. In fact, if one reads only these seven *récits*, a surprisingly coherent and complete story emerges. And repeatedly, throughout the play, Arnolphe 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 cuckolds. 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, ll. 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, ll. 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, ll. 312-16), Arnolphe demands an account of Horace's visits from Agnès. She obliges him at some length, detailing Horace's repeated "révérences" and the old woman's subsequent visit

on his behalf (II, v, ll. 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 cuckolds 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 offstage. 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'Ecole 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, exécration damnée!" (I. 511) and "Ah! sorcière maudite, empoisonneuse d'âmes / Puisse l'enfer 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, ll. 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, ll. 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, "Où! Où! 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:

Où, 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 étonniez,
 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, ll. 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, ll. 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, ll. 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 onstage, 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, ll. 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 *récit* is wholly appropriate to comedy insofar as it presents a representation of wish fulfillment,⁸ it is nonetheless, in a certain sense, typically tragic. Indeed, it shows that Arnolphe's fate was determined years before the action of the play begins, and that all action on his part was futile.

In conclusion, the *récit* is firmly embedded in *L'Ecole des femmes*. Both Magné and Conesa have noted its central position in the grouping: monologue/*récit*/monologue, a repeated structure which provides the main rhythm of the play.⁹ A broad series of interrelated thematic and structural oppositions are tied to the presence of these narratives:

1) Onstage/Offstage. The content of the *récits* involves actions which have all occurred offstage. Arnolphe is onstage for all but two scenes of the play; thus, he is physically divorced from the arena of action.

2) Speech/Action. This opposition is closely tied to the one above: the offstage arena is the site of the primary action in the play. The stage itself is the locus of speech. The *récit* provides a logical means of converting action, which is seemingly excluded from the stage, into speech.

3) Knowledge/Control. Arnolphe is repeatedly informed, by means of *récits*, of what misfortune has befallen or awaits him. Horace does not know that Arnolphe is his rival, and Agnès, thanks to the education that Arnolphe has provided for her, knows very little at all. Yet, Arnolphe, for all of his knowledge, does not have the effective power to control their actions, to prevent Horace and Agnès from seeing each other. Agnès and Horace lack relevant knowledge and yet they demonstrate a far greater control of the situation, managing to overcome all of the obstacles which Arnolphe places in their path.

4) Dynamic/Static. On the one hand, the *récits*, of course, mark a break in dramatic action. The overabundance of long speeches (*récits* and monologues), at the expense of action, has been the most common criticism leveled at this play. And yet, as we have seen, the *récits* are not static pauses in the action of the play, because of the powerful effect that they have on the ad-

dressée (Arnolphe). If Horace (or Agnès or Oronte and Chrysalde) were to hit 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")¹⁰ 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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1. Molière, *La Critique de l'Ecole des femmes*, scene vi, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Seuil, 1962). All further citations of Molière's plays will be taken from this edition.

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.

3. Bernard Magné, "*L'Ecole des femmes* ou la conquête de la parole," *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, 145 (1972), 130.

4. J.D. Hubert, *Molière and the Comedy of the Intellect* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962), p. 72.

5. Ralph Albanese, Jr., *Le Dynamisme de la peur chez Molière: une analyse socio-culturelle de Dom Juan, Tartuffe, et L'Ecole des femmes* (University, Miss.: Romance Monographs, 1976), p. 140. See also Serge Doubrovsky, "Arnolphe ou la chute du héros," *Mercure de France*, 343 (1961), 113; and Edith Kearn, "L'Ecole des femmes and the Spirit of Farce," *L'Esprit Créateur*, 13 (1973), 225.

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!

8. Charles Mauron, *Psychocritique du genre comique* (Paris: Corti, 1964), p. 86; and Harold C. Knutson, *Molière: An Archetypal Approach* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1976), p. 12.

9. Conesa, p. 125, and Magné, p. 128.

10. Northrup Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 163-86 and 206-23.