

Translation, adaptation and performance: Spanish Golden Age theatre and Marivaux on the post-1950s stage
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I was putting together my notes for this paper during a Guest Lecture by renowned mathematician Sir Roger Penrose: *coloured shapes moving in space*. This is the concept of desire I want to talk about. Bear with me.

There is a moment in *MBFW* when I said: "this is pure Marivaux"! Here it is (*series of stills*):

- Pic 1 all 3 run thru a landscaped park to the sound of cheery 18c music
- Pic 2 Kimmy runs
- Pic 3 Michael runs
- Pic 4 Michael gives chase
- Pic 5 Julianne runs

Set-up: Caustic food-writer Julianne Potter has broken up the couple of her 'best friend' Michael & his wealthy, sweet fiancée Kimmy by deception: first she feels deeply ashamed, then pretty triumphant. Michael has called off the wedding and told Kimmy, but Kimmy has not told her parents; they all meet at the pre-nuptial party (Julianne unsuitably dressed: K's mother to friends as they chase by: 'She's from New York')

- Pic 6 the mothers: 'aren't they lovely?'

The 3 of them have all met up *by twos* at the party – where hopeful Julianne is immediately enlisted by first Michael, then Kimmy to carry messages between them:

- Pic 7 Julianne → Kimmy
- Pic 8 Julianne → Michael

The wedding is on again. At this point Julianne decides to risk all – she confesses her love to Michael → kiss

- Pic 9 kiss
- Pic 10 Kimmy's interrupting gaze.

And the chase begins.

This is one instance of what I am going to call 'the circuit of desire' – here more properly a chain than a circle. Before I go into its typical characteristics, I want to add two more elements – one that we have already noted: the audience. In this case, it is intradiegetic: the setting of the landscaped park, the ceremony, the mothers who see (mis-see) etc. This is pure theatre. Desire may feel like agony but, on display as it must be, it is comedy. The second is the stopping point. How does the madness of displaced desire come to a halt? The chase ends (this was 1997 after all) with all three characters jumping into cars – Julianne, you will remember, hi-jacks a baker's van. From the van (to the strains of *What the world needs now is love, sweet love*) she yells thru her mobile phone to her editor & friend George (whom her call has interrupted in the midst of a solemn, somewhat erotic poetry reading, as we'll see in a moment):

- Pic 11 Julianne phones George: George, this is all your fault! I told him ... and then I kissed him...
- Pic 12 George *raisonneur*: 'Did he kiss you back? ... Was there anything on the other side of that kiss that leads you to believe that this chase will end happily?
 - o Michael's chasing Kimmy – yes!
 - o You're chasing Michael – yes!
 - o Who's chasing you? Nobody. Geddit?

The chase is the simplest version of desire displaced: A loves B who loves C etc.

Familiar in **tragedy**: Racine eg *Andromaque* (1667):– Oreste loves Hermione who loves Pyrrhus who loves Andromaque, who loves her dead husband Hector and their threatened child Astyanax. Tragic because everyone loses. The stopping-point is not reason but death.

The other most common form of displaced desire, more like a circuit and potentially less doomed, is the triangle.

Another counter-example, which less predictably brings tragedy out of a conventionally marivaudian triangle: **Romantic**: Musset: *On ne badine pas avec l'amour* (1834): the two upper-class characters playing at pique via jealousy: the milk-sister commits suicide – and they part.

Triangular desire = usually 3 pairs into each of which a 'third party' intervenes:

- the legit couple (+ a third who desires: primal scene) usually m/f
 - the new [adulterous] couple ditto
 - the pair of rivals same sex

In the central 19c bourgeois genre, the fiction of adultery, the 'third' is of course the outsider (usually a younger man) but, given that it is a romantic genre, we side with this outsider's desire, so we don't exactly see it as disruption. In the theories of René Girard and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: the rival same-sex couple is the key one, linked by the *investment of jealousy*. What puts a stop to adulterous couples? Death, conventionally the death of the woman (Emma, Anna, Effi, Hester etc).

But to return to comic mode and in particular to Marivaux. If we assume that happiness is a blissful couple, then you don't have to be Roger Penrose to do the maths. This is how Arlequin puts it in *La double inconstance* (1723):

TRIVELIN: Silvia plait au Prince, et il voudrait lui plaire avant que de l'épouser. L'amour qu'elle a pour vous fait obstacle à celui qu'il tâche de lui donner pour lui.

ARLEQUIN : Qu'il fasse donc l'amour ailleurs ; car il n'aurait que la femme, moi j'aurais le cœur ; il nous manquerait quelque chose à l'un et à l'autre, et nous serions tous trois mal à notre aise.

TRIVELIN: Vous avez raison ; mais ne voyez-vous pas que, si vous épousiez Silvia, le Prince resterait malheureux?

ARLEQUIN : A la vérité il serait d'abord un peu triste; mais il aura fait le devoir d'un brave home, et cela console. [*this is what George tells Julianne : she's not convinced either*] Au lieu que, s'il l'épouse, il fera pleurer ce pauvre enfant ; je pleurerai aussi, moi ; il n'y aura que lui qui rira, et il n'y a point de plaisir à rire tout seul.

Comedy : laughter is good & you can't laugh alone (Marivaux, p. 110)

That's the logic of the triangle. For the 'normal' comedic outcome of a happy united couple to emerge, one person has to end in a state of loss [death or deprivation]. Someone must be denied the joys of matrimony & sex if the primal scene is to be restored. The outsider must resign himself/herself to being the child outside the door, believing that everyone is having fun except them.

Unless there are 4. Now there are varieties of 4 – we’ve seen one in the ending of the *MBFW* chase - but a ‘normal one’ (whether comedic or tragic) is actually 2 couples set side by side. A variety of examples, in chronological order: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Shakespeare, 1590s), *La double inconstance* (Marivaux, 1732), *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (Goethe, 1809), *The Golden Bowl* (Henry James, 1904); in each of these, after the muddle of misplaced desire, two pairs emerge. They may be odd couples – eq father & daughter in the

Henry James – and the solution to the peripeteia may come about by magic or cold reason, but what is common to all these very different fictions is the fact that four, like three, is actually an arrangement (or mis-arrangement) of twos.

The fantasy teleology of desire is, of course, the closed pair-bond. Desire has one course: the chase; and two possible outcomes: gratification or loss. In the terms of comedy there must be a happy ending for someone, and happy endings come in pair-structures in which an end-point freezes a *start-point that doesn't get investigated*. 'They lived happily ever after' is where the curtain must come down – or, in the performance equivalent, there is a marriage-moment sealed by a dance. This is exactly how *MBFW* ends: the *erotic* pair departs in the Rolls – to what one must only suspect might be a quite problematic future (*Match point*, anyone?) - and the *friendship* pair is reconstituted, via the replacement of sex by dance and a couple based on one kind of difference (heterosexual woman + heterosexual man) by a couple based on another kind of difference (heterosexual woman + homosexual man, both condemned to a different kind of pleasure):

GEORGE (on the phone to Julianne): Has God heard your prayer? Will Cinderella dance again? ... Suddenly the crowds part – and there he is. Sleek, stylish, radiant with charisma. Bizarrely, he's on the telephone – but then, so are you. (Pic 13: George at party. *Rises*.) And he comes towards you – the moves of a jungle cat. And although you quite correctly sense that he is - *gay* – like most devastatingly handsome single men of his age are – you think: what the hell. Life goes on. (Pic 14: Puts away her phone.) Maybe there won't be marriage. Maybe there won't be sex. But by God, there'll be dancing.

- Pic 15: dancing

The message of this comedy is that there are other kinds of happy ending. Are we convinced? Cheated of her obsessive aim to marry Michael, nevertheless Julianne smiles and dances. Maybe only for the moment. But after all the marriage ending is also not what it seems, as I have suggested...

What has happened in *MBFW* is that the protagonist has gone through a cycle from stable, slightly anxious singlehood supported by a male 'best friend', via the shock of desire – absolutely obsessive, as frustrated desire is, wreaking in her cheery character the deviousness, wanton cruelty and humiliation of the demand to win – back to her first state: a little more anxious, a little less supported in one sense (George is unlikely to marry her, but then nor was Michael, as we & she discovered) but a little more supported in another sense: this won't happen with George, will it - and with the 'consolation' of having told the truth and done the right thing.

The two implicit fallacies of the comic happy ending are, as we've seen:

- **first**, that the couple will be frozen in happiness for ever – they won't, or wouldn't, if they were real. Now *that* consoles, not just because it compensates for the general unfairness of distribution, but also because of course it means there will be another story, another triangle, another season, another reason...
- **second fallacy**: that there is a person or a place in whom there is no desire: conventionally, this is the good mother (eg Gide's Pauline, who absents herself from the circuit of pleasure while handing it out with touching 'resignation' to everyone else, all males).

Here the maternal/best friend role is taken by the '*devastatingly handsome*', '*oozing charisma*' George, who of course, in the person of Rupert Everett, 'steals the show'. Not only, let's remember, because he is attractive and amusing (we'll see in a moment how this is connected to his gender mobility), but also because he is the film's centre of truth and reason, its delightful reality principle – in the terms of French comedy, its *raisonneur*.

George stealing the show also works – and we, like Julianne, smile our way out of this fiction - because, actually, the object of her obsession was so very different. Why does Michael need to be such a hopeless wimp, so basically without charisma? Because – horribly perhaps, especially as I hate to concede anything to Lacan – because the assignment of value to a particular love-object is sometimes completely, and always somewhat, arbitrary. No one is worthy of the passion that desire invests in them. The specifics of characters in a desire narrative – and this is why it is always, in one sense, a comic plot – are arbitrary:

they are ‘the young lead’, the ‘spoilt rich girl’, the attractive gay man’, the pedant, the harlequin, the bellboy, the prince, etc: stars of stage or screen, *Commedia dell’arte* familiars, Julia Roberts, Cameron Diaz, *‘Elena Balletti dite Flaminia ... et Zanetta Benozzi dite Silvia, qui est naturellement Silvia’* (Marivaux, 57).

Time is short, however long art is, so I must regretfully restrict myself to a number of other observations, which I’ll illustrate as I go – some of them have already appeared in my exposition of *MBFW*, and others will relate more directly to Marivaux.

The first issue is the significance of the gaze. In comic drama, we watch with a smile while someone goes through what they believe is agony. The audience’s gaze has perhaps two main functions:

- a **we (as audience) know what others don’t: Julianne’s desire** (unknown to complacent Michael & Kimmy), the meaning of the chase (unknown to the mothers);
 - **Pic 16: the fact that George is not J’s fiancé.**
 - b **voyeuristic, observing another’s loss, suffering or desire.** Here are moments where we observe the difference between one’s complacency and another’s grief:
 - **Pics 17 & 18: dancing on boat**
- Or when we observe/share J’s desire for the wedding ring:
- **Pics 19 & 20: gazing at the wedding ring**
- Or the gazer is the excluded one, catching out a couple-moment:
- **Pic 21: Julianne as third (karaoke bar – primal scene: K has just won M back despite abjection).**

The audience, having a proscenium arch to gaze through, finds the world a décor and appearance the meaning of love. In that sense we always have a God’s eye view. We gaze upon the gazer. Indeed where *MBFW* is the most poignant is where it’s least theatrical – but it is never so for long. Exclusion for the characters is, for the audience, an entry point.

The second issue is the function of difference:

In Marivaux, the first premise of the pair bond is class similarity: like should bond with like, the pretty peasant girl with the good-hearted peasant boy, sophisticates with sophisticates etc. The peripeteia is the lesson that has to be learned by going through a reversal of settled class arrangements. The outcome is one version or another of normalisation. In *Arlequin poli par l’amour*, the hero goes back to his beloved Silvia and the Fée has to give in since, Julianne-like, she has resorted to artifice, magic & deception to try to win love and discovered that it can’t be done. In *La double inconstance*, the manipulative Flaminia uses no magic except the susceptibility of the two simple characters to a combination of vanity, material pleasures and pique. Part-Julianne and part-George (and part Mme de Merteuil almost 60 years ahead), she understands what the others don’t but is allowed to sustain and gratify desire alongside power. Are we convinced when she ends delighted to marry Arlequin? Surely not, except for purely sexual motives, keeping her cleverness to herself like the most conceited author figures.

Difference, then, is both the engine and the resolution of desire: it keeps the wheels turning, while alliances are made and unmade. As we have just seen with (even) Flaminia, the drama of *difference from oneself* is perhaps Marivaux's most powerful weapon against his characters' false beliefs: they are caught out, in the midst of plotting against others, by the 'surprise' of love – discovered or displaced. They learn – as does Julianne – that they cannot coincide with themselves for long.

In *MBFW*, the essential 18c difference of class/power is replaced (this is Hollywood after all) by wealth; and Marivaux's country/city difference (simplicity v. sophistication) is also given an American slant: the very rich person is the simple one – *she's so... perfect!* curses Julianne. But this is 1997, so the differences among women, conditioned partly by class, partly by age (George - Michael & Julianne - Kimmy) are underlain by a feminist assumption: Kimmy can choose to give up on a career, Julianne could not.

Similar in character (best friends, after all: we are told their sexual affair didn't work out before – no desire?) and similar in situation, Julianne and Michael are the proper American heroes, poor and 'driven': he doesn't want to work for a rich man but to pursue his career. It is, Julianne explains to Kimmy, the difference between crème brûlée and 'jello':

JULIANNE: Crème brûlée: it's beautiful – it's sweet – it's irritatingly perfect. But he's comfortable with jello.) Jello... makes him feel – comfortable.

KIMMY I can be jello!

JULIANNE: No. Crème brûlée can never be jello.

- Pic 22: KIMMY I have to be jello!

Differences and samenesses across the sexes lead, as in Marivaux, to the negotiations that end up cementing alliances.

But there is a last difference that functions – well, maybe more in *MBFW* than in Marivaux, tho I did see a curious production of *La double inconstance* years ago in Oxford where Flaminia was played by a man – and that last difference is **gender**. The kinds of women that Kimmy/Silvia and Julianne/Flaminia are differ in the ways that they go about manipulating others (for both kinds do, and it isn't a difference between *femmes de cœur* and *femmes de tête*, as the terminology used to go – the whole point of *MBFW* is that Julianne has a heart too, and the lucky pair who survive her plotting do so partly by the strength of their self-centred insensitivity). But gender puts a stop to the carrousel of heterosexual difference, just as the chase across a landscape garden comes up with a shock against urban George at the end of a phone. It seems rather fallacious: gay men are not famous for living celibate lives, but the brake on unstoppable desire in this fiction (is this why it ends on a smile) is homosexuality, that same-same impulse that cuts down all our standard fictions of complementarity. Kimmy's family adore George 'the fiancé' both because he removes Julianne as a rival and also because he is feminine in the most charming way: remember the 'key scene: *I say a little prayer...*

- Pic 23: G charms K's family of women
- Pic 24: all join in

Third and last: in the comic triangle, **mediation is also interruption, interruption is also mediation.**

There are almost too many scenes of triangularity in *MBFW* to show. We've seen Kimmy's gaze break up a kiss, or her misreading of the 'couple' of Julianne and George. *Here are two versions of three (2 + 1):*

- Pic 25: J arrives at karaoke
- Pic 26: J & G laugh (with/at Michael) for not seeing why G pretends to be gay...

But the structures of mediation are not only human ones. In the 18c (eg *Les Liaisons dangereuses* or, a few years later, *Adolphe*) the dramas of skewed communication are multiplied by the time it takes – to lift a line from Lacan – for a letter to reach its destination. In our age the tragi-comic devices that turn an error into a crime are mobile phones (they interrupt twice and then the third time they are the instrument of restoration) and emails:

- Pic 27: what if...?

- Pic 28: send or no??

Finally, I want to close the circle – or the circuit – on the question of what is perhaps the most marivaudian aspect of *MBFW*. The first time I watched it the man I was with cried almost the whole way through (mind you, he laughed at *The Piano*). It is, of course, a drama about loss. As in Marivaux, the closing resolution is comic, happy, accompanied by a dance – and also hauntingly painful.

- Pic 29: happy ending
- Pic 30: J smiles thru tears.