

## The Weapons of Spectacle:

### Song, Dance and Imaginary Identity in *Don Gil de las calzas verdes* and

### *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*

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The enormous theatrical production of Spain and France in the early and mid-seventeenth century provides numerous examples of characters who assume other identities by manipulating widespread beliefs, rumor and even attire, and in so doing, they explore and expand the otherwise restrictive societal criteria for identity. The mercurial, complex and resilient characters of the Spanish "comedia"--whose existence as such challenges society's power to impose upon them static, simplistic identity criteria--find their counterparts in the French dramatic world whose characters ardently seek to create their own subjectivity. 1

Despite the dissimilarity in plot between Tirso de Molina's *Don Gil de las calzas verdes* (1615) and Molière's *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* (1670)--it should be noted that there is little evidence to support the notion of a single "comedia" that served as Molière's model for this play<sup>1</sup>--both continue the rich 2

tradition of incorporating musical routines into the story not merely because they fit logically into the action (for this is not always the case), but because festive song and dance is a way of creating a more pliant ambiance in which identity alternatives can flourish.<sup>2</sup> This becomes evident in *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* in the form of a dance number (known as the "Ballet des Nations") that ends the play. This musical production is the culmination of the triumph of M. Jourdain's imaginary world over the real world of the society that surrounds him (Defaux 1980, 273).<sup>3</sup>

There is one stanza that deserves our special attention. Molière has "un Espagnol" sing: 3

Alegrese enamorado  
Y tome mi parecer  
Que en esto de querer  
Todo es hallar el vado. (V, 6, "troisième entrée")  
(Be glad, suitor  
and take my lead  
for when it comes to love  
Finding the ford is everything).<sup>4</sup>

The last two verses seem to sum up the guiding force in M. Jourdain's life. His intense desire to join the ranks of the nobility resembles that of a lover longing to be united with her/his beloved. Although M. Jourdain never actually reaches his goal of noble status, he exhausts virtually all means available to induce society's confirmation of his imaginary identity.<sup>5</sup> 4

In addition, "vado" is an interesting word choice. Its figurative meaning is a solution or a way around the problem, while its literal meaning indicates a passage from one side to another. Just as one would look for a ford to traverse a stream, M. Jourdain adamantly seeks passage across the gulf separating the bourgeois from the nobility. In this musical and festive atmosphere, his final defeat is unimportant. The song seems to praise not the outcome, but the relentless pursuit of the goal, incarnated in M. Jourdain. Thus, on the surface, while the Spanish verses of this musical routine may refer to the persistence of the traditional suitor of the "comedia" as he tries to overcome obstacles to his beloved, there is also an intriguing subtext which emphasizes the seemingly boundless energy M. Jourdain expends in order to find a way to realize his imaginary identity. 5

While the song and dance in *Don Gil de las calzas verdes* ("La Molinera", 864-901) is not closely related to the theme of imaginary identity, it is reminiscent of the ambiance created by the machinations of Doña Juana in her attempt to win back Don Martín, the man who seduced, then abandoned her. Despite being promised to Juana, Martín follows his father's orders to leave her so that the young man will be free to marry the wealthier Doña Inés. Juana decides to pursue Martín both under the pseudonym of Doña Elvira and disguised as a man named Don Gil de las calzas verdes (green britches). She eventually wins him back at the end of the play. 6

In a scene near the end of Act I, Juana, disguised as Gil, dances with Inés and Doña Clara, Inés' friend. The [accompanying song](#) describes a mill which metaphorically reaps its power from human jealousy in order to continue operating: 7

...this suggests that Juana's ingenuity in creating jealousy among the several characters by means of her disguises and her suspicion about the fidelity of one's mate will keep the mill running and will provide the motivating force to produce the result she so ardently desires (Hesse 1980, 59)

"La Molinera" provides a metaphoric description of the emotional atmosphere which Juana must create and in which she must function if the multiple identities she assumes are to be believed. It is an atmosphere in which social class and actual behavior have little bearing on identity construction: 8

...[la pièce] s'edifie sur l'axe polysémique de l'identité, entendue comme ressemblance et similitude, singularité ou individualité propre, et sur les signes extérieurs de l'identité, essentiellement l'apparence, la voix...et le nom. (Ly 1983,

183).

(...[the play] is built on the polysemic axis of identity, understood as resemblance and similarity, singularity and individuality itself, and on the exterior signs of identity, essentially appearance, voice...and name.)

Musical routines, then, are regularly integrated into the "comedia" as coherent and pertinent components of the play that reinforce its basic plot and the environment in which it (the plot) unfolds.

As seen earlier, the confluence of song and dance in *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* plays a key role in M. Jourdain's identity construction (Mazouer 1993, 75). As the protagonist is preparing the melodies and dance in order to woo the "marquise," Dorimène, it is only natural that he see a preview of them at the end of Act I and that the full spectacle be presented at the conclusion of the dinner with the "marquise" at the end of Act III. The famous "cérémonie turque" ends Act IV, and Act V concludes with the "Ballet des Nations" during which Cléonte weds Lucille, M. Jourdain's daughter, and Dorante marries Dorimène (Abraham 63-66).

In addition to their logical distribution throughout the play, these musically choreographed productions are also an exterior manifestation of the methodology used by M. Jourdain to confirm his noble identity. Story and the performing arts become inextricably intertwined. Thus, M. Jourdain has discovered a medium in which appearances are given special emphasis and the possibilities of transforming and expanding one's identity are greatly increased. He turns his life into theatre, that magical place where disbelief is suspended and the normal limits of human existence are pushed back. This is evident in [Act II](#) where the tailors fit him for a new suit: 10

Dès lors, [the tailors' ballet], ce 'gentilhomme' se révèle au spectateur, de manière toute cinématique, comme un bourgeois incurablement rigide qui, dans le sens littéral aussi bien que dans le sens péjoratif de l'expression française, 'se donne en spectacle.'<sup>a</sup>

(From that point, [the tailor's ballet], this "gentleman" reveals himself to the spectator, in a completely kinetic way, as an incurably rigid bourgeois who, in the literal as well as pejorative sense of the French expression, "makes a spectacle of himself," Brody 1968, 315)

This spectacle is infectious, spawning a musical, dream-like world of potentialities yet to be realized. Indeed M. Jourdain certainly believes that a nobleman already exists within him and that all his noble persona lacks is an accurate imitation of the actions of the "gens de qualité," (people of quality): 11

...il ne voit point de mal...de vouloir singer et hanter la noblesse, de vouloir apprendre toutes ces belles choses qui font de vous une personne de qualité. Jourdain fait la roue. Il veut que le monde l'admire, et il le dit. (Defaux 1980, 281) (...he sees nothing wrong in wanting to ape and frequent the nobility, in wanting to learn all these fine things that make one a person of quality. Jourdain is putting on airs. He wants the world to admire him and he says so.)

There is little doubt M. Jourdain equates appearances with authentic identity. He does not intend to deceive anyone with his new persona, for he truly believes that looking the part and being the part are identical.

For this reason he is disinterested in any skill that he cannot show off or that has no immediate applicability. He declines the offer of the "maître de philosophie" to teach him logic, ethics and physics, opting instead for a spelling lesson (during which M. Jourdain thoroughly enjoys the exaggerated pronunciation of vowels) and a tutoring session to help him write a love letter to the "marquise" (II, 4). He also learns the terms "prose" and "poetry" which are valuable to him, not because M. Jourdain is ignorant of the difference between the two (he has known the difference for years without being aware of the terms), but rather because it is demonstrable, albeit useless, knowledge that he may flaunt before others (III, 3). M. Jourdain must attract attention, must be seen, heard and well-known in his community because it is in conjunction with and/or in defiance of his community that he will construct his new 12

persona. Consequently, he spends much of the play trying to imitate the noble arts of music, dance, fencing, gastronomy and even courtship. But because he has not been instructed from birth in these areas, he must hire teachers ("maÓtres") so he may learn them.

M. Jourdain is in line with long-standing "comedia" tradition, equating noble identity with noble appearance and noble reputation. He seeks only to show off his acquired merchandise and knowledge for public consumption in the hopes he will convince the community that he belongs in its upper echelons. To this end, he tries to influence what others say about him and how they see him. He insists that the "maÓtre de musique" and the "maÓtre y danser" remain until his tailor arrives so they may see him in his new suit in the style of "les gens de qualiti"; even a walk through the city becomes a carefully choreographed event as he tells his valets to follow behind him during the promenade "afin qu'on voie bien que vous ítes y moi" ("so they see that you belong to me," III, 1); he explains to his wife the benefit of having others notice the Count Dorante frequenting their home (III, 3); and he is of course thrilled to be the center of attention at the musically dramatized ceremony where he receives the empty title of "Mamamouchi" (IV, 5). M. Jourdain believes the only difference between himself and the nobility to be their reputations in the community, how they are perceived by the rest of society. He accepts the premise that noble reputation is acquired through external manifestations and so seeks to imitate them in order to achieve noble identity. 13

Ironically for M. Jourdain, his exaggerated and inaccurate emulation of the nobility is indeed the natural expression of his bourgeois identity. Whereas the protagonist believes he is communicating what he considers to be his true noble identity, his actions are, in reality, only more evidence that he cannot escape from the ostentatious consumerism that characterize many of Molière's bourgeois. M. Jourdain makes no conscious effort to trick anyone. His project is executed in good faith, for he truly believes he is participating in the ordinary activities of the nobility. Nonetheless, in a very real sense, it is more difficult for M. Jourdain to distinguish himself from the bourgeoisie than it is for him to imitate the upper classes and since he chooses the fine arts to make the distinction, he cannot hide the bourgeois origin from which he wants to escape. 14

Thus imitation and differentiation in the performing arts are crucial themes in this play and even the agents of these arts--the "maÓtres"--try to prove their superiority over their rival, the "maÓtre de philosophie." The latter tries to elevate his stature by pointing out how one must set himself apart from the rest of society by stoically ignoring the insults of others (II, 3). He, of course, quickly betrays his own observation by falling into the same argument which preceded his arrival, bickering and then brawling with the other "maÓtres" over which art form is more important. 15

But M. Jourdain's awkward attempts to participate in the fine arts--an activity that usually identifies one as a member of the upper classes--only make him the object of scorn for his family and servants. This ridicule, however, far from making him see that he is at best a poor imitator of aristocratic ways, only reassures him of his ascendancy and his family's low social status which, for M. Jourdain, prevents them from fully understanding him. 16

While this ritual may have had a similar prototype in the "comedia,"<sup>6</sup> my interest lies with those characters who convince their community of the veracity of an imaginary persona--a notion embodied in the protagonist of Tirso's *Don Gil de las calzas verdes*.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it is Juana's gift for generating multiple and believable personas that remains constant in this otherwise unpredictable and intricate "comedia."<sup>8</sup> 17

Juana succeeds in producing a persona out of her own remarkable ingenuity and astuteness, yet she is nonetheless aware that she needs society's cooperation. Appearances may prompt the community to recognize and authenticate a particular identity without investigating the individual's motivations for putting forth such appearances, but the collectivity must have a reason for such collaboration. It is society's need to believe in this imaginary persona that Juana exploits and which allows her to conjure up a new state of things: 18

([Juana crea una] misteriosa pseudo-realidad en que se embrollan los otros personajes gracias a su avaricia, sus celos, su deseo de hallar un esposo gal·n o

una mujer rica, y sus propias decepciones unos de otros. (Varey 1989, 367)  
([Juana creates a] mysterious pseudo-reality in which the other characters embroil themselves due to their avarice, their jealousy, their desire to find a handsome man or rich woman, and their own deceptions of one another.)

Juana is then using society's own weaknesses against itself. She does not change the criteria for identity, but wrests control over it from the collectivity and uses them to her own advantage. Juana exploits the vulnerabilities of society and not only convinces it of a false identity, but actually forces the collectivity to submit itself to her own machinations and, in the process, to accept her version of what is true and what is false.

Turning back to Molière's work, M. Jourdain would like to pick up where Juana leaves off. As 19  
successful as Juana is in her endeavor, it is important not to lose sight of the reason she undertakes such a project:

La realidad nueva no fue creada para evadirse, sino como medio para alcanzar una meta. Por sus varios papeles, trucos y distorsión de la verdad, Juana crea un laberinto más que desagradable para Martín. Esto le devuelve al mundo de la realidad. Lograda su meta, Juana abandona su personalidad múltiple. (Hesse 1981, 271)

(The new reality was not created as an escape, rather as a means to a goal. Through her various roles, tricks and distortion of the truth, Juana creates a more than unpleasant maze for Martín. This returns him to the real world. Her goal achieved, Juana abandons her multiple personality.)

While the temporary nature of Juana's plan may not constitute a full-scale indictment of society's authority to decide identity, it does provide the blueprint for M. Jourdain's attempt to impose indefinitely his imaginary persona on his community. To that end he spares no expense not only to acquire noble accoutrements, but to buy a permanent aura that heightens his attempts to create a new reality. Lessons and new clothes are but two of his high-priced commodities:

...the expenses involved in acquiring a noble mistress are massive: 18,000 livres to Dorante to serve as go-between...a costly diamond, feasts, serenades, and entertainment. Jourdain's road to noble privilege runs through the means of personal relations purchased with his family's patrimony... (Gaines 1984, 159)

This is no temporary project with a short-term goal. M. Jourdain is far too business-conscious (remember his quick addition, without pen or paper, of Dorante's debt, III, 4) to spend his money for a new status of which he will quickly dispose after he tires of it. On the contrary, it is very telling that he is willing to sacrifice a good portion of his family wealth in order to create a melodic, dance-filled world in which all others comply with his desire to be recognized as a nobleman.

The "[Mamamouchi](#)" ceremony of the final act is of course the materialization of this compliance. The 20  
collectivity finally concedes defeat not to the authenticity of M. Jourdain's noble persona, but rather to the impossibility of derailing his individual imaginary identity. Indeed, he is so certain of his identity, he continues to see his wife as the stubborn one:

Vous venez toujours mêler vos extravagances y toutes choses; et il n'y a pas moyen de vous apprendre y être raisonnable. (V, 6)  
(You always come along and mix your foolishness into everything; and there is no way to teach you to be reasonable.)

M. Jourdain's enduring struggle to wrest this concession from society does more than make us laugh at 21  
an obvious and ridiculous impostor. Although he is never a serious threat to society's fabric, the result of M. Jourdain's project is that he exposes the collectivity's reliance on precarious criteria for the creation and distribution of identity as well as its impotence when it comes to correcting the outrageous behavior of its members. Neither ridicule nor reasonable discourse have any effect on M. Jourdain. Even Cléonte, the "honorable man" of the work *par excellence*, makes no headway when he explains to the protagonist

that, although he (Cléonte) is not of noble lineage, merit makes him worthy to marry Lucille (III, 12). Cléonte is, thus, forced to enter M. Jourdain's lyrical world of disguises to win his daughter's hand. But the young man's masquerade as the son of the "Grand Turc" has some very serious ramifications. The fact that he must hide his real identity only reinforces the futility of the individual's struggle against a society which extols appearances and respects vacuous titles (Mishriky 1982, 149).

M. Jourdain is certainly not aware of Cléonte's ruse, and it is impossible to predict how he would react if he were aware of the trick. Yet it is important to remember that Cléonte is only being practical and M. Jourdain is only being consistent. Despite Cléonte's dislike for society's preference of appearances over identity, he finds he must say what the reluctant father wants to hear (or more accurately, show him what he wants to see) in order to marry the one he loves. As for M. Jourdain, the title of "Grand Turc" convinces him that he is marrying off his daughter to someone of noble rank. 22

Imaginary identity (for M. Jourdain) and role-playing (for all the others) help to break out of the impasse. M. Jourdain's community is unable to shake his myopic view of himself from the outside and the bourgeois is equally incapable of convincing the collectivity of his noble identity. Something has to give and Covielle, the valet who organizes the whole masquerade of the "Mamamouchi" ceremony, explains to Mme Jourdain why they had to penetrate M. Jourdain's world of melody and prancing: 23

...ne voyez-vous pas bien que tout ceci n'est fait que pour nous ajuster aux visions de votre mari; que nous l'abusons sous ce d'Éguisement, et que c'est Cléonte lui-même qui est le fils du Grand Turc? (V, 6)

(...don't you see that this is only to accommodate the hallucinations of your husband; we are tricking him with this disguise, and it's Cleonte himself who is the son of the Grand Turk.)

In the end, music, dance and the unrelenting conviction of one man deny the collectivity's right to determine identity and its prerogative to punish those who would challenge such an authority. *Don Gil de las calzas verdes* may have allowed a glimpse at an individual overpowering her community, but M. Jourdain is unique in that he obtains a societal concession without deceit. At no time does his community actually believe he is truly of noble lineage, yet it remains incapable of converting him and too weak to expel him. The whole musical, festive atmosphere of the play (which eventually governs everyone's behavior) indicates society has lost the authority it reserved for itself to be the final arbiter of identity. To break the stalemate between itself and an unyielding individual, society must relinquish this favored position. It is by no means an unconditional surrender, but rather a compromise. M. Jourdain is satisfied (at least temporarily) with the recognition he receives and society neutralizes the immediate threat to the marriage of two young lovers. 24

### Extending the moment

M. Jourdain is the culmination of many French characters in that he represents the individual who does not conquer society, but rather fights it to a stalemate, forcing the entire community to play a role, to pretend to adopt the individual's point of view. This is a dramatic departure from the dynamic of the individual and society in many "comedias," where the individual promoting an imaginary identity is made to relinquish role-playing at the end of the work--such as the title-character of Tirso's *Marta la piadosa*--or surrenders the mask like Juana in *Don Gil de las calzas verdes*. 25

French comedy hypothesizes on what would happen if this moment of illusion, seemingly evoked into existence with such ease in the "comedia", were extended to a lifetime. Juana poses this "what if?" question by actualizing false identities and making others believe them, if only temporarily. Her will to succeed with her ruse not only completes the task at hand, but also reveals the diverse spectrum of identity possibilities. The temporary nature of such imposture was obviously no obstacle to Molière's notion that such role-playing could be expanded and integrated into some of his more complex characters as well as into a buffoon such as M. Jourdain. Nevertheless, Molière, ever aware of the awesome power of the collectivity, instills his protagonist with a deep and durable resilience, demonstrating the constant, and sometimes painfully slow, progress of the subject as s/he resists society's efforts to dictate identity. It 26

would seem that "extending the moment" leads to a truce between the individual and society rather than to a clear victory in the struggle for the right to create and determine "authentic" identity.

Yet, north and south of the Pyrenees, the truce is unstable. If French comedy of the era does not complete, but rather pushes forward the identity experiments undertaken by Spanish playwrights in the first half of the seventeenth century, then two elements key to the advancement of the subject are revealed; the will and the weapons. Whereas French comedy supplies the stubborn character who tirelessly resists the efforts of society to convert her/him, it lacks the Spanish weapons--the numerous ways a "comedia" character tricks and dupes the community. Thus the Spanish and French notions of subjectivity do not differ so much as they compliment each other and when combined, will be a formidable opponent of any society that seeks to control them.

## NOTES

1. There is an "entremÈs" (a short skit usually put on between acts of a featured play) by Moreto which resembles MoliÈre's basic plot, but it is not at all certain that the French playwright even knew of its existence, (Husz·r 1907, 241). It seems undeniable, however, that MoliÈre had more than a passing knowledge of Moreto's *El DesdÈn con el desdÈn* (1654) during the composition of *La Princesse d'Elide* (1664).
2. I wish to express my thanks to the Association for Hispanic Classical Theater for its permission to use scenes from *Don Gil de las calzas verdes* and to Debbie Berg Beyer and her students at Western Illinois University for permission to use scenes from their production of *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*.
3. The Spanish verses in this concluding act were, in all probability, written by MoliÈre himself (Husz·r 1907, 244).
4. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.
5. Gaines notes that M. Jourdain neglects the most common path of social, upward mobility in the seventeenth century, that of buying "lands and offices," (1984, 159).
6. Husz·r mentions Lope's *La boba para otros y la discreta para sÌ* and Rojas' *El DesafÌo de Carlos Quinto* as possible models for MoliÈre, (1907, 243).
7. In terms of the capability to create new identities seemingly at will, the protagonist, DoÒa Juana, as her name implies, could easily be considered the ancestor of Tirso's legendary trickster, the approximate earliest dates of composition for *Don Gil...* and *El Burlador..* being 1615 and 1616- 20, respectively. While in pursuit of the man who wronged her, Juana even creates a DoÒa Elvira. Even though there exists no concrete evidence to suggest MoliÈre knew of Tirso's heroine, the similarity of function and name to MoliÈre's Done Elvire is intriguing.
8. Hesse affirms that "it contains, perhaps, the most involved plot in Golden Age drama," (1962, 389).

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