

Adultery and the Rumor Mill: *Les bourgeois de Molinchart* and *El gran galeoto*

¡Ah! La calumnia se impone
y hace verdad el delito
(*El gran galeoto*, Act II, verses 1054-55)

Discussions of the adultery novel often consider the rise of the genre as a subversive current in nineteenth-century European literature. For some critics the infidelity represents a rebellion against the repressions and restrictions suffered by women in nineteenth-century society. For others—most notably, Tony Tanner—the adultery is the symbol of a broader phenomenon: a breakdown of the bourgeois social contract for which marriage is a metaphor.¹ In this essay, I would like to challenge these assumptions by pointing to a curious and relatively unstudied subset of nineteenth-century adultery texts: works in which the rumor of an affair predates and to a large extent provokes the act of infidelity. In these texts, discourse precedes and in many ways determines reality, resulting in an inversion of the traditional causality of the adultery novel: the transgression is not a source of gossip but rather a consequence of it.

This inversion raises a number of interesting questions. What does it mean when the adulterers are simply realizing a plot that has been projected upon them? What do we make of the public's collusion with the affair? And how do we interpret an infidelity that is not a rebellion against a mediocre and limiting milieu but rather a capitulation to its expectations? Finally, what does this subset of texts tell us about the meaning of adultery in nineteenth-century literature? In what follows, I will explore these issues in two works from different contexts and genres: *Les bourgeois de Molinchart* (1854), a novel by the French realist writer Jules Husson (1820-1889),

¹ For an overview of theories of the adultery novel, see the introduction to Amann, *Importing Madame Bovary*.

known by the pseudonym Champfleury, and *El gran galeoto* (1881), a play by the Spanish Nobel laureate José Echegaray (1832-1916).

The Public Eye: *Les bourgeois de Molinchart*

Champfleury's *Les bourgeois de Molinchart* opens with an anecdote that serves as a metaphor for its plot: "Il y a vingt ans, un chevreuil, poursuivi dans la plaine par des chasseurs, grimpa la montagne de Molinchart et traversa la ville. *On en parle* encore aujourd'hui" (3; italics mine). The roebuck trapped in the provincial village is a clear symbol for the heroine of the work, a bourgeois housewife imprisoned in a meaningless marriage. These lines, however, not only anticipate the plot but also introduce one of its most influential characters: the anonymous public—the "on"—that rehashes and comments upon the smallest details of village life.

Much of the plot of the novel hinges around this idle chatter, the *qu'en-dira-t-on* of provincial life. In the opening chapters, the heroine, Louise, warns both her husband, M. Creton du Coche, and would-be lover, Count Julien de Vorges, of the dangers of small-town gossip. "Toute la ville va savoir que vous traitez M. de Vorges," she tells M. Creton, "Vos mamies de grandeur courront la ville, et chacun se plaisantera sur vous" (49). Similarly, she complains of Julien's indiscrete attentions: "on vous a vu, presque tout le dîner, causer avec moi" (49); "toute la ville [...] vous a vu" (85). This "on" and "toute la ville" reappear throughout the novel:

- "tout le monde inspecte ma maison; chacun me regarde avec curiosité" (37)

- "Madame Creton a donné hier un très-beau dîner, dit-on dans la ville" (60)

- “il suffira qu’on te voie souvent dans la ville [...] Vous occuperez plus de la moitié de l’année les langues du pays” (71)
- “cela se saura, tout le monde te verra sur la place” (80)
- “Parlez moins haut [...] on pourrait vous entendre” (82)
- “c’est scandaleux, toute la ville le voit” (222)
- “Tout le monde en parle” (219)
- “Louise serait affichée aux yeux de toute la ville” (239)
- “On parle beaucoup de vous dans la ville” (257)
- “les gens de la ville sont si méchants, tout se sait... je crains...” (270)
- “Croyez-vous que toute la ville ne va pas le savoir ?” (277)
- “Il me semble qu’on te regarde” (279)
- “tout le monde de la ville me parle de vous” (284)
- “On vous plaint dans la ville” (290)

Through this repetition, the village becomes a panopticon of sorts, a space of constant surveillance—an “inquisition des regards” (103)—which generates an unending stream of discourse: an “incendie des propos de province” (223). And as is often the case with the panopticons described by Foucault, the heroine ends up internalizing this punishing eye. Even when she has left Molinchart and enjoys the anonymity of Paris life, “elle ne pouvait pas s’empêcher de songer qu’elle servait de fable à une petite ville, que son nom était cité à tout propos” (306).

The public eye not only observes but also seeks to penetrate surface appearances to reveal hidden truths. The narrator observes that the locals “feraient d’excellents commentateurs, s’ils appliquaient à des travaux sérieux la millième partie de ce qu’ils dépensent d’inductions pour la connaissance des pas et démarches de leurs concitoyens” (104). The provincials are like chemists:

qui t'analysent des pieds à la tête, qui commencent par l'extérieur pour arriver à l'intérieur. D'abord, ce seront tes habits qui subiront l'examen puis tes manières, ta figure, ta voix, ta démarche; jusque-là rien de plus naturel. Mais les chimistes ne s'arrêteront pas là: ils voudront savoir à quoi tu penses (195).

Champfleury's village, thus, is a space of constant and invasive surveillance, and its inhabitants have a melodramatic penchant for unmasking, for making the private public. The figures that most embody this attitude are the heroine's spinster sister-in-law, Ursule Creton, and the two Dames de Jérusalem, who keep watch over the village from their window and come to represent "le tribunal de l'opinion" (266). The initial characterization of Ursule reinforces her inquisitorial function. She first appears knitting beneath a portrait of her mother, who is her spitting image. The prying eyes of the picture—"yeux propres à fouiller au fond des consciences"—and the enormous "menacing" knitting needle (62) call to mind the revolutionary figure of the *tricoteuse*. Life in the village is a Terror of sorts, a space of constant, punitive scrutiny.

The surveillance and anonymous chatter of the village play an important role in the development of the plot. In the opening chapter, a roebuck, escaping a hunting expedition led by Julien, stampedes through the village and M. Jajeot's store destroying much of his merchandise. Jajeot later sues the count for damages. During the trial, his lawyer, M. Quantin, makes an insinuation about Julien's motives for befriending Louise's husband:

M. le comte Julien de Vorges est devenu l'ami de M. Creton du Coche, toute la ville le sait depuis longtemps; *on en parle assez* [...] Nous ne rechercherons pas les causes de cette amitié; la vie privé doit être

murée, et quoique les harangues de Me Grégoire nous autorisent à entrer dans cette voie perfide, nous laisserons le comte de Vorges emmener M. Creton du Coche à la campagne et lui procurer toutes les distractions imaginables. (214-15; my emphasis)

Through *praeteritio*, M. Quantin hints at an affair without making a direct accusation. At this point in the novel, Louise has done nothing blameworthy; she has consistently avoided and resisted the advances of her would-be lover. Nevertheless, she is already condemned in public opinion. In the following chapter, we learn that Quantin's source—the face behind his “on”—is none other than Ursule Creton, who resents her brother's wife and seeks to undermine her. Like M. Quantin, however, Ursule identifies her source as the collective voice: “*Tout le monde en parle*, et si ouvertement, que Me l'avocat Quantin s'est cru obligé d'en dire un mot dans son plaidoyer, et que ce jeune muscadin l'a été, le lendemain, demander en duel” (219; emphasis mine).

What is noteworthy in both Quantin's and Ursule's words is the inversion of cause and effect. Both attribute their story to village gossip, to “on” or “tout le monde”, but it is in fact Ursule who fabricates the story and Quantin who publicizes it at the trial. It is not they who repeat “tout le monde” but rather “tout le monde” who repeats their inventions. This inversion of cause and effect reflects that of the main plot. The “effect”—the gossip about Louise and Julien that begins to circulate at the trial in chapter 14—precedes by many pages its cause, the affair, which is only consummated in chapter 20. The punishment will similarly precede the crime in the dénouement of the novel. After spreading the rumor, Ursule and the Dames de Jérusalem begin to spy on Louise and catch her leaving a local boarding school shortly before Julien exits the same building. Although their encounter at the school is

an innocent one, Ursule and M. de Creton assume the worst. Louise's punishment, to which she initially resigns herself, is to be confined to her home and cut off from the outside world. Her humility, however, does not satisfy her persecutors who continue to invent humiliating punishments.

This public persecution of Louise for a crime she has not committed is to a large extent a catalyst of the adultery at the end of the novel. Harassed by her sister-in-law and weary of life, Louise plans to take refuge in the cottage of her maid's family. Little does she know that her servant has conspired with Julien. When she enters the carriage that is to take her to the cottage, she finds herself in his arms en route to Paris. Louise is, thus, tricked into an elopement. Her final adultery is not so much an active rebellion as a passive capitulation to circumstance.

At a superficial level, Champfleury's plot bears many similarities with Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, which appeared only two years later. Both works deal with provincial adulteresses oppressed by the mediocrity of their surroundings and both place emphasis on the meaningless chatter of the collectivity. These similarities have led many critics to compare the two works, which has generally resulted in a dismissal of Champfleury's.² It is important to point out, however, that *Les bourgeois de Molinchart* has a very different logic from *Madame Bovary*. Flaubert's novel explores the *impotence* of clichés. When Emma seeks to express her feelings for Rodolphe, she is foiled by the triteness of her words, which he has heard many times before from "des lèvres libertines ou vénales". As the narrator observes, "la parole humaine est comme un chaudron fêlé où nous battons des mélodies à faire danser les ours, quand on voudrait attendrir les étoiles" (219). Through sheer reiteration, the words Emma uses have lost their force.

² On the similarities and differences between the two novels and novelists, see Feyler, Lacoste, Pinelli, Overton and Williams.

What Champfleury explores, in contrast, is the power of repetition, the way in which reiteration can produce truth. The story that Ursule invents and that the townspeople repeat gradually becomes a reality over the course of the novel. In *Les bourgeois de Molinchart*, words impose themselves on the world precisely through their reiteration. Champfleury includes a number of episodes that reinforce this logic. At a dinner party early in the novel, two guests perform a duet called *Le Duel*, a piece that imitates musically a “combat à l’épée” (52). Through a series of mishaps, however, the performance turns into a physical fight between the two musicians. The piece that begins as a representation of a combat (an effect) becomes a catalyst of one (a cause). Its plot seems to realize itself in reality. The subplot around a circus performer named Carolina demonstrates a similar pattern. Julien seeks her company in an attempt to distract attention from his pursuit of Louise and later to provoke her jealousy. Once again, however, he loses control of the fiction, which disturbingly becomes real when Carolina falls in love with him and almost kills herself in despair. Yet another example of this pattern is the description of Ursule, who, though secretly longing to find a husband, pretends to despise the institution of marriage: eventually, she begins to believe her “médiances antimatrimoniales, comme un avocat peut croire, à l’audience, à la vertu d’une femme adultère qu’il défend” (65). Champfleury’s simile is an inverted image of the novel itself in which the heroine comes to believe in the adultery of which she has been (falsely) accused.

This emphasis on the power of words may help to account for two aspects of the novel that have often been considered shortcomings. The first is the impotence and passivity of Champfleury’s heroine. Compared with Emma, Louise is a flat character—“almost wholly passive” (Overton 72), “as dull as ditchwater” (Williams 148), “celle que l’on possède, que l’on veut posséder ou celle dont on parle”

(Louichon 195). “In making Louise so undemanding,” Williams observes, “Champfleury prevents the build-up of the exasperation with marriage which would have become the dynamic force propelling the heroine into adultery” (Williams 146). What Champfleury is exploring, however, is not (as in Flaubert) the heroine’s projection of fiction onto reality (Emma’s quixotic imagination) but rather the collective projection of a fiction onto the heroine. The protagonist of the novel is ultimately not Louise but the anonymous “on” of its first paragraph, the force of “tout le monde” in a provincial town. Louise is but a blank screen upon which their fantasy can be projected. The heroine’s emptiness, her non-complicity with her seduction, underscores the power of the rumor mill to impose its fiction on reality.

The second shortcoming to which critics often point is the loose construction of the novel, the disjunction between the main plot (the adultery story) and the descriptions of provincial *mœurs* that occupy so much of the novel. Tony Williams, for example, considers that

[o]ne of the main reasons why Champfleury's account is so unsatisfactory is that he has little idea of how to combine the account of his heroine's development with the description of provincial life.

There are several chapters dealing with aspects of life in Molinchart in which the heroine does not figure at all. Flaubert, in contrast, ensures that Emma is never eclipsed in this way. (155)³

Once again, however, it is important to keep in mind the very different logic of Champfleury’s novel. One of the main differences between *Madame Bovary* and *Les bourgeois de Molinchart* is the relationship between the heroine and her milieu. In Flaubert, Emma’s difference from her environment is to a large extent the catalyst of

³ Similar criticisms appear in Lacoste (153), Seillan (114), Louichon (199) and Overton (70).

her adultery. Her infidelity is a reaction against a world that she considers beneath her; her love affairs give her a sense of superiority, of greater sophistication. Louise's difference from her milieu, in contrast, is not what propels her into adultery but rather what allows her to resist it. Her final infidelity is ultimately a capitulation to the provincial plot. Throughout the novel, the narrator and various characters insist on Louise's difference: she is "une sorte de Parisienne égarée dans Molinchart" (73) and has somehow "échappé à l'ornière provinciale" (103). "Si vous y êtes," Julien tells Louise, "il n'y a plus de provinces" (54). These words are an apt description of the compositional principle of the novel itself. If Louise is on center stage, the provinces must fade into the backdrop and vice versa. The separation of the two genres underscores the separation between the heroine and her milieu.

Perhaps the most striking expression of Louise's difference is the narrator's explanation of her withdrawal from society. Although the heroine is an acute observer with an "esprit fin", she refrains from satirizing her neighbors:

Étudier les vices de chacun était trop facile dans une petite ville où chacun laisse lire dans ses actions et ses pensées. À ce jeu de critique maligne, Louise sentait qu'il était facile de devenir méchant, et, pour se garer de ce défaut éminemment provincial, la femme de l'avoué se condamna à une retraite absolue. (33)

As Voisin-Fougère rightly observes, the narrator is himself vulnerable to Louise's critique (297); he engages in precisely the type of mockery that his heroine rejects. If Louise is absent from these depictions of local *mœurs*, it is because she has rejected the very genre that Champfleury has embraced: provincial satire. Emma Bovary uses the shortcomings of her husband and neighbors—the mediocrity of her environment—to justify her adultery. Louise, in contrast, refuses to blame "les

pauvres provinciaux qui ne sont jamais sortis de chez eux” (50), and although her husband is blatantly neglectful and disparages her in public, she considers him innocent as well: “Louise se trouvait coupable parce qu’elle ne voyait pas son mari coupable: l’égoïsme de M. Creton du Coche, la parfaite indifférence qu’il témoignait à sa femme ne semblaient pas des motifs absolus de condamnation” (273).

The irony of Flaubert’s novel is that Emma, who disdains and criticizes her milieu, ultimately falls into its clichés. Her attempt to be different betrays her fundamental sameness. In Flaubert, the opposition between Emma and her milieu is a weak one; she easily succumbs to the *bêtise* of her surroundings and becomes indistinguishable from it. Louise, in contrast, has opted for non-judgment, closing herself in and off from her milieu. She does not fall into the clichés of her milieu. Rather, the town intrudes upon her solitude, projecting its hackneyed plot upon her reality. The opening scene, in which the roebuck and townspeople invade her home, is an apt metaphor for the plot of the novel as a whole. Louise is the victim of a predatory public whose discourse imposes itself on her world. Her attempt to dissociate herself from her milieu does not demonstrate her sameness (the common silliness of all provincials) but rather the invasiveness of her opponent. The emblematic image of Flaubert’s novel is the lathe on which Emma’s neighbor, M. Binet, carves wooden objects without function or meaning—an apt metaphor for the gradual wearing down of significance, for the dissociation between words and reality. The machine at the heart of Champfleury’s novel, in contrast, is the rumor mill, the workings of which do not wear down but rather increase the influence of its discourse, which gradually becomes reality.

The Public as Go-Between: *El gran galeoto*

In its inverted causality and emphasis on the power of gossip, the plot of *Les bourgeois de Molinchart* recalls one of the most popular works of nineteenth-century Spanish theater, José Echegaray's *El gran Galeoto* (1881), a play about a couple torn apart by idle rumor.⁴ Don Julián and his wife Teodora have taken into their home a young playwright named Ernesto, who is the son of a late friend. Observed together in society, Teodora and Ernesto soon become the object of gossip, which gradually destroys the family. After Julián dies of wounds from a duel, Ernesto resigns himself to the role that rumor has assigned him and accepts Teodora as his lover: “Lo quiso el mundo; yo su fallo acepto” (296).

The play begins with a “Dialogue”, which introduces the work and explains its thesis. In this prologue, Ernesto is struggling to complete a play, which he will call *El gran Galeoto*, and discusses his difficulties with his friend and protector, Don Julián:

ERNESTO: Figúrese usted que el principal personaje, el que crea el drama, el que lo desarrolla, el que lo anima, el que provoca la catástrofe, el que la devora y la goza, no puede salir a escena.

DON JULIÁN: ¿Tan feo es? ¿Tan repugnante o tan malo?

ERNESTO: No es eso. Feo, como cualquiera: como usted o como yo. Malo, tampoco: ni malo ni bueno. Repugnante, no en verdad: no soy tan escéptico, ni tan misántropo, ni tan desengañado de la vida estoy que tal cosa afirme o que tamaña injusticia cometa.

DON JULIÁN: Pues entonces, ¿cuál es la causa?

ERNESTO: Don Julián, la causa es que el personaje de que se trata no cabría materialmente en el escenario.

⁴ In what follows, I cite the Castalia edition of the play.

DON JULIÁN: ¡Virgen santísima, y qué cosas dices! ¿Es drama mitológico por ventura y aparecen los titanes?

ERNESTO: Titanes son, pero a la moderna.

DON JULIÁN: ¿En suma?

ERNESTO: ¡En suma, ese personaje es... ¡*todo el mundo*, que es una buena suma!

DON JULIÁN: ¡*Todo el mundo*! Pues tienes razón: todo el mundo no cabe en el teatro; he ahí una verdad indiscutible y muchas veces demostrada.

ERNESTO: Pues ya ve usted cómo yo estaba en lo cierto. (76-77)

As in Champfleury's novel, the main protagonist of the play is the anonymous collectivity, and the story will be driven by its idle rumors. In both works, the main characters long to hold the gossipers to account but are frustrated by the sheer number of their antagonists. When Julien expresses a desire to kill "celui qui oserait dire un mot sur le compte de Louise," his friend points out that "[t]oute la ville est complice; ce n'est pas une bouche qui parle, ce sont toutes les bouches; tu veux tuer tout le monde" (239). Similarly, Doña Mercedes tells Teodora that Julián would need "manos para mucha gente" to avenge her, since "todos son de un parecer" (630).

Like Champfleury, moreover, Echegaray explores an inverted causality, a rumor that precedes and provokes an affair. The playwright, however, examines in greater detail the way in which this comes to pass. The first stage in the process is the birth of the story:

Si les han visto
cien personas ese día,
es para el caso lo mismo

que haberse mostrado en público
 no en un día en cien distintos [...]
 lo que vieron dicen todos
 y no mienten al decirlo.
 “Les vi una vez.” “Otra yo.”
 Una y una, dos; de fijo.
 “Y yo también.” Ya son tres.
 Y ése cuatro; y aquél, cinco.
 Y de buena fe sumando
 se llega hasta lo infinito. (177-78)

In these verses, Echegaray insists on the power of repetition. Multiple viewings (and recountings) of a single incident create the illusion of multiple incidents. Repetition of a story leads to a belief in the repetition of an action in reality. The rumor mill, through its very reiterations, gives an illusory grounding the story.

This repetition gradually transforms the characters themselves. Julián laments that:

[...] aunque dicen con verdad:
 “¡Pero si no nos amamos!”
 a fuerza de repetirlo
 acabarán por pensarlo. (162)

As in Champfleury, repetition here does not wear down truth but rather confers it. Although Julián seems to analyze this phenomenon dispassionately, his phrasing betrays the extent to which the rumor has already perverted his thinking. The antecedent of the object pronoun in “repetirlo” is a disavowal of love—“pero si no nos amamos”. In theory, this should be the antecedent of “pensarlo” as well, but the

context suggests the opposite: that Ernesto and Teodora will end up thinking that they are in love. The imagined repetition has turned indifference to love before our eyes!

Just as Louise gradually internalizes the external eye in *Les bourgeois de Molinchart*, so the characters in the play begin to adopt the logic of the collectivity. Although Julián disdains the idle gossip, he finds himself harboring suspicions, divided against himself:

DON JULIAN: De modo que en esta lucha
de dos impulsos contrarios,
para los demás soy juez,
y soy su cómplice en tanto. (157-58)

He is at once a judge of the public (condemning its gossip) and its accomplice (in his suspicions of his wife). As the rumor is repeated, it begins to change his very personality: “estas internas / luchas [...] han hecho de mi carácter / otro carácter contrario” (160). Even the alleged lovers begin to doubt themselves. Ernesto wonders whether the rumor “¿[m]arca con sello maldito / la culpa que ya existía / o engendra la que no había / y da ocasión al delito?” (109), and Teodora starts to question her innocence: “a veces dudo de mí / y me pregunto espantada: / ¿Seré lo que dicen todos?” (252). Both Ernesto and Teodora consider that the rumor has polluted their minds, changing their moral essence. As Ernesto observes, “¿Lo horrible es que se mancha el pensamiento / al ruin contacto de la ruin idea!” (241). Similarly, Teodora complains that it is “¿[t]an maldita y tan fatal, / que sólo por no arrancarla / de mi memoria y llevarla / en ella, soy criminal!” (132). As in *Les bourgeois de Molinchart*, the punishment seems to precede the crime: “¿Sufrir la humillación / es ser digna de la mancha!” (253)

The metatextual subplot of Echegaray's work—the story of the composition of play itself—reflects the inverted logic of the adultery plot in the play. Whereas normally it is the author who directs his characters and his plot, Ernesto finds himself a victim of his own story, which gradually imposes its logic on his personal life. Like the rumor about Teodora and Julián, the play intrudes upon reality. As Julián observes in the middle of the play, it is not Ernesto but the public who will determine its dénouement:

[...] el cuidado
 de preparar desenlace
 para este drama está a cargo
 del mundo que lo engendró
 solamente con mirarnos:
 tal su mirada es fecunda
 en lo bueno y en lo malo. (163)

Whereas in the opening lines of the play, the public is Ernesto's audience—"Está visto que *todo el mundo* se interesa por mí" (82)—by its end, he resigns himself to being their creation—"soy como quieren los demás que sea" (236)—and relinquishes control over his story to the collectivity: "¡Vosotros, á inventar!... Yo, a recogerlo!" (297). A similar inversion is present in the relationship between Echegaray and his characters. Where in theory he is the author and creator of his characters, his characters—Ernesto and later *todo el mundo*—ultimately become the author of his work.⁵

The metatextual nature of the play allows Echegaray to explore more explicitly than Champfleury the challenges of converting the anonymous collectivity

⁵ This inversion is clear in the dedication of the work, which he attributes "*a la buena voluntad de todos, no a méritos míos*" (71).

into a character. As Ernesto points out to Julián in the Dialogue that precedes Act I, the true protagonist of his work is too big to appear on stage. When Julián suggests that he depict the collectivity through a few representative characters—“*Todo el mundo puede condensarse en unos cuantos tipos o caracteres*”—Ernesto objects: “Si yo represento la totalidad de las gentes por unos cuantos tipos o personajes simbólicos, tengo que poner en cada uno lo que realmente está disperso en muchos, y resulta falseado el pensamiento” (77).

Champfleury and Echeagaray deal with this problem in different ways. In *Les bourgeois de Molinchart*, Champfleury resorts to the strategy of condensation that Julián advocates. The novel represents *tout le monde* through three gossiping characters—Ursule and the Dames de Jérusalem—who, in both their number determining function, resemble the Three Fates of antiquity. The result of this condensation is the introduction of a secondary motive. While the nameless masses may gossip indifferently, the bitter sister-in-law must do so for a reason, in this case, her jealousy of Louise and desire for revenge. Critics have dismissed this aspect of the plot as feuilletonesque: “L’intrigue [...] est mue par le ressort favori du roman-feuilleton, la vengeance.” (Seillan, 116). Just as Ernesto fears, the strategy of representation results in exaggeration, in a falsification of Champfleury’s realist project.

Echeagaray also flanks his play with a group of meddling family members, who serve as mirror figures to the protagonists: Severo (Julián’s brother), Modesta (Severo’s wife) and Pepito (their son) reflect Julián, Teresa and Ernesto respectively. Severo’s family seeks to warn the main characters about the rumors circulating in Madrid and to prevent them from exposing themselves to further gossip. Their names evoke the moral values that they represent: the modesty of the bourgeois housewife

and her husband's severe sense of honor. Both Severo and Modesta are quick to jump to conclusions, but their primary goal is to save their relatives from impending disaster. In this sense, they represent an intermediate space between the private zone of the home and the public zone of the rumors.⁶ In contrast to Ursule, who invents and actively attempts to confirm the rumor about Louise and Julien, Severo and his family engage in damage control; they attempt to protect the protagonists from their own indiscretions.

The closest that Echegaray comes to incarnating *todo el mundo* is the figure of the Viscount Nebreda, whom Ernesto overhears repeating the rumor about Teodora in a café and challenges to a duel. When Julián finds out about this, he is overjoyed: “que hasta hoy la calumnia fue / impalpable y no logré / ver cómo tiene la cara. / ¡Y al fin sé dónde se esconde...!” (176). Finally, he can identify a rumor with a face. It is important to note, however, that the audience can never do so. Neither the Viscount nor *todo el mundo* ever appears on stage.

The divergent approaches to representing the gossipers in the play and the novel reflect a very different understanding of their motivation. In the novel, the rumor about Louise is a deliberate calumny, invented and disseminated by Ursule to undermine her sister-in-law's position. In the play, in contrast, the gossip emerges

⁶ Some critics have considered the in-laws as the incarnation of public gossip. Samper, for example, describes Mercedes, Severo and Pepito as a “trio secondaire des bourreaux [...] porteparole de la calomnie et cause du conflit initial” (88-89), and Goenaga and Maguna call them “los victimarios, el trío que se convierte en portavoz de la calumnia” (399). Gonzalo Sobejano points to the absence of an “intermediario [...] entre los protagonistas y el coro de murmuradores” (104). It is important to note, however, that the three characters differ considerably in their reactions and the interpretations. Pepito's long monologue in Act II suggests a very nuanced understanding of the situation, one that recognizes the positions of both Ernesto and society at large. It is perhaps more accurate to describe the three characters as representatives of the ideological and social codes—particularly, the notion of the importance of appearances—rather than as incarnations of the gossip or of evil in society. They function as intermediaries to the extent that they attempt to reconcile the conduct of the family with the expectations of society.

from an accident of perspective (multiple testimonies perceived as multiple incidents), and if the rumor is repeated, it is not necessarily out of malice. Indeed, Echegaray insists on the indifferent, meaningless nature of the gossip, which is based on tiny gestures and insignificant repetitions: “yo sólo pretendo demostrar que ni aun las acciones más insignificantes son insignificantes ni pérdidas el bien o para el mal, porque sumadas por misteriosas influencias de la vida moderna, pueden llegar a producir inmensos efectos” (78). As Ernesto himself admits, the gossiping multitude acts “sin pasión, sin saña, sin maldad, indiferente y distraído” (77). This difference in the treatment of the rumors may be related to the settings of the two works: what is petty envy in a provincial village (Molinchart) is indifferent banter in the urban space (Madrid). Indeed, Julien’s friend observes more than once that his relationship with Louise would not be subject to the same scrutiny in Paris.

A final difference between the two works concerns the way in which the rumor becomes reality. The title of Echegaray’s (and Ernesto’s) work recalls the episode in Dante’s *Inferno* in which Francesca commits adultery with Paolo after they read together a love scene in which Gallehaut leads Lancelot to Guinevere. Francesca blames their sin on the suggestive force of their reading material: “il Galeotto è il libro” [“A Gallehaut indeed, that book”] (46-47). Like Gallehaut, the book has drawn her to Paolo. In a central scene of Echegaray’s play, Pepito discovers in Ernesto’s apartment a copy of Dante’s poem open at the episode of Paolo and Francesca. Ernesto later explains to Pepito that “a veces es Galeoto/ toda la masa social” (186). It is not the fictions of the book but those of society—the gossip—that draw Ernesto to Teodora. What makes the gossip so influential in the play is its power of suggestion. The idea of a relationship with his protector’s wife had not occurred to him before he heard the rumor, but now that it has been planted in his head, it has become an

obsession. Echegaray is in a sense combining the model of *Les bourgeois de Molinchart*—the determining role of *tout le monde* and gossip—with that of *Madame Bovary*, which explores the suggestive force of Emma’s reading and by extension the way the fictions we encounter shape our desire. In *El gran Galeoto*, the fiction in question is the rumor, which inspires in Ernesto a desire he had never imagined.

This representation of the public as a go-between distinguishes the play from the novel. Champfleury’s characters do not need the public to figure out that they are soul mates. The attraction is natural and immediate and even predates the beginning of the action. It is not the desire but its fulfillment that is socially determined.

Echegaray, in contrast, suggests that the rumor mill creates the desire itself. What is natural in *El gran galeoto* is not the desire so much as the assumption of an attraction between good-looking people of a similar age. In *Les bourgeois de Molinchart*, multiple forces influence the final outcome: Ursule’s resentment and spying, Julien’s plots, Louise’s jealousy of Caroline. The rumor mill is but one force among many. The play, in contrast, insists much more on the causal function of the gossip. The rumor mill both generates and disseminates the false story.

Critics have reacted to this causality in one of two different ways. Many critics dismiss or question the thesis of the work—the representation of gossip as “el gran Galeoto”. James Hoddie, for example, argues that Ernesto is unconsciously in love with Teodora but unable to accept his feelings. He therefore “projects” his guilt onto society as a whole, blaming others for his own illicit desires (36). Similarly, Wadda Ríos Font writes of the “adulterous act that [Ernesto] unconsciously desires and to which the pressure of others ultimately impels him” (66). Fornieles goes as far as to dismiss the thesis of the prologue entirely: for him the Dialogue is but an attempt to make the play more acceptable, to “disminuir los riesgos, en fijar las pautas con las

que el drama debía ser interpretado por los espectadores” (40). The audience, he claims, quickly forgets Echegaray’s thesis: “los espectadores dejan a un lado las advertencias sobre la murmuración y se hacen sin cesar una pregunta: ¿se aman Teodora y Ernesto?, ¿son o no son culpables?” (42) Both Fornieles and López consider the thesis about the rumor mill to be secondary to the adultery plot (Fornieles 42; López 47). What is fascinating about these interpretations is the way these readers align themselves with the gossiping masses. They too are “reading into” the conduct of the protagonists, projecting emotions onto external appearances.

One of the challenges of the play is how to justify Ernesto’s final capitulation to the rumors. Early critics of the piece, indeed, found it difficult to accept “la debilidad que mostraba [Ernesto] al dejarse influir por las murmuraciones” (*Revista contemporánea*, cited in Fornieles, 46) and the “intento de considerar culpable a la sociedad o de creer que la calumnia pudiera originar por sí misma la pasión” (García Cadena, cited in Fornieles 47). The assumption of a pre-existing or underlying desire helps to account for the dénouement of the play. The problem with this reading, however, is that it casts a shadow of bad faith upon the protagonist and in so doing diminishes the fundamental tension of the work: the opposition between the truth of society and the truth of the individual.

Other critics, accepting the basic thesis of the work, insist on this dichotomy: Samper, for example reads all of Echegaray’s theater as “une grande machine à défendre l’individu contre la société” (86). In *El gran galeoto*, he argues, it is society that “fait donc naître le mal quand il n’existe pas encore dans l’individu” (89). Similarly, Caldera observes that there are two truths in the work; at the end, “[h]a trionfato [...] la verità di Severo e Mercedes; eppure sentiamo che la verità di Ernesto, la fondamentale purezza del suo cuore, non è stata sconfitta” (91). I would argue that

what ultimately brings Teodora and Ernesto together is not a pre-existing desire so much as their unique epistemological position. The gossip places them in the position of sharing a truth that no one else can verify—that of their innocence—and which they themselves cannot prove before the world. This shared knowledge and frustration creates an intimacy and solidarity between them, which opens them to the suggestive power of the rumor.

The diverse critical readings of the play reflect the peculiar position in which Echegaray places his spectators. For the audience at once embodies the collective villain of the story—the impartial onlookers who provoke the *dénouement*—and is invited to identify with its protagonists. As Paolini observes, “el público siente su responsabilidad en lo sucedido, sin embargo, estéticamente purificado, aplaude frenéticamente mientras algo queda adentro, en su conciencia” (485-86). The public’s position is to a certain extent the inverse mirror of that of the characters themselves. Where the protagonists begin defending their individual truth but gradually come to internalize that of society at large, the public begins in the position of “todo el mundo” but increasingly identifies with the individuals on stage. The genius and tension of the play derives in large part from this inverse movement. In this respect, the work differs considerably from *Les bourgeois de Molinchart*, which does not implicate or assimilate its reader with the gossiping public (where the Molinchartois are reading into external signs and appearances, the reader has privileged access to the hearts and homes of all of the main characters).

It is interesting to think about what it says about us as readers that we accept or reject the premise of the work, that we align ourselves with the characters or the public. Those who read the adultery plot into the relationship, in a sense, adopt the standpoint of society and the gossiping masses. The more subversive position—the

one that challenges societal norms and assumptions—is that of the reader who accepts the thesis of the play and the truth of the couple. It is important to note that Echegaray dissociates this perspective from the adultery plot. As Paolini points out, the elopement of Ernesto and Teodora occurs after the death of Julián, “lo que, dejando a Teodora viuda, hace jurídica y moralmente imposible el adulterio” (482). What is truly defiant in the play is not the suspicion of adultery but rather our recognition of the innocence of the couple.

The Politics of Adultery

At this point, we can return to the question raised at the beginning of this essay: the political significance of the female adultery plot. Both works end with the creation of a couple, which involves a certain sense of relief and release. The characters seem poised to escape the public that condemns them. In each case, however, a number of factors undercut this sense of liberation. First, neither of the heroines actually chooses to engage in adultery (posthumous or otherwise). As I mentioned earlier, Louise is trapped into an elopement, and in the final scene of the play, Teodora faints and is unconscious when Ernesto carries her off. This passivity and unawareness undermines any subversive reading of the heroines’ actions. In both cases, moreover, the triumph of the public’s truth—the interpretation of the rumor mill—casts the final relationship as act of resignation or submission. Finally, both works end on a note of ambiguity that diminishes the satisfaction we take in their outcome. Although Champfleury’s lovers enjoy a few idyllic months traveling through Europe, Julien’s passion soon fades, and Louise continues to see herself through the eyes of Molinchart gossip. At the end of the novel, their future together is dubious. Similarly, Ernesto’s final gesture is not an act of defiance so much as an

admission of defeat. In both works, the realization of the adulterous relationship is ultimately not a subversion of bourgeois society but rather a conformity with collective desire.

Bibliography

- Amann, Elizabeth (2006). *Importing Madame Bovary: The Politics of Adultery*. New York: Palgrave.
- Caldera, Ermanno (1989). Echegaray, tra la parole e il silenzio. *Symbolae Pisanae*, 1, 85-98.
- Champfleury (1859). *Les bourgeois de Molinchart*. Paris: Michel Lévy Frères.
- Dante (1982). *Inferno*. Trans. Allen Mandelbaum. New York: Bantam Books.
- Echegaray, José (2002). *El gran galeoto*. Ed. Javier Fornieles. Madrid: Castalia.
- Echegaray, José (2007). *El gran galeoto*. Ed. James H. Hoddie. Madrid: Cátedra.
- Feyler, Patrick (2006). Champfleury et Flaubert: les malentendus du réalisme. In G. Bonnet (Ed.), *Champfleury, écrivain chercheur* (pp. 159-172). Paris: Honoré Champion.
- Flaubert, Gustave (1979). *Madame Bovary*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Foucault, Michel (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Pantheon.
- Goenaga, Angel and Maguna, Juan P. (1971). *Teatro español del siglo XIX. Análisis de obras*. Madrid: Las Américas.
- Lacoste, Francis (2006). *Les bourgeois de Molinchart et Madame Bovary*. In G. Bonnet (Ed.), *Champfleury, écrivain chercheur* (pp. 145-158). Paris: Honoré Champion.
- López, Julio (1981). *La poesía y el teatro realista*. Madrid: Cincel.
- Louichon, Brigitte (2006). *Molinchart: ses objets, ses discours, son roman*. In G. Bonnet (Ed.), *Champfleury, écrivain chercheur* (pp. 189-199). Paris: Honoré Champion.
- Overton, Bill (1996). *The Novel of Female Adultery: Love and Gender in Continental European Fiction, 1830-1900*. London: Macmillan.
- Paolini, Gilbert (1995). *Un acercamiento a la obra de Echegaray*. *Saggi in onore di Giovanni Allegra*. Perugia. 479-91.
- Pinelli, Pier Luigi (1987). *Una Emma Bovary à Laon: Louise Creton du Coche*. *Letterature*, 10, 63-100.
- Pinelli, Pier Luigi (1986). *La polisemia della finestra e la «vue plongeante» in Madame Bovary e nei Bourgeois de Molinchart*. *Annali dell' Instituto Universitario Orientale*, Napoli, 28, 595-618.

- Pinelli, Pier Luigi (1992). Dal vero al bello. *Les Bourgeois de Molinchart e Madame Bovary*. Geneva: ECIG.
- Pinelli, Pier Luigi (1989). La fatalità del “milieu” in *Les Bourgeois de Molinchart e in Madame Bovary*. *Letterature*, 12, 26-51.
- Pinelli, Pier Luigi (1983-1984). Madame Bovary et Les Bourgeois de Molinchart: analyse comparative de deux personnages secondaires. *Les Cahiers du Ru*, 3, 18-28.
- Samper, Edgard (1992). José Echegaray ou la souveraineté de l’individu. In F. Regard (Ed.); *Logique des traversés: De l’influence* (pp. 75-97). Saint-Etienne, France: Université de Saint-Etienne.
- Ríos-Font, Wadda (1997). *Rewriting Melodrama: The Hidden Paradigm in Modern Spanish Theater*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press.
- Seillan, Jean-Marie (2006). Théorie et pratique du réalisme chez Champfleury: l’exemple des *Bourgeois de Molinchart*. In G. Bonnet (Ed.), *Champfleury, écrivain chercheur* (pp. 105-118). Paris: Honoré Champion.
- Sobejano, Gonzalo (1978). Echegaray, Galdós y el melodrama. *Anales Galdosianos (Anejo)*, 94-115.
- Tanner, Tony (1979). *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Voison-Fougère, Marie-Ange (2006). Cartographie ironique des Bourgeois de Molinchart. In G. Bonnet (Ed.), *Champfleury, écrivain chercheur* (pp. 287-299). Paris: Honoré Champion.
- Williams, Tony (1991-1992). Champfleury, Flaubert and the Novel of Adultery. *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 20(1-2), 145-157.