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Marivaux's Comedy of Loss: *La Double Inconstance*

by Thomas M. Carr, Jr.

MARIVAUX'S TREATMENT of losing love in one of his favorite plays, *La Double Inconstance* (1723), is a double tour de force. Not content to show that grieving or offering sympathy for lost love can be intimately tied to the awakening to love that is at the center of his theater, he also turns them to comic advantage. The classic accounts of the role of sensibility in Marivaux, such as Ruth Jamieson's, have pointed out how love strains against pride in his plays as lovers summon amour-propre to resist acknowledging that they are in love (97, 105) and noted the comic results of this conflict; yet even commentators who have been especially attentive to the role of sympathy in Marivaux, such as David Marshall, have overlooked the comic potential of this sympathy. My reading of the play proposes that mourning one's own losses and sympathy for the losses of others are not only a considerable factor in the triumph of new loves at the denouement, but figure, along with amour-propre, in the play's troubling brand of comedy where the comic skirts melancholy.¹

Unlike *La Seconde Surprise de l'amour* (1727), where the protagonists have lost their previous lovers to death and the convent, in *La Double Inconstance* the initial loss is merely separation. When the play opens Silvia has been removed by force from her lover Arlequin by the Prince who had fallen in love with her while he was disguised as an officer visiting her village. The Prince has had Silvia installed at his court where with the help of Trivelin and Flaminia he intends to convince her to abandon Arlequin and become his wife.

The birth of one love thus requires the death of another love in this play, and such a loss entails grieving, as might a physical death. The normal reaction to loss is to seek repair, some compensation that restores what has been lost; but when a substitute of equal or greater value cannot be obtained, various strategies of adjustment must be brought into play. In Marivaux's time, such remedies generally went under the appellation of consolation; today, they are more likely to be referred to as therapies of mourning.²

The action of *La Double Inconstance* spins itself out between two replacements that potentially obviate the characters' sense of loss and eliminate

the need for any grieving or consolation.³ In the play's first scenes Trivelin seeks to persuade Arlequin and Silvia to trade their love for the material advantages of the court. At the end of the play Arlequin and Silvia do accept replacements for each other, but Silvia at least sees her new tie to the Prince less as a substitute than as a more authentic love. This shift in perspective is accomplished by a sort of grief therapy through which Silvia and Arlequin accept the loss of their love for each other while establishing new attachments.

Before examining the strategy invented by the Prince's agents to replace Arlequin with the Prince, an excursus into the role of sympathy in Marivaux's treatment of grieving and consolation will be useful. While Marivaux wrote no consolatory treatise, his reworking of the commonplaces of consolation shows that he was well versed in the tradition that dates back to the Greeks.⁴ The pompous Hortentius in *La Seconde Surprise* proposes readings from a *Traité de la patience* (2.4) that recalls the works of moral philosophers like Seneca or any number of texts by Renaissance humanists who preach that reason can and must control passions such as grief. But while the learned doctor is a caricature of the Stoic consolatory tradition, in Marivaux's *journaux* and early novels we find a more serious reworking of the ancient sources in terms of Marivaux's own point of view that stresses the unreasonableness of vanity and sympathy for the plight of others.

One of *L'Indigent philosophe's* most frequently cited passages, which stresses that true reason does not require heroic efforts ("la raison nous coule de source quand nous voulons la suivre" [279]), is offered within a discussion of mourning: a nobleman kills himself in an effort to be "un modèle de raison" when he tries to hide from others his pain over the loss of a dear wife by not crying in public (279). A model that Marivaux deems more reasonable is presented in the *Les Effets surprenants de la sympathie* where Clarice's tears calm the violence of her despair (31); her consoler, Philine, sets the modest goal of not increasing her mistress's pain by inopportune discussion (32). But just as it is unreasonable to suppress all tears, prolonging them is not reasonable either. As the father of the Inconnu in the *Spectateur* tells his wife who is grieving over reversals in the family fortune, "il n'est pas étonnant que la raison plie d'abord sous de certains revers: les mouvements naturels doivent avoir leurs cours. Mais on se retrouve après cela; on revint à soi-même, on s'apaise" (237). Marivaux does not specify just how this consolation is effected, but seems to suggest that consolers should offer sympathy and hope rather than arguments, while awaiting the healing action of time, for "Le temps console de tout" (*Spectateur* 256).

Stress on sympathy for the pain of others is the distinctive feature of Marivaux's treatment of grief. An *âme sensible* is by its very nature prone to intense suffering, but more importantly, resonates with the pain of others (*Spectateur* 129). If women are especially likely to torment themselves

with grief ("se désol[er] comme une femme," says the Indigent philosophe [280]), they are also more likely to inspire such sympathy than men (*Effets* 29). While to conceal one's grief out of sense of pride in one's ability to manage the emotions can be life threatening, to moderate one's display of grief so as not to increase the sympathetic grief felt by those who offer condolences is praiseworthy (*Spectateur* 236–37). As David Marshall notes, emotions like sympathy function through a "theatrical dynamics" in which characters either stage-manage themselves as spectacles of feeling or operate as spectators who attempt to decipher the spectacle displayed by others (5).⁵

The attack against Silvia begins when Trivelin proposes not sympathy but material inducements if she will abandon her sorrow over her separation from Arlequin. In a scene typical of the opening of Marivaux's plays where one character often recommends *raison* to another, he asks: "Ne faut-il pas être raisonnable" (1.1)?⁶ But if Trivelin preaches laying aside emotion it is not in the name of the stoic impassibility of Hortensius in *La Seconde Surprise*; *raison* for Trivelin is not the will's control of the emotions, but a calculated assessment of the honors and riches that the Prince's favor can bestow. In fact, Trivelin is incapable of understanding Silvia's pain over losing Arlequin; the courtier only sees the advantages she will gain as the Prince's lover. However, Silvia will have none of either form of reason. Rejecting stoic calm, she takes perverse pleasure in the first symptoms of her grief—loss of appetite, anger and the like: "Et moi, je hais la santé, et je suis bien aise d'être malade; ainsi, vous n'avez qu'à renvoyer tout ce qu'on m'apporte, car je ne veux aujourd'hui ni déjeuner, ni dîner . . . Je ne veux qu'être fâchée, vous haïr tous" (1.1). The resentment and refusal to relinquish her pain seen here, and her fear later in act 1 (1.12), are typical symptoms of the initial phases of grief, and she combines them with concern for Arlequin: "[Arlequin] se désespère quelque part, j'en suis sûre, car il a le cœur si bon! Peut-être qu'on le maltraite . . . Je suis outrée . . . laissez-moi m'affliger en repos" (1.1). Trivelin is equally callous with Arlequin's tears: while he is full of sympathy for the unhappiness the Prince will feel if he has to return Silvia (1.4), Trivelin maintains that the peasant Arlequin has only to find another girl to replace Silvia ("il ne s'agira seulement que de quitter une fille pour en prendre une autre" [1.4]).

When material inducements fail, Flaminia devises a plan that she claims will be based on appeal to the vanity inherent in Silvia's heart: "[E]lle a un cœur, et par conséquent, de la vanité" (1.2). In truth, Flaminia's strategy will equally exploit another aspect of the heart, Arlequin and Silvia's capacity to resonate in sympathy with others. The first step will be for Flaminia and the Prince, disguised as the officer, to feign compassion for the losses of Arlequin and Silvia, promising to defend them against the overt enemies of their love such as Trivelin and Lisette (1.11; 2.2). Their

condolences become a clever way of winning the trust of their victims (1.13). This ploy takes advantage of the difficulty, noted by Marshall, that characters have accurately reading the displays of emotions of other characters (5).

Simultaneously, in order to foster a love for the Prince and herself that will replace Arlequin and Silvia's love for each other, Flaminia exploits their capacity to sympathize with the grief of others. Flaminia presents herself as grieving for a lover who has died and whom she can never forget (1.11); Arlequin's condolences for her feigned loss thus create an additional bond with her feigned condolences for their real loss: "[J]e suis fâché de la mort de votre amant, c'est bien dommage que vous soyez affligée, et nous aussi" (1.11). Sympathy becomes an agent of seduction. Arlequin and Flaminia's mutual condolences will later serve as an initial cover for their growing interest in each other, an *amour* disguising itself as *amitié*.

Flaminia devises another series of *fausses confidences* involving potential losses. Lisette confides to Silvia her hope that the Prince will marry her and asks Silvia's aid (2.10); Trivelin makes a similar request for aid regarding Flaminia to Arlequin (3.2); Flaminia informs Arlequin that she is about to be exiled from the court for having interceded on his behalf (3.7; cf. 2.6). Such deceptions trigger anxiety in Silvia and Arlequin over a possible loss (albeit in Silvia, vanity over losing the Prince's affections is more at issue than losing his love). This anxiety pushes Arlequin and Silvia closer to the realization that what they feel for Flaminia or for the officer is not just sympathy, or even friendship, but love.

Sympathetic pain for another's pain is not limited to grief over death or separation from a lover. It can also be occasioned by unrequited love. Here, however, the remedy proposed goes beyond the condolences of sympathy to eliminating the grounds for the suffering. Thus, just as at the beginning of the play Silvia glories in the pain she feels at being separated from Arlequin as proof of her love, the Prince does not hide from Silvia the suffering he feels because she loves Arlequin instead of him. Playing the role of the submissive suitor, the Prince claims that he will leave Silvia rather than cause her discomfort: "Quant à moi, belle Silvia, quand mon amour vous fatiguera . . . vous n'avez qu'à m'ordonner de me taire et de me retirer; je me tairai, j'irai où vous voudrez, et je souffrirai sans me plaindre, résolu de vous obéir en tout" (2.12). Silvia recognizes the officer's worth as an *âme sensible* and thus that he merits her love precisely because he is able to display a concern for her feelings that seems more genuine than Arlequin's. Moreover, he claims not to place demands on her at a time when she is becoming increasingly irritated by her duty to remain faithful to Arlequin. Thus Silvia's initial grief over being separated from Arlequin and her sympathy for his pain are gradually replaced by a recognition of the officer's capacity for sympathy and by a concern for his suffering; the play can end when she recognizes that her sympathy is in fact love.

Indeed, so difficult is it for Silvia to admit that the Prince's pain and her own sympathy for it could be alleviated most simply by her transferring her love from Arlequin to the officer that Marivaux postpones this realization until just before the play's end: "dire toujours non à un homme qui demande toujours oui, le voir triste, toujours se lamentant, toujours le consoler de la peine qu'on lui a fait, dame, cela lasse; il vaut mieux ne lui en plus faire" (3.8). In effect, the therapist decides that the best cure for her patient is to fall in love with him; Silvia determines that rather than console the officer for the pain she causes him, she should not make him suffer in the first place. At the same time, she successfully completes her own mourning for the loss of Arlequin's love by finally accepting her new status as the spouse of the Prince.⁷

Henri Coulet and Michel Gilot identify an alliance of the comic and the pathetic as a principal distinguishing feature of Marivaudian comedy.⁸ Examining how Marivaux presents the pain of loss as comic will allow us to better understand this paradoxical union. Theoreticians have often noted that the comic presents some object that would ordinarily be a cause for alarm in a way that neutralizes the concern. Aristotle speaks of a painless defect (*Poetics* 5.1). For Marcel Gutwirth, laughter is in response "to an inconsequential bit of damage" (122). For Elder Olson, comedy presents a subject in such a way that the emotions of pity or fear which the object could potentially arouse are disarmed by showing that they are "the contrary of the serious" (37).⁹ According to Olson, for a play as a whole to be comic—as opposed to just individual scenes, characters, or bits of dialogue—the dramatist must construct the plot in such a way that, although the characters may at times experience real suffering, the spectator knows that their pain will not have serious consequences (48, 61). The comic perspective depends on undercutting the sympathy that might develop if spectators concentrated on how they resemble the character (Olson 16–19).

In order to reduce the tension spectators might experience over the characters' suffering Marivaux uses a series of strategies that devalue any distress the characters feel. As early as scene 2, the spectators can foresee the outcome when the Prince informs us that Silvia permitted him to see her again five or six times after having met her and professed his love. The spectator quickly suspects that the *douceur* with which she treated him will lead to *tendresse* and realizes that while the lovers' anguish at their loss is real enough, it will be temporary.

This foreknowledge of the eventual outcome provides the necessary condition for other factors that make the loss of love appear comic. The first is a tendency toward exaggeration that is encouraged by the characters' need to dramatize their feelings as spectacle. Arlequin and Silvia's expressions of mutual love begin to appear more and more overstated, especially when they cling to their duty to remain faithful long after their

love, the grounds for this faithfulness, has weakened. In fact, Silvia eventually seems more afraid of losing her reputation for fidelity than her love for Arlequin. After all, she realizes that it is an important component of the *naturel* that makes her attractive to the officer: "cette fidélité n'est-elle pas mon charme" (2.1)?

Just as their love, while sincere, is not as deep as they claim, their pain of sympathy and their grief seem overly dramatized. Thus, at the end of the play, immediately after letting Flaminia understand that she cannot continue to let the officer suffer from unrequited love, Silvia shows an unexpected concern for the pain she might cause Arlequin if she leaves him for the officer, "Cependant j'ai peur qu'Arlequin ne s'afflige trop." But when she adds, "Mais ne me rendez pas scrupuleuse" (3.8), it is clear that she does not want this concern for Arlequin to win out.

In a similar vein, Arlequin exaggerates their ability to manage their suffering, as if reason were capable of holding the emotions in check. Their mutual pledge to remain eternally faithful, but not to suffer over their separation flies in the face of common sense. Arlequin goes so far as to suggest that they can be joyful, given their fidelity: "Il n'y a donc rien à craindre, ma mie, tenons-nous donc joyeux" (1.12), and maintains that if they do feel pain, they have only to overlook it: "Il n'y aura qu'à ne pas songer que nous pâtissons" (1.12). Arlequin will suggest a similar strategy of diversion to the Prince when he recommends, "Prenez quelque consolation, Monseigneur, promenez-vous, voyagez quelque part, votre douleur se passera dans les chemins" (3.5). Directing the attention away from one's sorrow is an often recommended consolatory tactic (cf. Montaigne's essay *De la diversion* [3.4]), but it is as unlikely a remedy for the Prince's pain as for Arlequin and Silvia's distress.

On another level, Marivaux uses excessive displays of sensibility to blunt Arlequin's otherwise powerful critique of the Prince's abuse of power. For the conservative Marivaux the social hierarchy is justified as long as each class treats the others with humanity. Arlequin makes explicit the Prince's arbitrary use of force against his subjects: "Eh bien, personne ne me l'a prise que vous; voyez la belle occasion de montrer que la justice est pour tout le monde" (3.5). The Prince himself admits, at least in an *aparté*, the injustice of his dealings with Arlequin and Silvia, ("Il a raison, et ses plaintes me touchent" [3.5]), and suggests that he may go so far as to renounce his claims on Silvia: "[S]ois heureux aux dépens de tout mon repos" (3.5). However, both characters come to the scene planning to play the emotional trump rather than reason. The Prince has been counseled by Flaminia to treat Arlequin with *douceur* (3.1). Thus he tries to move Arlequin by displaying the suffering he will feel if he cannot have Silvia. The spectator suspects that he is playing a game that matches Arlequin's exaggerated protestations of pain.

The fact that the lovers' motives are seldom as pure as they would like others (and perhaps themselves) to believe is the source of another series

of factors that undercut their professions of painful loss. Various forms of amour-propre are omnipresent. For example, Arlequin's condolences for Flaminia's dead lover are devalued by the fact that Flaminia's eulogy of her lost lover is merely an indirect way of praising Arlequin: "Je n'ai vu dans le monde que vous et lui de si aimables" (2.6). Arlequin readily accepts the flattering fiction that the deceased lover resembled him: "puisque vous aimiez tant ma copie, il faut bien croire que l'original mérite quelque chose" (2.6).

The typical Marivaudian structure of parallel scenes involving the upper and lower class characters points to the gap between ostensible and real motives. When Arlequin declares to Silvia, "Comment voulez-vous que je m'empêche de pleurer, puisque vous voulez être si triste? si vous aviez un peu de compassion pour moi, est-ce que vous seriez si affligée?" (1.12) instead of the noble sympathy the officer will profess for Silvia's pain, Arlequin seems more concerned with alleviating his own suffering. Similarly, he cannot decide in the next scene whether to see Silvia or stay for the succulent meal Flaminia has prepared and exclaims "Que de chagrins!" (1.13).

The pain over anticipated loss that Arlequin and Silvia profess to feel is also devaluated by their mixed motives. When Silvia and Arlequin are finally reunited and alone for the first time at the end of act 1, she proclaims her fear of losing him: "Ah! j'ai bien des choses à vous dire! j'ai peur de vous perdre" (1.12). The irony is that the fear she claims to have, fear of the separation that lovers experience in its most extreme form at the death of a partner, will eventually be put to rest by their mutual infidelity. Two losses she does not even envisage (that she might lose her love for him, or that he might lose his for her) prove to be much more immediate threats but are undercut comically by her vanity. At first she is so confident of Arlequin's love that she talks of exchanging him for the officer ("[S]i j'avais eu à changer Arlequin contre un autre . . ." (2.1) as if she held his love for her as a sort of inalienable possession. Later, as she begins to recognize that her attachment to him is more duty than love, she toys with the possibility that he might marry someone else ("Si Arlequin se mariait à une autre fille que moi . . . [2.11]), but abruptly breaks off the speculation when Flaminia suggests taking Arlequin off her hands. Even at the end of the play when she realizes that the officer is a more worthy replacement, her pride makes her reluctant to admit that Arlequin might love another: "Diantre, il est donc bien facile de m'oublier, à ce compte?" (3.8).

Just as she does not fear Arlequin's infidelity at the outset, she does not foresee that she will lose her love for him, even though her inconstancy had begun well before the beginning of the play with her tacit acceptance of the officer's courtship. And although she had spoken of Arlequin's love for her as a possession she could trade, when called upon to justify her own inconstancy, she presents her love for him as an entity independent

of her control: "c'était un amour qui m'était venu; à cette heure que je ne l'aime plus, c'est un amour qui s'en est allé" (3.8). This inconsistency and treatment of love as just another commodity of exchange calls into question the passion she had earlier exalted.

Marivaux may undercut Arlequin's critique of the Prince's abuse of power and show that the characters' suffering over lost loves is not to be taken too seriously, but he does not devalue the bonds of sympathy and humanity that underlie the condolences and concern for the pain of others. In the installments of the *Spectateur Français* containing the letter of the Inconnu which began to appear in October 1723, six months after the staging of *La Double Inconstance*, the pain that one feels because others are suffering (and often they are suffering themselves in sympathy with the suffering of others) and the desire not to pain them further is said to be the sign of an upright heart (*Spectateur* 238-44). It constitutes what Janet Whatley calls the play's "moral center" (350).

It is rather the exaggerated suffering of characters who are further down the road to a new love than they themselves realize that is gently mocked. Moreover, the comic perspective of the spectators allows them to see the traps set by sympathy to which the characters are blind. Silvia and Arlequin cannot detect the feigned sympathy of the Prince and Flaminia, and although Arlequin does manage to lay bare the bad faith of the Prince, Silvia is less willing to admit that the Prince is responsible for the pain for which he professes sympathy.

In general, the comic mode requires a perspective that mitigates the impact of loss by de-emphasizing the persistence of bonds with the lost object, for if the ties are so tight that letting go of them is impossible, inconsolable mourning and not comedy would result. Yet if the bonds are so weak that substitutions can be made too easily, Trivelin, with his "Il ne s'agira seulement que de quitter une fille pour en prendre une autre," would have the last word. Marivaux's brand of serious comedy, in which spectators simultaneously witness the pain of loss while seeing the extent to which this pain springs from amour-propre, lies somewhere between the two. Thus Silvia's apparent callousness toward Arlequin at the denouement ("Consolez-vous comme vous pourrez de vous-même . . . j'ai le cœur tout entrepris: voyez, accommodez-vous" [3.10]) is quite different from the casual attachments and facile replacements that Trivelin extols. She has undergone a difficult trajectory of disengagement from Arlequin that included concern for his feelings and reactions to loss so painful that she could hardly bear to acknowledge that he no longer loved her. Condoling over another's pain or grieving lost loves are necessary intermediate stages in this play, before new relationships are established.

In spite of the fact that the characters find joyous satisfaction in their new partners at the denouement, the action of *La Double Inconstance* is tinged with a melancholy akin to that in some of Watteau's *fêtes galantes*.

The play's title after all stresses the negative capacity for unfaithfulness, not the more optimistic aspects of love found in most of Marivaux's other titles, even those where loss is overcome such as the two *Surprise de l'amour*. Silvia has not just lost Arlequin's love, but much of her innocence. The Prince seems unaware that Silvia has lost the *naturel* which attracted him to her in the first place. The supposed prediction of the ladies of the court reported by Flaminia that the Prince's love is a "caprice" and that he will not love Silvia for long (2.1) may well be true. This melancholy is not that of the inconsolable lover who resists at all costs letting go of a lost attachment, like the father of the *Inconnu* in the *Spectateur* who follows his wife to the grave (254–56). The audience reads the characters' joy through the lens of a wistful recognition that human attachments, however strong they might have once seemed, are subject to dissolution, and that sympathy for the suffering of another can become an instrument of seduction.

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Notes

¹F. Rubellin gives a fine overview of the interpretations of the play as a *comédie noire* (159–62). Gilot and Coulet, in their edition of Marivaux's *Théâtre complet*, refer to "l'espèce de grave mélancolie qui imprègne certains instants des dernières scènes" (1: 857). All quotations from Marivaux are from the various editions by Deloffre.

²For a succinct yet thorough overview of the ancient tradition and its Christian prolongations in the Renaissance see McClure's introduction. See Payne 42–54 for an insightful discussion of the modern therapies in terms of rhetoric. Michel Hanus provides an excellent synthesis of current psychoanalytic views on mourning that is both theoretically informed and clinically oriented.

³J. B. Ratermanis's astute scene-by-scene analysis of the play is one of the few to take into account this dialectic of loss and replacement. Christophe Martin's reading comes the closest to mine. While he does not discuss grieving, he does conclude that only by overcoming the fear of loss do the characters accede to love (99). Where he sees this occurring through a gifting process that transforms exchange (96–97), I will stress sympathy. I am closer to Joseph Donohoe on this point who points to the role of identification and "compassionate amusement" (180) as significant features of Marivaux's comic style.

⁴Marivaux's views on consolation have rarely been examined by critics. Dabbah El-Jamal, after briefly reviewing occurrences of the word in the plays, defines it as "pouvoir se consoler" (338) noting that characters who pose as consolers often have other goals in mind.

⁵Curiously, for all his stress on spectacle, Marshall only discusses Marivaux's novels.

⁶See Carr on the role of reason in the comedies.

⁷Recent theory sees learning such new roles as one of the tasks of grief work. Moriarty interprets the play in terms of a transformation of identity, but does not see its relation to grief work.

⁸"[C]e qui lui est le plus propre est d'attendrir au moment même où il fait rire, ou de faire rire au moment où il attendrit" (1: lxxx). See Ratermanis (163) and Coulet and Gilot (1: 890) on how Marivaux tempers the melancholy. The scenes of the play that evoke outright laughter tend not to be ones that deal with love but the ones that stress the contrast between Arlequin and the courtiers. On this point see Pavis 196–99.

⁹The comic action, thus, neutralizes the emotions of pity and fear to produce the

contrary—again I must insist, not the negative or contradictory but the *contrary*—of the serious" (37).

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