

# *The Visionaries (Les Visionnaires)*

by Jean Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin,  
translated by Richard Hillman

« Introduction to *The Visionaries* » by Michel Bitot

coll. « Scène Européenne : traductions introuvables », 2011, pp.1-12,  
mis en ligne le 8 Novembre 2011,  
URL stable <<https://sceneeuropeenne.univ-tours.fr/traductions/visionaries>>

## Théâtre anglais

est publié par le Centre d'Études Supérieures de la Renaissance  
Université François-Rabelais de Tours, CNRS/UMR 6576

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ISSN - 1760-4745

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## Date de création

Novembre 2011



# Introduction to *The Visionaries*

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*The Visionaries* of Desmarests... achieved such extraordinary success that all the fine wits of Desmarests's time named it the inimitable comedy. (Voltaire<sup>1</sup>)

*The Visionaries* (*Les Visionnaires*) was first performed in 1637, when its author was just over forty, by Molière's company at the fashionable Théâtre du Marais in Paris. Celebrated though it would become, as is attested by re-editions and revivals over the better part of a century, its success was not immediate, and Desmarests reacted by expressing a contempt for the vulgar public that is likely, for students of the English drama, to recall Ben Jonson. The introductory Argument to the first edition concludes with the following defence of the obscure verse of his "poète extravagant", Amidor:

il importe fort peu que les ignorants l'entendent ou non, puisque cela n'a pas été apprêté pour eux. C'est être bien déraisonnable, d'accuser d'obscurité celui

1 "Les Visionnaires de Desmarests . . . avaient eü un succès si prodigieux que tous les beaux esprits du temps de Desmarests l'appelaient *l'inimitable comédie*" ("Vie de Molière avec de petits sommaires de ses pièces" (1739), *Mélanges II, Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, online at [http://www.voltaire-integral.com/Html/23/08Vie\\_Molier.html](http://www.voltaire-integral.com/Html/23/08Vie_Molier.html) accessed 7 July 2011).

qui dans la bouche du poète s'est voulu moquer de l'obscurité des anciennes poésies [it matters very little whether the ignorant understand him or not, since it was not intended for them. It is unreasonable indeed to accuse of obscurity one who, through the mouth of the poet, has wished to mock the obscurity of former poetical styles].

*Ce n'est pas pour toi que j'écris,  
Indocte et stupide vulgaire:  
J'écris pour les nobles esprits,  
Je serais marri de te plaire.*

[It is not for you I write,  
unlearned and stupid vulgar.  
I write for noble wits.  
I should be very sorry to please you.]<sup>2</sup>

The irony is that, in thus defending his creation, the ridiculous Amidor, Desmaret's produces a distinct echo of that creation's own language and attitudes, including Amidor's complaint that his learning is unappreciated ("Ah, times are hard for devotees of learning!" [IV.iii.1356]). And it makes a double irony that, when Amidor dismisses "Those dullards whose Muse is content to feed / The appetites of minds of common breed" (I.iv.549-50), he is scorning those who compose comedy as opposed to tragedy.

The changeability of literary values and judgements is precisely Voltaire's point, although his view remains narrow, if not perverse, from our own vantage point. In fact, he is using Desmaret's comedy to condemn the unenlightened tastes of that author's age, which preceded the supposed discovery of "nature" (*la nature*), of "truth" (*le vrai*), hence of the "beautiful" (*le beau*), as he finds these to be exemplified in the work of Molière.<sup>3</sup> Hence, he reports, *The Visionaries*, with its exaggerated and heteroclitic characters, failed miserably when revived in the neo-classically con-

2 Jean Desmaret's de Saint-Sorlin, *Les Visionnaires, comédie, Théâtre du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle II*, ed. Jacques Scherer and Jacques Truchet, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), pp. 407-8 (*Argument*). On the piece's reception and Desmaret's attitude, see Truchet's Notice in this edition (pp. 1358-59) and H. Gaston Hall, ed., *Les Visionnaires, comédie: Texte de la première édition*, Société des Textes Français Modernes (Paris: Librairie Marcel Didier, 1963), pp. lxx-lxxiv, who notes that Desmaret envisaged from the first a coterie audience capable of appreciating his satire and, especially, his parody (p. lxx). All who write about the work of Desmaret owe a large debt to Hall's thorough and meticulous editorial labours; these are generally reflected throughout the present introduction, which is intended for readers who are not specialists in the French drama of the period.

3 A modern perspective is far more open to what Desmaret and Molière have in common—indeed, to the direct influence of the former on the latter; see Truchet, Notice, p. 1363.

ditioned early eighteenth century. (Significantly, Voltaire makes this point without reference to the topical satire which today is sometimes cited to account for the play's popular appeal in its own time.) It is tempting to imagine, given the mockery built into his own portrait of poetic styles and dramatic fashions (through the characters of both Amidor and Sestiane, the latter "in love with Comedy"), that Desmarets would have greeted Voltaire's earnest declarations with a knowing smile. In any case, regardless of the indeterminate question of last laughs, he would surely have been gratified by the renewed appreciation of his comedy by audiences and theatre professionals over the last fifteen years or so.<sup>4</sup>

The long life of Jean Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin (1595-1676) included prolific literary activity (as poet and controversialist, as well as dramatist), the holding of important public offices and, for his final thirty years or so, an intense religious devotion combining mysticism and monarchism—to the point where his enemies ridiculed him as having joined his own collection of "visionnaires".<sup>5</sup> What chiefly concerns us here, however, is his earlier close connection with Cardinal Richelieu (d. 1642), whom he first served, it seems, as a literary adviser, beginning in 1634,<sup>6</sup> before producing plays on command (initially tragedies, sometimes in collaboration with the Cardinal himself). Hence, he was a natural choice to become the first chancellor of the Académie Française, founded by Richelieu in 1635. It has long been recognised that *The Visionaries* is intimately bound up with the Cardinal's patronage of Desmarets, who is generally taken to be producing, in the extraordinary description by Phalante at the very core of the play (Act Three), a flattering portrait of the Cardinal's own chateau, then still under construction.<sup>7</sup> The fact is, however, that Phalante is finally exposed as a sham, "his" chateau standing finally as a monument to his own folly and, beyond that, to human vanity at large. This double vision may be taken as the key to a double-edged irony

4 Witness productions by the Théâtre du Nord-ouest (Paris) in spring, 2007 (dir. Coralie Salonne), and by the Théâtre National Populaire (Villeurbanne, Lyons) in October of the same year (dir. Christian Schiaretti, who had already mounted the play in 1999 with students of the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts et Techniques du Théâtre).

5 See Truchet, "Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin", p. 1356.

6 See, Hall, ed., pp. xvii-xxii, who has most convincingly established the chronology of Desmarets's relations with the Cardinal.

7 See Henry Carrington Lancaster, "The Chateau de Richelieu and Desmarets's *Visionnaires*", *Modern Language Notes* 60.3 (1945):167-72.

which, beginning with the play's title, has an ultimately disturbing tendency to turn back upon its most heartily laughing spectators.

## I

Lysander, the “raisonneur”<sup>8</sup> in *The Visionaries*, delivers what sounds like the play's message in his commentary on what had promised to be spectacular and eventful concluding action, but which, in the event, falls flat and goes nowhere—unless it is back to the beginning:

Children, pursue your follies as you started.  
Maintain your humours, happier by far  
Than this world's wise men, kings or princes are. (V.1x.2010-12)

This comment proves essential for the understanding of a profoundly extravagant play, striking for its almost relentless dramatic and verbal inventiveness, as being also extravagantly profound. “Follies”, “humours”—the latter term alluding to contemporary humour theory—are at the core of *The Visionaries*, whose title itself, in the French of Desmarest's time, evokes the mentally imbalanced. And these follies hold the stage to the end, impervious to the spokesman for reason, who himself, moreover, is at least momentarily thrown off-balance. The reminiscence of Ben Jonson's somewhat earlier “comedy of humours” is apt, to the point of highlighting a common theatrical (and, of course, scientific) heritage.

The dramatic framework within which this heritage is displayed is highly conventional. *The Visionaries* may, at first sight, be taken as presenting a common seventeenth-century comic situation, grounded on a straightforward moral premise. Folly, whether mild or severe, but always considered as the obverse of a supposed sanity or wisdom—in short, the dialectic between folly and reason—was a classic preoccupation of early modern drama, in France as in other countries of Europe. One of the standard ingredients of the genre is the traditional father-child conflict, which, in *The Visionaries* as elsewhere, centres on marriage. A distinctive feature of Desmarest's comedy, however, is that the common clash of perceptions between a “reasonable” father and a “foolish” daughter, when it comes to the choice of a husband, issues in an indecisive, if not ambiguous, conclusion. Although we are

<sup>8</sup> This term, associated particularly with Molière, usually refers to a secondary character who, through his moral and rational stability, serves as a foil to the divagations of the protagonist.

apprised, from the start, of the father's wish to marry off his three daughters, none of them actually marries in the end, and this is directly contrary to convention. This is so because the young women are not driven by ordinary romantic love, which at least has the potential to justify itself by proving less foolish than stage fathers tend to imagine, but rather are obsessed by "visions", quite unable to step out of their closed, imaginary world of phantasms to enter into real relations with others. And so are their putative suitors. Even as it flirts with the conventions of a comedy of love, therefore, *The Visionaries* flouts those conventions by refocusing the reason / folly dichotomy on the inconsistencies and absurdities—and finally the inescapability—of forms of self-loving.

Desmarets's "visionaries" are benignly lunacy-ridden: as stated in the playwright's *Argument*, theirs are "follies for which no one is locked up".<sup>9</sup> Yet in the years 1630-50, the French stage featured a number of urban comedies by Pierre Corneille and others which staged characters affected, not only by visions and chimeras, but even by outright madness. Indeed, Jacques Truchet situates Desmarets's comedy within what he terms the "theatre of extravagance"—"extravagance" being, like the "vision" of "visionnaire", another synonym for a delusory mental state.<sup>10</sup> He singles out a few such plays, whose very titles suggest an attraction for the spectacle of insanity, in ballet as well as in drama: among them are Corneille's *La place Royale ou l'Amoureux extravagant* and Charles Beys's *L'Hôpital des fous*.<sup>11</sup> Here, too, one may draw a parallel with one thematic strand of early modern English drama. There are reminiscences of Shakespeare's treatment of lunacy, real or pretended, even "politic"—or again, closer to Desmarets's time, of Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling* (1622), whose action is in part situated in an asylum.<sup>12</sup> Desmarets, however, makes a claim in the *Argument* of the play for his "visionary" or "extravagant" characters as being in no way disconnected from his contemporaries' everyday reality:

9 "[...] de ces folies pour lesquelles on ne renferme personne" (Scherer and Truchet, eds., p. 405 [*Argument*]).

10 Truchet, Notice, p. 1360.

11 See also Hall, ed., pp. xlvi-lx, who stresses the influence of Beys on Desmarets.

12 For perspectives on English dramatic treatments of the subject, see, e.g., Robert Rentoul Reed, *Bedlam on the Jacobean Stage* (1952; rpt. New York: Octagon, 1970); Carol Thomas Neely, *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); and Ken Jackson, *Separate Theaters: Bethlehem ("Bedlam") Hospital and the Shakespearean Stage* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005).

every day we see such characters among us, who at the least think such extravagant thoughts, even if they do not speak them.

[tous les jours nous voyons parmi nous des esprits semblables, qui pensent pour le moins d'aussi grandes extravagances, s'ils ne les disent]<sup>13</sup>

This point is perhaps easiest for modern audiences to grasp as it is embodied in the play by Phalante, designated in the *Dramatis Personae* as “rich in his imagination” (*riche imaginaire*). The portrayal he produces at great length of the chateau he supposedly owns is obviously inflated beyond any reality (witness the thousands of orange trees, the statues in virtual motion), yet it intersects substantially with that imagined, then physically projected upon reality, by Desmarets’s patron, whose *eminence* conspicuously consisted in forms of worldly wealth and power. The Cardinal’s chateau, built between 1624 and c. 1640 at Richelieu in what was then termed “Poitou”,<sup>14</sup> was by all accounts genuinely astounding, having been designed to equal France’s most renowned princely places, including Fontainebleau. Regarded by contemporaries as one of France’s architectural “wonders”, it was famous for its size and architectural magnificence, but especially, as Phalante’s description reflects, for the profusion of statues, either genuinely antique or based on antique models—such as the celebrated Venus and Bacchus—which ornamented its facade and gardens. Jean de la Fontaine wrote an extensive account of Richelieu in his *Relation d’un voyage de Paris en Limousin*, yet also deferred to the descriptions offered by Desmarets—this time, however, in the latter’s much later and non-fictional *Promenades*.<sup>15</sup> For Desmarets returned from another perspective, as will be seen more clearly below, to this eminently real “extravagance”, where the great Cardinal hardly lived at all, and which was to be demolished (except for a few minor buildings) in the nineteenth century.

13 Scherer and Truchet, eds., p. 405 [*Argument*].

14 Richelieu is now considered as part of the southern extremity of Touraine and is situated within the *département* of Indre-et-Loire.

15 “vous aurez recours à ce que M. Desmarets a dit de cette maison : c’est un grand maître en fait de descriptions. Je me garderais bien de particulariser aucun des endroits où il a pris plaisir à s’étendre, si ce n’était que la manière dont je vous écris ces choses n’a rien de commun avec celle de ses *Promenades* [you will have recourse to what Monsieur Desmarets has said about this house: he is a grand master of description. I would refrain from giving the details concerning any of the places on which he has chosen to expatiate, were it not that the manner in which I write these things to you has nothing in common with that of his *Promenades*]” (Jean de La Fontaine, *Lettres de La Fontaine à sa femme ou Relation d’un voyage de Paris en Limousin*, ed. Ange-Marie Caudal [Paris : Centre de Documentation Universitaire, 1966], Letter dated 12 September 1653). The reference is to Jean Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin, *Les promenades de Richelieu, ou les Vertus chrestiennes* (Paris: Henry Le Gras, 1653).



## II

No one would doubt that *The Visionaries* is a self-consciously literary, auto-referential construct, a play fundamentally about acting and role-playing. It is worth extending that concept of self-consciousness to its own structure and use of conventions. The debate between Amidor and Sestiane about the neo-classical unities of time, place and action (I.iv.561-628), which spoofs aesthetic issues taken with the utmost seriousness by contemporaries, resonates with elements signalled within the “non-literary” dialogue. For instance, in keeping with the “rule” about time, we are explicitly dealing with a single day’s action, as we are made aware from the start:

ALCIDON

Before the day is out, I vow to find  
Suitors who suit me—and not change my mind.

LYSANDER

A full day’s work! (I.vii.341-43)

Even if there are three matches to make, and even if the task proves to be complicated (not to say unbalanced) by the presence of four suitors, the rule is thereby put in place.

Still, though the resolution occurs, classically (if not in classical form), at the end of the day, when, as has been pre-arranged, all the characters arrive at Alcidon’s house for the finale, the notion of time in the play may be regarded as highly flexible, if one takes into account the range and variety of temporal references throughout. The time of the main action proper—the business of choosing the suitors, the unexpected conclusion to the quest—may be opposed to what could be termed virtual temporality. The basic time scheme is, indeed, an illustration of the classical rules, yet the playwright freely departs from them—not least in Amidor and Sestiane’s long exchange on the subject, which concludes with Amidor’s clear rejection of strictures he considers “austere” (I.iv.566). Is the poetaster here again, ironically, serving as the poet’s spokesman? (Let us note that Molière himself, especially with his *Dom Juan* [1665], later proved averse to the three “unities”, in the name of verisimilitude.)

The aesthetics of *The Visionaries*—as in some of Corneille’s comedies, particularly *L’Illusion comique* (1635)—are characterized not only by the free play of illusionistic devices, but also by a movement towards expansion, or excess—a drive to proliferate imaginative schemes, characters and eccentricities. The first

“visionary” to appear in the play, Artabaze, the *miles gloriosus* (who bears close comparison with Matamore in Corneille’s *L’Illusion comique*), is a case in point. His declamatory raving about his supposed terrorizing of the whole world allows him to span vast historical periods, giddily taking us through Antiquity and its gods to the present time, with a fantastic detour via the Creation. Artabaze, with the encouragement of Alcidon’s gullibility (IV. viii), proves more than ready to “out-Alexander” Alexander. He boasts, not only of far greater triumphs than the Greek conqueror could ever claim, but even of having killed his rival for glory—and now, momentarily, for love (IV.ii.1282).<sup>16</sup> Artabaze finds a female counterpart in Mélisse, succinctly labelled in the list of *dramatis personae* as “in love with Alexander the Great”—the hero who, for her, can never die. The mad meeting of the two is one of the high points of this comedy, with both characters nursing their own delirious “visions” and exchanging their personal discourses when no real exchange is possible: to the very end of the play, these stereotypes will run their autonomous courses regardless of each other, parallel lines that will never intersect. That in itself is a measure of their a-temporality.

An additional blurring of the nominal time scheme of *The Visionaries* is produced by two dramatic inserts. The debate on the unities between Sestiane and Amidor issues in the generation of an imaginary play—an extravagant romantic tragicomedy—which explodes all the conventions. Moreover, the deferral of closure characteristic of romance narrative is self-reflexively reinforced, twice, by the father’s interruptions. “Some day, Amidor, I’ll finish narrating” (I.iv.662), declares Sestiane hopefully, but of course she never does. In another play-within-the play (IV. ii), Mélisse vainly tries to engage Artabaze in the role of Alexander, momentarily effecting a division within his fictional identity—and thereby renewing amorously the threat he perceives in the creative/destructive “sorcery” of Amidor. (It is a threat that he can finally defeat only by grandiosely reaffirming his unity in the form of self-love.) These tendencies towards expansion and development of a baroque kind, whereby time, space, and identity are parenthetically suspended, entail the creation of imaginative areas in which the classical rules do not obtain.

A double departure from the unity of time may arguably be detected in the fantasies of Phalante. His extraordinary *ekphrasis* of over 180 lines (III.ii) not only

16 This fantasy is first mentioned as part of his self-presentation (I.i.39-44).

takes both on- and off-stage audience out of the flow of action and into a dream-like state, but introduces distinctly trans-historical properties, as, mirroring the Cardinal's antiquarianism, he effectively brings the pagan past into the present. This is where the later perspective of the *Promenades*, a long pious poem written more than ten years after the Cardinal's death, when Desmarets was engaged in a theological polemic with the Jansenists, may be helpful. For even as his poetic evocation of the chateau displays an unmistakable nostalgia, it practises a resounding rejection of mundane concerns. In his meditation on faith ("De la Foy"), the poet again pictures the mythological and pagan figures, the rich statuary and architectural graces of Richelieu's chateau, where he had lived for some years, but only to turn away from them:

*Je te laisse, Palais de pompeuse structure,  
 Pour les simples beautez de la riche Nature.  
 Pour les œuvres de Dieu laissons celles de l'art,  
 Où les mortelles mains prétendent trop de part.*

[I leave you, Palace of pompous form,  
 for the simple beauties of rich Nature.  
 For the works of God let us leave those of art,  
 in which mortal hands claim too great a share.]<sup>17</sup>

In the retrospective light of such spiritual devotion, it is easier to see that the intuition of material vanity attached to Phalante's fantasy of possession already extends, by implication, to the extravagant chateau itself, across the pointed compliment that Desmarets is most obviously paying to his patron. And to the extent that Richelieu's ambitions as a collector of the relics of Antiquity are specifically evoked, the revival of mythological narratives through the vivid descriptions of Phalante, as he imaginatively sets in motion the stories of Arethusa (III.v.1061 ff.) and the Danaïdes (1145 ff.), is pregnant with ironic intimations of a false—pagan—claim to eternity by comparison with the Christian truth. Phalante's (and Richelieu's?) arrogation of power over time, highlighted by the violation of the dramatic unity, thus becomes functional in a didactic way, as do the mercenary overtones of the final exchange between Alcidon ("Your hope lies in the death of your relations?" [V.viii.1958]) and a Phalante who has been brought somewhat down to earth ("We might well see it happen any minute" [1959]). If Desmarets

17 Desmarets, *Les Promenades*, "De la Foy", p. 3.

obviously knew by 1653 that Cardinal Richelieu had scarcely ever sojourned in the costly palace and the adjacent utopian city that he had conceived, the fact is uncannily anticipated in 1637.

### III

The perception that Phalante's vision involves the projection of space beyond time leads to the realisation that the notion of space in *The Visionaries* is dual: there is the domestic space of the house and household, on the one hand, the construction of imaginary, oneiric or mythological areas, on the other. The central *locus* is Alcidon's townhouse and the adjacent streets, in keeping with the centrality of his resolve to have his three daughters matched by the end of the day. Accordingly, all the protagonists, daughters and "suitors" unite in Alcidon's house for what promises to be the hectic resolution of the dramatic scheme. The sense of interiority is reinforced by references to the world outside, beginning with "the next street" (V.ii.1714), where Lysander has witnessed the crowd and quarrel. From that world the suitors will arrive one by one. But the daughters who are summoned from within the house to hear Alcidon's will pointedly defy their father by successively reiterating their imaginary spaces: Mélisse's summary of Alexander's combats (V.iii.1777-80), Hespérie's vision of a world depopulated by lovers' suicides (V.iv.1811-22), Sestiane's evocation of the theatre (V.v.1853-72), which she can attend because "you for pleasure let me leave the house" (1868).

In Desmarests's theatre, the shift from Alcidon's house to the mythological or cosmic spheres evoked by Artabaze, for instance, or by Amidor's and Filidan's bouts of poetic furor, might be supported by exterior sets suggesting pastoral or antique scenes: rocks, caves.<sup>18</sup> But the characters also carry their imaginary spaces with them when they arrive for the resolution. And undoubtedly the most spectacular setting in the play, Phalante's chimeric chateau, whose effect depends on the conspicuous absence of any onstage correlative, is given special attention. The denouement of the play occurs when Phalante is gradually made to confess—though he still does not fully *see*—that his ownership of this prize is a figment of his imagination. Lysander then ruefully recognises the ruin of his own vision of a place of comfort and luxury, admitting that even he, the play's rational centre of gravity, had fallen prey to vain desire: "O lovely spot, whose

18 See Hall, ed., pp. xxxiii-xxxvii.

hope was our delight, / Your marvels suddenly have taken flight” (V.viii.1975-76). As for Alcidon, his sarcasm at this point proves that, unlike his daughters and their “suitors”, he is capable of disillusion, hence of learning from his multiple misapprehensions: “Great thanks, O truly self-made millionaire, / For the *thoughtful* honour you seek to share” (1977-78).

Both Alcidon and Lysander, moreover, effectively acknowledge their own susceptibility, their participation in fallible humanity, by finally accepting, if not exactly condoning, the visionaries’ follies, at least in a general sense. After all, those follies have proved to be infectious, as they certainly are theatrically, providing even the relatively sober and rational characters with their ration of dream and fantasised power. This comedy, then, in the general manner of Corneille’s *L’Illusion comique*—but without its magic tricks—comments fundamentally, and from multiple angles, on the attraction and dangers of illusion. Even those characters who seem to be free from the epidemical “follies” of the play do not escape the pitfalls of delusion and credulity. They are snared into belief by tales of riches, luxury and power, lured—quite literally—by the mirage of a castle in the air, because such mirages mirror their own attraction to wealth and the good life.

#### IV

Desmarets’s 1653 evocation of the past splendour of the “chateau”, with its opposition (as opposed to Phalante’s fusing) of Art and Nature, finally induces a reflexion upon the playwright’s artistry and artifice in the play, and upon its self-consciousness. Along with Corneille, Desmarets belongs to a theatrical trend in the 1630’s whereby a mastery of theatrical techniques, designed most immediately to display brilliant acting and stagecraft, incorporates a serious reflexion upon the medium. Like *L’Illusion comique*, Desmarets’s comedy is striking for its virtuoso combination of dramatic elements which partake of apparently divergent genres and styles: love-comedy, the pseudo-heroic, the burlesque.

Yet the relentless exploitation of his characters’ extravagant follies makes for a distinctive enrichment of Desmarets’s reflection on his craft. As the dramatic sequences that mark the progression of Alcidon’s quest for ideal suitors alternate with long passages of lyrical or heroic verse expounding one folly or another, the author achieves a compound of freedom and convention. He flirts with comedic conventions, while overtly indulging in varied forms of rant and oratory, rhetoric calculated to disorient, and therefore charm, the educated audience he was

addressing. The attendant subversions of the unities thus comment wryly on his own art. Through the inset narrative, in particular, in which Sestiane composes her play for Amidor's appreciative benefit, we are offered a kind of draft, a play in the making, where imagination (or folly?) is conspicuously given free rein in terms of time, place and action. This fanciful plot, never to be performed, shows Desmarets engaged with one of the main aesthetic issues of his time, not necessarily taking a firm position,<sup>19</sup> but playfully staking a claim for his own powers of invention. Yet the fascinating mixture of narrative and dramatic elements thereby goes beyond theatrical game-playing, so as to call in question the limits of invention and experiment, the power of illusion and delusion, in an era when the neo-classical rules could matter a great deal.

In the final analysis, much comes down to the play's language—or, rather, languages. The proven ability of *The Visionaries* to engage audiences—in our time and its own—owes much to the variety of its (mad) discourses, and it must be admitted that, without this element, Desmarets's comedy would not amount to much. The discourse holds the various comedic ingredients together, not least by its very diversity. Indeed, *The Visionaries* might be described as a sort of airy nothing worked up into a magnificent show, thanks principally to the dramatist's linguistic virtuosity.

This dominant aspect of the play weighs decisively against reductive readings in terms of topical satire. It might be argued that Desmarets, through the creation of an avowedly mad theatrical world, could risk presenting not merely social types but even recognisable personages of his own time, because the very excess and general extravagance of *The Visionaries* would forestall censorship. Yet while social climbing and the thirst for riches are obvious targets (and fairly safe ones in the abstract), the social game as played in the comedy seems unlikely to have been aimed at particular contemporary figures. Doubtless, it reflects the manners and forms of language to be found in those circles which Desmarets and his audience were familiar with. The prevailing and final impression, however, is of a pure pleasure compounded of words begging for performance, a kind of homage paid ultimately to the professional actors who created the roles.

19 This is the impression given, even if Desmarets in his *Argument* defends the “true rules” (“véritables règles”) and dismisses “these two extravagant persons” (“ces deux extravagantes personnes”) (Scherer and Truchet, eds., p. 406). Cf. p. 1369, n. 2 to p. 430. Truchet may insist too strongly on the play's own fidelity to the unity of time (Notice, p. 1359).