

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Baby's Laxative. 1931

Jean Renoir (1894-1979)

STORY

Jean Renoir represents a bridge between silent and spoken films, as well as a bridge-- we cross it in the present example—between an older world of comedy and a newer world, one which to us, today, is likely itself to seem dated. All of this archeology of cultural times has piled up in the brief period separating us today from the work of the Lumière brothers and George Méliès, the first cinematographic presentations, in the Paris of the late 1890's. For the transition to sound in films—the coordination of imagine and sound—we are indebted to the work of sound engineers like Joseph Tykociński Tykociner, a Polish research engineer at the University of Illinois, who in 1922 demonstrated new registers of synchronization, which though of little initial commercial value, were to play into the seamless sense experience required for the inherent development of film. Any number of experimenters and entrepreneurs—like Lee de Forest, the 'father of radio'—would be required to ready the new cinema for the burgeoning commercial/social role it was ready to play by the early thirties.

Narrative. Jean Renoir—*The Rules of the Game* (1939), *La Chienn e*(1931)—was one of the most prolific French directors to cross the historical bridge referred to above. With the irreverent comedy before us, he drew on a popular stage farce by Georges Feydeau (1862-1921), a natural for parodying the pretensions of the bourgeoisie, and thus of carrying further the cleansing mission of Moliere himself, who, in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (1670) did a thoroughly humiliating job on M. Jourdain, who thought himself able to buy his way into high society. How does Clouzot turn the knife in the back of the bourgeoisie 250 years after Molière?

Participants. Renoir takes the raw material of stock comedic figures—the harried husband, the growling wife, the spoiled child, the incompetent maid; essentially the ingredients of a play by Menander, or of *The Jeffersons* on American TV—throws them into an intrusive situation, and watches them flail. The stage opens onto M. Follavoine, a short, bustling manufacturer of 'unbreakable porcelain,' and his dopey maid, who is barely up to answering the door, the first duty of a pretend nouveau riche family. The maid has come to announce that Mme. Follavoine wants her husband immediately in their child's room, a request M. Follavoine virtually dismisses, by engaging the maid in the topic at the moment preoccupying him, to find out from his encyclopedias where the Hebrides Islands are located. It is not long before the impatient, indeed infuriated wife appears, demanding her husband's attention, letting herself get distracted by the question of the location of the Hebrides, and then at last bearing down on Monsieur with the news that their child, Toto, is constipated, and that his, Monsieur's, help is needed to get the spoiled child to take a (much hated) laxative. It is of the essence of this set of interactions—maid/husband; wife/husband—that the maximum of misunderstanding, malicious innuendo, and audience-directed wordplay is employed to extract the full juice from each scene.

Geometry. The audience is rapidly directed toward the main lines of development. We see it all coming. M. Follavoine, who has nothing but contempt for a certain M. Chouilloux, whom he and his team mockingly call 'the cuckold,' learns that the guy, a long term employee of the War Department, has been assigned the job of taking bids on a new and HUGE consignment of bed pans for the French army. Having learned that M. Chouilloux will be becoming to discuss this issue with him, the hyper excited Mr. Follavoine is beside himself with anticipation. While his wife can think only of the child's constipation, and is omnipresent carrying bottles and attempting to force feed the brat, M. Follavoine is racing to the sound of the doorbell, to let the suddenly highly honored presence of M. Chouilloux into the house. He arrives to the tune of chaos, needless to say, for the lady of the house is still in curlers and house garb.

The denouement. It is hard to see how this confusing situation can get worse—or how the silver screen can more hilariously capture the deterioration. In fact it gets both worse and better. M. Chouilloux turns out to want to be a friend of the family, in its confusion. A puffy, self-important chap, he finds the disheveled Mme. Follavoine attractive, tries valiantly to show Toto how to drink a laxative, and notes but only politely, that M. Follavoine's allegedly 'unbreakable' chamber pots break very easily, disqualifying them for Army use. Worse? It had been rumored that Mme. Chouilloux always ventures out only in the company of her lover, and so indeed it turns out—the two arrive together, meet M. Chouilloux, and the social party unfolds, with all the awkwardness imaginable, and M. Follavoine's financial dreams shattered.

The point. The bourgeoisie, with its social pretensions, cannot paper over the basic needs of the body, which—in the form of constipation—has made a wreckage of the fine social pretensions of the Follavoine family. The visitors, for their part, have hollowly demonstrated their un real partnership, and left Follavoine with nothing to take to the bank. Comedy, from the time of Aristophanes, has been about pretense and the revenge of the norms, the in the end rightness of simple values and universal norms.

THEMES

Pretention The Follavoine family is riddled with pretensions, like the families of Molière's comedy, who have found wealth, in a 'new society, but who have not had time to catch up on their manners. The maid doesn't know how to open the door for guests, the man of the house doesn't know how to control himself when guests—M. Chouilloux—arrive, and Madame Follavoine doesn't get around to changing from her messy dressing gown.

Greed. For M. Follavoine, the possibility of selling chamber pots to the Army trumps any concern for the consistency of his values: he has formerly spoken with total scorn of this 'cuckold' who is not worth speaking with.

Innocence. The Follavoine family, now living as part of the new bourgeoisie, have no idea how to deal with their son's constipation. They air their dirty (and smelly) laundry in the face of 'upscale' visitors whom they are hell bent to impress.

Garrulity. The reckless pace of M. Follavoine's chatter, as he searches the encyclopedia for information about The Hebrides; the intrusive babbling of Mme about the constipation of her child; the kid's squalling and squabbling about the laxative facing him: torrents of unshaped language pour from the Follavoine family.

CHARACTERS

M. Follavoine is a nouveau riche businessman, who has made his money—look at his house!—from the sale of a newly durable—allegedly—type of chamber pot. (Water closets gradually replaced chamber pots throughout the twentieth century, but have not yet totally triumphed in France.) He has high hopes for a big chamber pot sale to the French Army—but alas those hopes, and his sample pots, shatter.

Mme. Follavoine is a garrulous, and contentious lady of the house; she is fixated—naturally—on the issue of her son's constipation, and cannot think of anything else. In her messy housecoat, disheveled hair, she is nonetheless attractive to the fussy, effete M. Chouilloux. She comes off as ready to fight with her husband, but more lively and down to earth than the man of the house.

M. Chouilloux, who arrives at the house to discuss chamber pots with Follavoine, is preceded by the moniker 'cuckold,' and does nothing to belie that expectation. He is fussy with his clothing and monocle, preens and coos in the presence of Mme. Follavoine, and recedes into the background when his wife arrives with her permanent paramour

Main character. M. Follavoine is a nouveau riche businessman, who lives in a fancy Parisian townhouse. The lifestyle into which he has plunged leaves him out of place, except with his rawboned maid, and semi

distracted housewife, who treats him roughly. This man of the house is money hungry, argumentative, hysterical, but in his way charmingly engaged in every new event that consumes his attention.

Parallels. On the gut level, Jefferson, in the American sitcom of that name (1974-85), is the very simulacrum of M. Follavoine. Voluble, super charged, overreactive, self-important—yet at the same time funny and charming. From the ancient repertoire, one might think of one of Theophrastus' character types, the bombastic man, for instance; from the moderns, in literature, perhaps Mr. Pickwick, in Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*.

Illustrative moments.

Inquisitive. M. Follavoine is from the outset of the film beside himself with a search for the location of the Hebrides Islands. He is absorbed in his Encyclopedia, but he strikes out because he does not know how to spell *Hebrides*.

Contentious. From the beginning, as he berates his maid, then argues with his wife about their child, M. Follavoine is hot tempered and volatile.

Uncontrolled. When he hears the doorbell ring, and realizes that M. Chouilloux has arrived while Mme. Follavoine is still in her robe, preoccupied with the son, M. Follavoine goes essentially bonkers, calling out for attention and help in all directions.

Careless. M. Follavoine rushes into the demonstration phase of his 'unbreakable' new chamber pot, without having picked sure fire unbreakable examples, with which to overwhelm M. Chouilloux. This is careless. The picked examples shatter.

Discussion questions

In what ways could film intensify the satirical effect of the present film—by contrast with literature? Does *seeing* characters and settings make their effect sharper than reading about them? Can you tackle those issues in terms of the tossing of the chamber pots which turn out to be very breakable?

For what kinds of vices and failures are M. and Mme. Follavoine pilloried in this film? How do those failings compare to the failings for which M. Jourdain is pilloried in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*?