Introduction: Dissonant Dénouements

BARBARA R. WOSHINSKY

This series of articles grew out of a panel I chaired at the MLA in 2007. One often associates the testing of readers’ expectations with modernist or post-modernist writers, while expecting classical writing to stay within the social and genre expectations of its time. In fact, however, early modern works reveal self-conscious experimentation and a testing of tradition. This boldness extends to their dénouements. Shakespeare’s All’s Well that Ends Well calls into question the popular saying that furnishes its title; and John Gay’s Beggar’s Opera, a model for Brecht’s Three-Penny Opera, blatantly satirizes its own “happy ending.” In these works, a transgressive dénouement is strongly linked to social criticism: the knowledge that in real life a convicted felon will not be rescued by a royal messenger packs an ironic punch. On another level, a destabilizing dénouement leads us to question our practice of reading. Accustomed to read through plot, to and for an expected ending, do we give too much importance to this ending? How should we weigh what comes before the dénouement, if the two clash? Finally, how can we be sure that our expectations of happily-ever-after were shared by contemporary audiences?

These and other issues are addressed in original ways by the following articles. As Paul Scott shows in “Comic and Marital Frustration in George Dandin,” Molière enacts a repetition of false discovery leading to a stalled dénouement, frustrating to audience and main character alike. In “Is the Ending to your Taste? Dissonant Dénouements and Audience Reception in Molière’s Tartuffe” Barbara Woshinsky uses a combination of textual and reception analysis to reveal how the ending of Tartuffe was perhaps less troubling in its time than for later readers. Catherine Theobald’s “The Princess and the Paradox: The Subversion of Formal, Social and Representational Codes in La Princesse de Clèves” goes beyond the overt frustration of the marriage plot to reveal how the narratological contract developed over the course of the novel is broken. In the final article in the series, “Happily Ever After? Not so Easily! Seventeenth-Century Fairy Tales and their Uncon-
ventional Endings,” Charlotte Trinquet-Balak also addresses issues of audience reception, asking whether the non-conventional endings of certain popular fairy tales of the 1690s responded to reader expectations of the period or were, as they are now, considered surprising. Her conclusions are both surprising and interesting to the reader.