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DANCOURT
LES BOURGEOISES
A LA MODE

Cambridge University Press

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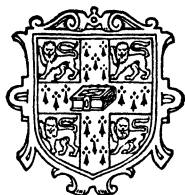
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NOTE

DANCOURT (Florent Carton) was born of noble parents at Fontainebleau, in 1661. His father, a recent convert to Roman Catholicism, sent his son to be educated by the Jesuits at their college in Paris. Resisting all attempts to enrol him in the Company of Jesus, Florent became first an *avocat*, and later an actor at the Comédie Française. His wife, Thérèse de la Thorillière, with whom he eloped in 1680, played with him in comedy, to the delight of the public. In 1685 Dancourt, now the *orateur* of the troupe, produced his first play, an agreeable trifle called *Le Notaire obligé*. It was well received and from that moment the author rose from strength to strength. For thirty-three years, he wrote comedies for the *troupe royale*, protected and even befriended by Louis XIV who was impressed by Dancourt's intelligence and his dignity of speech and manner. Dancourt's theatre, which embraces some fifty plays, mirrors the society of his time. Every profession and condition is represented—nobles, bourgeois, millers, peasants, gamblers, courtizans, stock-jobbers and sundry other persons who engage in the making and stealing of money. His picture of manners, if we allow for that exaggeration which is inseparable from dramatic satire, is remarkably vivid and true. An *actualiste*, Dancourt reflects the average public opinion of his day upon the topical events and types which inspired such works as *La Désolation des Joueuses* (1687), *Le Chevalier à la Mode* (1687), *Les Bourgeoises à la Mode* (1692), *Le Moulin de Javelle* (1696), *Le Retour des Officiers* (1697), and *Les Curieux de Compiègne* (1698),

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the mere titles of which give some inkling of Dancourt's versatility.

In one respect he is unique. We must thank him for revealing to us in plays like *Les trois Cousines* and *La Maison de Campagne*, that unknown land which lay eastwards of Paris and her salons. I mean the sunlit, wooded Gâtinais. For the first time in the history of the French stage we glimpse the village life of France. In comedies redolent of the soil, Dancourt shows us a Merrie France in which, against a background of slowly turning windmills, of snug coppices and well-stocked farm-yards, real country lasses flirt with the loutish, yet cunning, peasant lads. And the author, as much at home in the village tavern as in his beloved *Cornemuse* at Paris, slips easily from the fashionable jargon of the *bonne compagnie* into the rough dialect of Seine et Marne.

Dancourt's last years were sad. Obsessed by religious scruples, he retired from the stage in 1718, to the hamlet of Courcelles-le-Roi. Like Racine, he turned to pious works and even wrote a religious tragedy, never published. "Lorsqu'il se sentit malade et proche de sa fin," says Nicéron with unction, "il fit son tombeau dans la chapelle de son château et l'alla voir lui-même avec toute la tranquillité et la fermeté d'une âme absolument détachée des choses d'ici-bas et qui n'aspire plus qu'aux biens célestes et éternels." He died on 7 December, 1725.

F. C. G.