Nostalgic glimpses in search of the Three Musketeers of 10 rue Monsieur-le-Prince

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Classical Inquiries

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For example:
§0. In this exercise, which can perhaps best be described as a kind of retrospective, I attempt to recover what are by now no more than glimpses of a lost era in which I too had participated once upon a time in my own past, though mostly on the sidelines. I must admit from the start, however, that I am no longer able to build for that era long gone any relevant model of “periodization”—except by way of a dusty bibliographical detail. Looking backward in time, I have in mind here a book, published in the year 2001 by The New Press in a series of books bearing the overall title of Postwar French Thought, the Senior Editor for which was Ramona Naddaff. The book, which was Volume III of that series, had its own title: Antiquities. The other day, I pulled this book off the shelf and, dusting it off, I started to re-read. My re-reading, as I discovered to my utter delight, brought back to life in full vibrant color the intellectual thrill of tracing the many different discovery procedures of French thinkers whose writings, translated into English, were included in this book documenting their engagement with “antiquities,” especially with the ancient Greek world. Hovering above my introductory paragraph here are pictures of four of those thinkers, who happen to be the focus of what I have to say in what follows. I have chosen photographs that approximate how they looked back when I was first getting to know each one of them personally. But why are there four pictures featured and not three, corresponding to the playful title of this nostalgic exercise? My answer to that question will be part of my whole story here.

§1. The four French thinkers whose photographs I have shown are Jean-Pierre Vernant (1914–2007, upper left), Pierre Vidal-Naquet (1930–2006, upper right), Marcel Detienne (1935–2019, lower left), Nicole Loraux (1943–2003, lower right). The four faces that look back at me from these photographs correspond, as closely as I can imagine, to the way I best remember them, in one particular phase of my life, which I can narrow down to January 1982. I offer relevant and intensely nostalgic reminiscences of that happy time in a write-up celebrating a different occasion, https://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/what-gn­owes­omd/, 2§1–4, 2§19.

§2. The writings of all four of these French thinkers are represented prominently in Antiquities 2001. When I was first getting to know them, the four of them were all members of an organization that was founded by Jean-Pierre Vernant and Marcel Detienne, affectionately known to their friends as Jipé and Marco. It was the Centre de recherches comparées sur les sociétés anciennes, later renamed, at the insistence of Jipé, as the Centre Louis-Gernet de recherches comparées sur les sociétés anciennes. This center was located at number 10 rue Monsieur-le-Prince, 6th arrondissement. Nearby, number 41 on the same street, was and is the famed restaurant Polidor, once frequented by the likes of Victor Hugo, Paul Verlaine, and Arthur Rimbaud. The Centre has long since relocated, but my fond memories stay anchored at number 10, even though the building now serves as a museum dedicated to the memory of an earlier occupant, the positivist philosopher Auguste Compte (1798–1857), who as a thinker stands in stark contrast, ironically, with the
“Three Musketeers” whom I signaled in the title of this presentation. But I come back to my question: why do I say “three” when I have in mind four thinkers?

§3. It all goes back to a comment, meant to be witty, I guess, that I once overheard—I cannot remember exactly when. What I do recall is that this comment was made in the course of a conversation between two persons who were talking about Vernant, Vidal, and Detienne, where one of the two was referring to these three as the original “Three Musketeers” of the Centre Gernet, while the other one of the two—this one was the wit—shot back with a comment that went something like this: and that would mean that Nicole Loraux is d’Artagnan? I am unsure to this day about the intent behind such a witticism, but now, retrospectively, I can see some truth in it—though only if we keep in mind a famous line uttered by the persona of d’Artagnan himself in the original Les Trois Mousquetaires, a historical adventure novel published in 1844 in serialized form from March to July in 1844 by Alexandre Dumas. We find the line in a scene that takes place in Chapter 9, where d’Artagnan as the neophyte Musketeer says to the three veteran Musketeers, who are Athos, Porthos, and Aramis: Et maintenant, messieurs, dit d’Artagnan sans se donner la peine d’expliquer sa conduite à Porthos, tous pour un, un pour tous, c’est notre devise, n’est-ce pas? Here is my translation: ‘And now, gentlemen, said d’Artagnan without taking the trouble to explain to Porthos the reason for his conduct, it’s all for one and one for all—that’s our motto, right?’ The context here is essential, because Porthos, just before d’Artagnan is quoted as saying this to the Three Musketeers, had just referred to all four of them, standing together with d’Artagnan, by saying quatre mousquetaires ‘four musketeers’.

Beyond such narratological oscillation between three and four, however there is nothing about these four characters in the novel of Dumas that would remind me personally of Jipé, Pierre, Marco, and Nicole. Still, the oscillation itself is comparable—intellectually. These four French thinkers may have been all for one and one for all, but they all thought quite differently. And their differences show, loud and clear, in the selections of their writings as translated in Antiquités 2001. That is the main point I want to make right now, at a time when, as of March 21, 2019, the last of these intrepid musketeers, Marcel Detienne, has just left the world of the living.
§4. To mark the passing of the golden era when those four musketeers of 10 rue Monsieur-le-Prince were in their prime, I now turn to the value I see in the collection of their writings in *Antiquités 2001*. And I start with a fact that enhances exponentially that value. The fact is, Nicole Loraux was one of the two original editors of *Antiquités 2001*. I was the other, and the two of us had worked together long and hard in assembling the French writings that were ultimately published in that book about "postwar French thought" centering on Greek as also on Roman antiquities.

§5. But then, horrifically, Nicole became incapacitated in the fall of 1994, and I had to search for an additional partner who could help finish the task of editing the collected writings and composing the Introduction. I was fortunate to find a perfect new editor in Laura Slatkin, who had been a dear friend of Nicole and who knew her work—and her ways of thinking—even better than I did. I tried to share with Laura everything I remembered from the conversations I already had with Nicole over what to say in the Introduction to *Antiquités 2001*. With her unfailingly steady hand, Laura helped me finally put together that Introduction, which, as I now re-read it, has an almost timeless quality, thanks largely to her—and to the acute observations already made by Nicole, which I had recorded and transmitted to Laura. Even Nicole, despite her severe incapacitation, managed to help us put the finishing touches to *Antiquités 2001*. (For an eloquent set of tributes to the intellectual and academic legacy of Nicole Loraux, I recommend the *collection edited by Nathalie Ernoult and Violaine Sebillotte Cuchet 2011*.)

§6. It was thanks to Nicole Loraux that *Antiquités 2001* was divided into three parts: I, convergences of approach; II, convergences of subject; and III, divergences of approach or subject. In Part I alone, which contains seventeen articles, eight of these are authored by our four musketeers, with two contributions by each one of the four. Here I highlight one of the two contributions by Marcel Detienne, which came from a new preface he wrote for a new edition of his *Masters of Truth* (1996). I quote what is said about this preface at p. 5 of the Introduction to *Antiquités 2001*—and I remember clearly that the source of inspiration for the formulation here was Nicole Loraux herself:

> In general, he [= Detienne] offers provocative retrospectives on "mainstream" French classicists ("the littéraires, as they are called on the Left Bank"), on the "hermeneutists" associated with [Jean] Bollack, and even on the "équipe" to which he himself does and does not belong; he raises questions, implicitly, even about the distinction between "équipe" and "Centre."

Such a formulation, especially with regard to the "team" or équipe of researchers assembled at the Centre, is I think a most effective antidote to assuming that convergences in approach predictably result in consensus of opinion. The motto "all for one and one for all" does not preclude diversity of thought.

§7. That said, I close by quoting my own personal tribute to Marcel Detienne, last of the four musketeers of 10 rue Monsieur-le-Prince. It comes from p. 205 of *Antiquités 2001*, where I introduce the English translation of his introductory essay "Return to the Mouth of Truth" (1996) by offering a description of what he has to say there. I stand by my description, though I now distance myself from my over-use, back then, of the words "scholar" and "scholarship"—exclusivist words that ring hollow, the more I hear them nowadays. Here, in any case, is how I described the "Return":

> This important essay was designed by Marcel Detienne to serve as an introduction to the American edition of his influential book, *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece* [1966]. Its importance, however, goes even beyond the central topic of the book, which can be formulated as a basic question: what are the historical facts that link poetry with the ever-changing cultural constructs of universal truth in ancient Greek civilization? [More on this question, as posed by Detienne, in *Navy*, 2018.10.11.] Detienne's introduction goes on to broaden this question: how is the actual study of Greek civilization linked with the search
for truth in contemporary scholarship? Pointedly, Detienne reaches beyond the world of French Classics scholars: here he is speaking not only as Directeur d’Études and holder of the Chaire des Religions de la Grèce of the École Pratique des Hautes Études, Fifth Section (Sciences Religieuses) in Paris, but also as the simultaneous holder of the Basil L. Gildersleeve Professorship of Classics at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, the historical birthplace of [...] graduate-level teaching and research in Classical Philology in the United States. [...] In this essay, Detienne’s professorial voice addressed simultaneously the French and the Anglo-American worlds of classical scholarship. “La bouche de la vérité” has developed an American accent. Reviewing thirty years of his own thinking, Detienne sets out here to “reexamine the assumptions and procedures” and to “consider a number of methodological problems.” His essay provides a fitting coda for readers of Part I of Antiquités. It marks an opportunity for reflection and retrospection.

Bibliography


Ernoult, N., and V. Sebillotte Cuchet, eds. 2011. Classics@Issue 7: Les femmes, le féminin et le politique après Nicole Loraux, Colloque de Paris (INHA), novembre 2007, 2011. https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/3369. Proceedings of a conference held in Paris (INHA, 15–17 November 2007) which was co-organized by the Centre Louis Gernet (CNRS-EHESS), the Équipe Phléace (Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne and Université Denis-Diderot Paris VII) and the Réseau National Interuniversitaire sur le Genre (RING, Paris). The aim of the conference was to explore aspects of the intellectual and academic legacy of Nicole Loraux, especially with regard to the subjects of the feminine and the polis—both in Hellenic Studies and in feminist scholarship.


Tags: Jean-Pierre Vernant, Laura Slatkin, Marcel Detienne, Nicole Loraux, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece, The Three Musketeers

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