
H-France Review Vol. 14 (July 2014), No. 109

Walter E. Rex, *Molière's Strategies: Timely Reflections on his Art of Comedy*. Medieval and Early Modern French Studies 12. Oxford, Bern, and New York: Peter Lang, 2013. Illustrations, notes, Index, and bibliography. xi + 322 pp. \$72.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-3-0343-0920-2.

Review by Ronald W. Tobin, University of California, Santa Barbara.

This gracefully written book is really two in one. The body of the text is for the non-specialist, and the (small font, single spaced) notes are for the Molière scholar.[1] The late Walter (Ted) Rex, author of what is still, in my opinion, the most enlightening *Introduction* to Pascal's *Pensées*, has offered us a close and imaginative reading of Molière based mostly on the principle of contrariety that he elucidated over twenty years ago in *The Attraction of the Contrary*. [2]

In *Molière's Stratégies* Rex promises to show "the ways in which [Molière's] creations, as comedies of his time almost never did, reach beyond themselves, sometimes provocatively, into the problems of society" (p. xxi). So, for example, the plots of *L'Ecole des femmes* and *Le Tartuffe* "were engineered to lend humor, warmth and drama to the social/religious message, even as the message gave intellectual weight and importance to the plot" (p. xxiii). Despite an early disclaimer about not being interested in current debates about Molière (it is not clear which ones he is referring to), Rex has, with this book, vaulted himself into the old controversy of Molière *homme de théâtre* versus *Molière penseur*. At least that is what is implied in his privileging of the "message." To be sure, we should expect that, having spent most of a brilliant career studying the Enlightenment, Rex would indeed be more inclined to promote the philosophical content over the vehicle (*pace* Voltaire). Yet, to the reader's great relief, he devotes his energies to a clever analysis of a number of Molière's plays from the early farce *La Jalousie du barbouillé* to the last, *Le Malade imaginaire*.

Rex's point of departure is the idea that "the pleasure [of comedy] emanates not from good feeling but from distress" which calls for the remedy of laughter (p. 1). It was, Rex assures us, no easy task for Molière to make audiences laugh at dangerous subjects such as religion, sexuality, and male authority, and to create his plots from the discontents that inevitably arise from relationships. Rex decides, therefore, to focus on the "dynamics of divergence and discord, of negativity" (p. 4) that enliven Molière's art. He is, I believe, the first to pursue such a line of attack over an entire book.

The results are noteworthy. He does set himself up to succeed by choosing the most negative play in Molière's corpus, *George Dandin*, as the first object of his analysis. Rex argues that the play is grim because of the absence of true love. This is accurate to an extent but cannot be the full explanation, because *L'Avare* is almost as negative, and it features romantic love. But one cannot disagree with his conclusion that we need to revise our opinion of *La Jalousie du barbouillé*, the main source of *George Dandin*, "for if the later play represents a 'spelling out' of the implications of the earlier one, this suggests how much more there was in the earlier one than meets the eye" (p. 26). This is a significant clue to Rex's methodology: His careful eye, following the example of his acknowledged master, Judd Hubert, will shed light on aspects of Molière's text that have gone underappreciated.

We soon find two more indications of the perspective he will adopt, first, in his statement that “In Molière’s comic creations, religion is entirely, perhaps even absurdly, beside the point” (p. 27), and then in his belief that Molière created characters based on himself. This includes *Dom Juan*, Molière’s most enigmatic creation, which is, in Rex’s eyes, a self-parody because Molière, like Don Juan, always brings trouble down upon himself. While we can never deny the possibility of biographical elements forming part of the creative process, Rex’s approach occasionally harkens back to the *l’homme et l’oeuvre* biographical criticism of the nineteenth century.

Rex sees Don Juan ultimately as a seducer determined to abolish the past. Although this is a perceptive point about the somber tone of much of the play, Rex might have noted that *Dom Juan* closely resembles a Racinian tragedy in which the past and its accumulated debts weigh upon and bring guilt to the present while threatening the future. Rex makes the point that Don Juan and the Commandeur, the towering reminder of misdeeds, never sit down to dinner. The larger issue is that a meal constitutes the replaying of the fundamental act of Christianity, the Last Supper, the ultimate Communion. There can never be such an event between the atheist and *Le Ciel*.

Before moving on to *Le Misanthrope*, Rex pauses to meditate on Molière’s endings when compared to La Fontaine’s in *Le Loup et l’agneau*. He takes pains to show that, if Molière produces happy endings unlike what we find in *Le Loup et l’agneau*, we can still perceive the brutal reality of the times just offstage in his theater. The otherwise insightful textual analysis of the fable is hampered by a vision of La Fontaine as a practitioner of ambiguity: “Not only do the contrarities dramatized in the most famous *Fables* imply an unwillingness to openly take sides, but, for the reader, the rhetorical situation of the action makes commitment impossible” (p. 72). Unless one still holds to the theories of the critical pluralists of the 1980s and 90s, this statement flies in the face of most interpretations of this particular fable as a practical lesson in prudence: the strong are terrible, so avoid them.

Le Misanthrope, “the closest of all Molière’s plays to the *Fables* of La Fontaine” (p. 78), serves Rex’s thesis well because all the main characters except Eliante “are positioned around the protagonist according to a single principle, namely, contrariety to the character traits of Alceste” (p. 81). Given that the characters of *Le Misanthrope* are among Molière’s most complex, Rex shows us that he is a master of psychological analysis by examining the celebrated *caractère* that La Bruyère devoted to Giton and Phèdon (“Des biens de fortune,” #83). Although the canonical analysis by Jules Brody will still be the starting point for studies of this *caractère*, Rex makes a compelling addition by teasing out the psychological clues hidden beneath the factual information provided by the *moraliste*, something missing from previous studies. [3] Recalling that there is no mention of money in this *caractère*, Rex concludes that “the invisibility of coinage...may also insinuate the author’s own disparaging view of it, his contempt for the monetary source of Giton’s disposition” (p. 90). Amen.

In “Sex, Philosophy and Other Problems in *Les Femmes savantes*,” Rex is unnecessarily hard on the comedy and lends Molière a point of view for which there is no evidence: “Molière’s comedy is a reaction, largely negative, to the social phenomenon of women usurping a role traditionally assigned to men” (p. 111). On the contrary, Molière’s theater promotes the sane expression of women’s rights. The comedy of *Les Femmes savantes* lies in that expression being insane.

The next chapters contain brilliant insights into the theological questions that surround *Le Tartuffe*. Rex teaches us, for example, that Tartuffe’s only principle is expediency. As a consequence, we can be grateful to Rex for ending the debate over which school of Catholicism is being satirized: There is no single theological thrust in the play.

The final seven chapters all deal with *Le Malade imaginaire* in one way or another and offer, for the general reader, a considerable number of welcome perceptions about “Surprise,” “Structure as Rite,” and “Music, Dance, and Medicine.” The pages devoted to the “Philosophical Centre” (pp. 217-35) contain

some of the best writing about the critical role of the *raisonneur* Béralde that I have seen, since he will “create the philosophical centre and result in the main theatrical crisis of this comedy” (p. 217). Some discussions could have been fruitfully expanded. “Molière’s Titles” could have benefitted from Jacques Scherer’s “Sur le sens des titres de quelques comédie de Molière.”^[4] On Molière’s practice of “vraisemblance,” we have to remember that comedy allows characters to arrive unannounced just when they are needed. That is, we do not expect the same rigorous attention to the rules in Molière that we find in Racine.

Rex tends to minimize the connection between the first scene of *Le Malade imaginaire* and the rest of the play. Yet, act I, scene 1, displaying Argan counting the sums he has paid for his various evacuations, clearly signifies his preoccupation with the body, medicine, and with pleasure, the theme of this comedy and of Molière’s oeuvre. In his analysis of the structure of the plays, Rex assumes that Molière’s point of view can be deduced by taking seriously the debates that occur between the monomaniac and his interlocutor, with the former always being wrong. This approach once again privileges philosophy over dramaturgy, for one can also see the *raisonneur* existing to serve as a foil, his own philosophy not being significant. See the deft positioning of Arnolphe and his adversary Chrysalde in *L’Ecole des femmes*.

Rex sums up the reason for awarding the lion’s share of his attention to Molière’s last play by highlighting its fundamental “contrariety”:

“[T]he entire play is not only a bravura gesture of defiance by the author against his own approaching death, but at the same time, and most perversely—by contrary motion, a provocation that jeeringly invites the very thing against which it protests” (p. 246).

I cannot agree more. However, one must add that, in developing the new dramaturgy displayed in the late *comédies-ballets*, including *Le Malade imaginaire*, Molière rewards our patience with a paradox. While recreating a polyphonic form worthy of the festive ceremonies of the Renaissance, Molière also laid the foundation for a profoundly modern dramaturgy that, especially in its language, clearly influenced Beckett and Ionesco. In other words, what worlds would Molière have opened to us had he lived, for *Le Malade imaginaire* is more a beginning than a finale?

Rex concludes *Timely Reflections* by stating that Molière and Montaigne “showed how completely and perfectly the end of life can be achieved in art” (p. 253), a timely coda for Rex’s last book.

NOTES

[1] See note 41 on pp. 273-74, which constitutes a short treatise on blasphemy.

[2] Walter Rex, *Pascal’s Provincial Letters: An Introduction* (London: Holder and Stoughton, 1977) and the same author’s *The Attraction of the Contrary: Essays on the Literature of the French Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[3] Jules Brody, “La Bruyère: le style d’un moraliste,” *Cahiers de l’Association internationale des Etudes françaises* 30 (1978): 139-53.

[4] Jacques Scherer, “Sur le sens des titres de quelques comédie de Molière” in *Molière, Marivaux, Ionesco...60 ans de critique*, ed. Colette Scherer, (Paris: Nizet, 2007), pp. 36-46.

rwtohin@frit.ucsb.edu

Copyright © 2014 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172