

---

H-France Review Vol. 19 (September 2019), No. 187

Angela Daiana Langone. *Molière et le théâtre arabe. Réception moliéresque et identités nationales arabes*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016. 332 pp. Bibliography, index, and appendices. \$85.43 (hc). ISBN 978-3-11-044234-2.

Review by Noël Peacock, University of Glasgow.

The contribution that Molière has made to theater and performance traditions of different countries has become an increasing focus in translation studies. Comparatist approaches to Molière gained considerable impetus in the lead up to the celebrations of the three hundred and fiftieth anniversary of his birth (1972) and the tercentenary of his death (1973). Numerous articles appeared with the title “Molière *in*” or “Molière *and*” (or their equivalents in the language of the articles), indicating the increasing impact that Molière was having beyond the Hexagon. With globalisation, the reach of Molière has extended further.[1] However, one major gap in our understanding of the wider influence of Molière has been of that in countries whose first language is Arabic. Angela Daiana Langone’s scholarly attempt to address this *lacuna*, in a revised version of her PhD thesis, is therefore a welcome addition to the Molière bibliography.

One of the challenges in assessing the influence Molière extended in different countries is that of recognition and attribution. For example, the titles of some of the early adaptations in English would seem to have no connection with the French dramatist. In this respect, Langone’s claim that the first English translation of Molière dates from John Ozell’s version of *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac* in 1974 (p. 1) ignores the number of adaptations which preceded it, which go back to Sir William D’Avenant’s *The Playhouse to be Let*, which was first performed in 1663, and whose second act was a version of *Sganarelle*. [2] It is surprising that the first recorded adaptation of Molière in the Arab world is as recent as 1847, given Molière’s reference to the Orient in a number of plays and the frequent travel between France and the Ottoman and Safavid empires, and North West African Countries. The difficulty lies in finding any extant texts or details of private performances. What is quite remarkable—and for which we are indebted to Langone—is the evidence provided for “la place incomparable accordée à ce dramaturge français de la part du milieu théâtral arabe,” which has made Molière in little more than 150 years such an iconic figure, enjoying the status in some circles as “Sidi Molière” or “le parrain du théâtre arabe” (p. 2).

The theoretical framework underpinning Langone’s study, set out in the introduction (chapter 1), is in itself an original choice, examining four adaptations against the backdrop of the “quatre phases de nationalisme” outlined by the American anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, in his *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). These four phases are elaborated in

chapters two to five, with each of the four adaptations taken from four different Arab countries, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco, and from four different time periods:

Hypertext	Hypotext	Dramatist	Created	Published
<i>al-Baḥīl</i>	<i>L'Avare</i>	Mārūn al-Naqqāš	1847	1869
<i>Mūlyār Miṣr wa-mā yūqāsīhi</i>	<i>L'Impromptu de Versailles</i>	Ya'qūb Ṣannū	1870	1912
<i>Al-Mārīšāl</i>	<i>Le Bourgeois gentilhomme</i>	Nouredine Kasbaoui	1967	1997
<i>Molière ou «Pour l'amour de l'humanité»</i>	<i>Tartuffe/Dom Juan</i>	Taïeb Saddiki	1994	1994

Drawing on Stephen Greenblatt's thesis that "la littérature est...le produit plus d'une culture que d'un auteur" (p. 70), Langone prefaces each textual analysis by helpful contextual considerations, including a biography of the dramatists and a brief history of the theatrical traditions within which these were working. All four dramatists/translators are seen as travellers, experiencing that cultural mobility extolled by Greenblatt. Naqqāš and Ṣannū were influenced by Italian traditions while the hybrid adaptations by Kasbaoui and Saddiki brought together French and classical Arabic theatrical experience. In all four adaptations, a subversive political substratum is identified.

*L'Avare* (chapter two), by the Maronite dramatist Naqqāš, pitches into the economic upswing in Beirut in the middle of the nineteenth century and is seen as an indication of the first phase of an Arab nationalist *prise de conscience*. Drawing on ideas circulating in intellectual milieux in Lebanon and inspired by European travel, this adaptation of Molière's play becomes an attempt to galvanise what Greenblatt terms "social energy"[3] into a critical reflection on the political and cultural "stagnation" in the Arab world, particularly when considered against the progressive spirit of enquiry in Europe, and notably in Italy and France (p. 82).

In the second phase of Arab nationalism, Ṣannū gives to his version of *L'Impromptu* (chapter three) a distinctly didactic function, illustrative of a wider struggle to liberate Egypt from the socio-cultural khedivial tyranny and British control. Molière's invective against actors of the Hôtel de Bourgogne are transposed into an attack on a non-native acting style imported from European theatre. His satire of Draneht Pacha, considered as the latter's spokesperson, recalls Molière's caricature of Edme Boursault's *Portrait du peintre* (1663). Ṣannū reads his own conflictual experiences into Molière's pillory of critics of his new comedy. However, Langone suggests that a more attentive reading of Ṣannū's text decodes a proactive message that, transcending a mere protest against European cultural hegemony in Egypt, may be seen as an attempt to promote a collective national response: "Le théâtre de Ṣannū est par conséquent indissociable de la question nationale et de la naissance du nationalisme en Egypte" (p. 101).

Kasbaoui's Tunisian adaptation of *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* (which had an uninterrupted run from 1967 to 1986) reflects the political initiatives to unite the urban elites and largely illiterate rural population (chapter four). In the "Tunisification" of Molière's text, the traditional dénouement, in which the unenlightened Monsieur Jourdain accedes to the marriage of his daughter Lucile to

Cléonte only through a theatrical stratagem of disguise, is replaced by the titular hero's willing acceptance of the match, and indeed of his own lowly origins. This third phase in the renaissance of Arab nationalism shifts the focus away from the armed struggle against the colonial oppressors to the creation of a new independent national identity, mirrored in President Bourguiba's efforts at social reform and in the construction of the Nation-State.

The fourth phase, illustrated by Saddiki's *Molière ou "Pour l'amour de l'humanité"*, traces the development in the Moroccan context of the Arab appropriation of Molière. The play was inspired by the March 10, 1994 assassination in Oran of Abdelkader Alloua, who was in the process of adapting Molière's *Tartuffe*. In fact, Langone attributes Alloua's death to his "amour pour le dramaturge français" (p. 167). Saddiki's play is more ambivalent than the preceding ones studied in chapters two through four in its cultural hybridity and exchange with the French sources. The fact that the play is written in French as opposed to Arabic is indicative of mutuality rather than oppositionality, and indeed, of a protest "contre l'arabisation, contre l'unilinguisme, contre toute fermeture, pour accentuer la différence, la pluralité et la variation" (p. 190). Molière becomes a character assimilated into the new narrative, and indistinguishable at times from Saddiki himself. The new play is seen as a collage, a kind of "mosaic" of citations drawn from different Molière plays. The collage is full of anachronisms such as "voitures," "teeshirts," and "débatés télévisés" which create a deliberate incongruity and tension. As Langone concludes: "La pièce de Saddiki n'est pas une simple adaptation ayant un hypotexte mais un texte où la pratique transtextuelle la plus explicite est celle de la citation de plusieurs hypotextes moliéresques" (p. 175). The succinct conclusion (chapter six) brings together the narrative of the four preceding chapters. Invaluable appendices provide a French translation of the first three texts, facilitating access to the sources from which the non-Arabic reader would otherwise be excluded.

The corpus from which Langone has selected is obviously circumscribed in view of the constraints of the exercise for which it was initially envisaged. The close reading of texts does, however, show the rich diversity within Arab cultures and avoids some of the generalisation which can so easily emerge from a more broadly imagined approach. Moreover, the analysis of the dramatists' manipulation of language and dialect invites us to have a fresh look at the linguistic diversity of the original French plays. It would however be interesting to see if the interface between French and Arab cultures impacted productions in France.

Langone's study makes a contribution to the afterlife of the text, which has become a significant development in Molière studies over the last fifty years.<sup>[4]</sup> The political framework to which the texts have contributed indicates that Molière has not lost that *puissance de choc* which characterized some of his *mises en scène* in seventeenth-century France. Langone further illustrates the richness of Molière's creations, which transcend the spatial, theatrical, and socio-political frontiers of his time, and go beyond the linguistic and cultural identity and the theatrical patrimony of one nation.

## NOTES

[1] The adaptation and even "nationalization" of Molière may be seen, for example, in the publication in Kyoto in 2003 of the first Japanese translation of the complete works in ten volumes by Nobuko Akiyama. See also Marie-Noëlle Ciccia's study of the influence of Molière in eighteenth-century Portugal, *Le Théâtre de Molière au Portugal au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: de 1737 à la veille de la révolution libérale* (Paris: Centre culturel Calouste Gulbenkian, 2003); the use made by

Scottish dramatists to fill the Shakespeare-sized gap in Scottish theatrical history such as Noël Peacock, *Molière in Scotland 1945–1990* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow French and German Publications, 1993); Jim Carmody, “Molière in America,” *Le Nouveau Moliériste* 3(1996–97): 139–48; Alain-Michel Rocheleau, “La Présence de Molière dans le théâtre au Québec,” *Œuvres et critiques* 22, 2(1997): 83–94; Lars Roar Langslet, “The Nordic Molière,” *Scandinavian Review* 91, 3(2004): 19–23.

[2] For the latest account of the early fortunes of Molière in England see Suzanne Jones, “French Imports: English Translations of Molière, 1663–1732” (D.Phil. University of Oxford, 2016), and her forthcoming monograph, *The First English Translations of Molière: Drama in Flux 1663–1732* (Oxford: Legenda, 2020).

[3] Stephen Greenblatt, *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* (Cambridge: CUP, 2009), p. 250, cited by Langone, p. 16.

[4] For example, in the period between 1956 and 2016 there have been almost sixty English translations of *Le Misanthrope* and *Tartuffe*. See Cédric Ploix, “A Study of Prosody in Modern English Translations of Molière’s Plays” (D.Phil. University of Oxford, 2018).

Noël Peacock  
University of Glasgow  
[Noel.Peacock@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:Noel.Peacock@glasgow.ac.uk)

Copyright © 2019 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 redistribution/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