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Ioana Galleron, *La comédie des mœurs sous l'ancien régime: poétique et histoire*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2017. ix + 284 pp. Bibliography and index. £65.00 (pb). ISBN 978-0-7294-1196-7.

Review by Guy Spielmann, Georgetown University.

In a field with a such a long and abundant tradition of scholarship as early modern French drama, any new contribution faces the challenge of either bringing something new, in a major key, by providing intellectual tools to redefine the field itself, or in a minor key, by exploring a specific aspect that has been heretofore neglected. Ioana Galleron initially seems to take the latter route by exploring *comédie de mœurs*—loosely translatable as “comedy of manners,” although the term *mœurs* is so central to the argument that I will keep it in this review—a sub-genre universally invoked by scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries without being ever precisely defined by any of them.[1] Galleron begins her study by wondering whether there was ever such as thing as *comédie de mœurs*, or whether it is nothing but a pure academic contrivance. Yet it remains difficult for us—not just theater specialists, but a general, educated audience—to refrain from wondering why we should care whether *comédie de mœurs* existed at all. Supposing that it did, what impact would that certainty have on our knowledge of theatre history and perhaps on our understanding of *ancien régime* society? These are the ultimate questions that the reader might expect to be raised, and hopefully answered in such a work. The author, however, positions herself squarely in the field of poetics, as specified in the title, and appears concerned mostly with the status of *comédie de mœurs* as a literary genre.

While this is not an exceptional stance, anyone with a serious interest in theater will find it unusual. Lately, research in this domain has decisively evolved towards interdisciplinarity, or at least towards an approach that seeks to confront an exclusively literary perspective on dramatic texts with considerations on the technical crafts involved in performance (acting styles, stage equipment, set and costume design, etc.) and on the economic and sociological dimensions of theater as a form of spectacle and as a business. While Galleron duly references in her introduction (pp. 1-16) a number of significant books and articles in French that have renewed theater research in the past twenty years, she chooses mostly not to rely on or engage with them in her own analyses, referring, instead, to an older critical tradition, even as she critiques its shortcomings. As a result, her analyses work well when she focuses on play texts produced at the Théâtre-Français that reflect a certain deference towards a literary model; but her arguments do not always hold together when she ventures further afield to include other types of plays.

Early on, for instance, she states that *comédie de mœurs* was not a recognized category in the period when it flourished, but that it was invented in the nineteenth century as a convenient

catchall descriptor for the period extending roughly between 1680 and 1720. While there is no arguing with this claim, several researchers (myself included)<sup>[2]</sup> have provided abundant evidence to justify abandoning *comédie de mœurs* as an operational concept altogether, not merely because it is apocryphal, but also because it is based on a profound misunderstanding—and misrepresentation—of comedy as a purely literary genre that can be envisioned outside of the performative and spectacular context in which it evolved.<sup>[3]</sup>

In other words, we know for a fact that *comédie de mœurs* is an artifact of a scholarly tradition that began with Jean-François La Harpe's *Lycée* in 1798-1804; this treatise aimed to establish French drama in the *ancien régime* as a legitimate branch of literature. This involved a complex and ideologically biased process of filtration and classification, an exclusive focus on texts and their authors, and the erasure of all other dimensions of the theatrical experience. Although Galleron is obviously aware of this, she nevertheless hypothesizes that *comédie de mœurs* might be a coherent entity after all, which not only requires returning to an earlier stage of scholarship, but also creates a hermeneutic circle: she looks for distinguishing features of *comédie de mœurs* first and foremost in plays that have traditionally been designated as such.

Yet, since *comédie de mœurs* was not a known category during the period Galleron sets out to study (a period later designated as the golden age of *comédie de mœurs*), she naturally finds it difficult to delineate a valid corpus, all the more so as she begins by doubting the very existence of this sub-genre. As she also recognizes that her study cannot pretend to exhaustiveness (she confesses to not having read all of the myriad comedies produced between 1680 and 1720—but I do not know anyone who has). Galleron starts her first chapter with an investigation of *Les Mœurs, ou les Façons du temps* (1685), a minor play from a minor author (Saint-Yon), but which was traditionally acknowledged as the first *comédie de mœurs* for no other reason than being the first to feature the word *mœurs* in its title. This makes for a rather shaky foundation, and more solid arguments can be summoned to single out Edme Boursault's 1683 *Les Mots à la mode* as the likely prototype of a new kind of play, especially since it also received much greater exposure, whereas *Les Mœurs du temps* remained, by Galleron's own admission, "confidential" (p. 19).<sup>[4]</sup>

Even if we set aside this very minor quibble, it still seems epistemologically dubious to stake a claim on "l'avis de nombreux historiens de la littérature du dix-huitième siècle" (p. 15) for at least three reasons: first, because historical research should not take general opinion as evidence; second, because understanding theater (as opposed to dramatic literature) requires expertise other than literary; and third because it would take some explaining to situate the 1680-1720 period exclusively in "the eighteenth century."

Indeed, periodization emerges as an issue of its own here, one of the key arguments being that *comédie de mœurs* characterizes a period in French drama: "Il constitue ainsi un des éléments permettant de saisir l'unité de la période 1680-1720" (p. 1). However, the author never convincingly justifies the meaningfulness of these dates. To take 1680—the creation of a single official French spoken theater company, the Théâtre-Français—as a starting point seems at odds with Galleron's choice to leave out the logistical dimension of theatrical activity (with the rarest of exceptions, such as when she speculates that a coquette's flashiness probably translated into a lavish costume worn by the actress). As for 1720, we can only guess that it relates to the beginnings of Pierre de Marivaux, who supposedly introduced a radically new kind of comedy. Such a consideration, however, only works in a purely literary perspective, and even then, only anachronistically. Marivaux's comedies were initially performed in 1720 at the Théâtre-Italien,

a secondary stage by then (far from its glory days of 1682-1697), and they failed to cause a stir. Some of these plays finally managed to gain some recognition at the Théâtre-Français much later in the eighteenth century, but Marivaux remained a second-rate playwright throughout the *ancien régime*, and was not elevated to the rank of undisputed classic until late in the nineteenth century: only then was it widely agreed that “Marivaux, [devient] auteur dont il n’est plus nécessaire de démontrer l’importance pour l’évolution de la comédie du dix-huitième siècle” (p. 215).

Periodization problems abound here, some merely distracting, such as a statement on the very first line that the *ancien régime* broadly defined ranges “from the Renaissance to 1789” (p. 1, n. 1). When does “the Renaissance” start in this case? Similarly, the *ancien régime* only ended with the proclamation of the republic in 1792, not in 1789. Other periodization issues are more alarming, such as Galleron’s proclivity to use overly broad or undefined labels like “Les Lumières” (e.g., p. 236), “La génération de 1685” (p. 180) or “La comédie de philosophes” (p. 243), which all add confusion where exacting precision is needed to make a viable case.

In the first chapter, Galleron’s close reading of Saint-Yon’s *Les Mœurs du temps*, presented as “a model play” (p. 19), mostly demonstrates how uneasy it really is to prove that this comedy stands out among other contemporary titles and should be treated as representative. In a sense, the author makes her task even more arduous by astutely ferreting out bits and pieces recycled from Molière, Baron, Dancourt (who collaborated with Saint-Yon), and other dramatists. All that can be asserted safely is that a certain type of comedy that has thereafter been customarily named *comédie de mœurs* and that arguably began with Molière’s 1659 *Précieuses ridicules* (but possibly much earlier, according to other historians whom Galleron references), had its heyday in a period roughly comprised of the last two decades of the seventeenth century and the first two decades of the eighteenth century. The book’s first fifty pages offer no conclusive evidence that would allow Galleron to venture authoritatively beyond this general observation.

In the second chapter of part one, “‘Regard noir’ et jeu des mœurs,” Galleron finally turns to the core of her project: characterizing *comédie de mœurs* according to clear, consistent features. At this stage, though, the reader has to suspend disbelief and accept that the author’s investigation will not break the hermeneutic circle, and that she will look for these features only in plays that have been designated a priori as being *des mœurs* on the sole basis of a tradition in literary scholarship.

Since *comédie de mœurs* remains such a fuzzy concept, Galleron proceeds prudently, but wisely by specifying first what it is not: a “realistic” glimpse on contemporary society (“Sous le signe de l’actualité,” [pp. 47-54]). This argument does not present a breakthrough—this point has already been made by several scholars—but, at least, it offers a solid grounding to investigating how playwrights approached the mores that they wished to lampoon and, presumably, contribute to correcting. Galleron manages to go beyond the usual charge of cynicism levied on the comedies of this era by coining the concept of “*regard noir*” (p. 56), an overwhelming “dark vision” of society as inherently corrupt. This vision is not necessarily hopeless, however, as Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees* (1711) explains how individual vices eventually contribute to the common good.

The second part of the book, undoubtedly its most original portion, moves on to the poetics of the genre *per se*. Galleron identifies three main operators in the “dark vision” that she posits as the underlying principle of *comédie de mœurs*. “Temporal shifters” (*embrayeurs d’actualité*) are textual devices by which authors disguise statements of timeless truths on human nature as

topical observations on a current state of affairs (pp. 71-76). Thus, phrases like *du temps*, *d'aujourd'hui*, and *à la mode*, liberally affixed to exposés of deviant or immoral behavior, serve to cast worn clichés in a seductively new light. A second trick involves adding an extraneous character, more or less convincingly integrated into the plot, whose only function amounts to providing an external point of view. Thus, morally upright ancient philosophers and wise men (Democritus and Aesop, for instance) come off as effective foils to the universal corruption surrounding them. Finally, metatextual discourse further affirms the distance between the inevitably dreadful *mœurs* displayed by the characters and the playwrights who have chosen to foist this lamentable spectacle on the audience.

Galleron then proposes a recipe for this “dark vision,” whose main ingredient is a gallery of types and recurrent characters such as the usurer or shady speculator (*agioteur*), the coquettish woman (*coquette*) and her male counterpart, the *petit-mâitre*—a kind of priggish wastrel often regarded as representative of the *Régence* period (1716-1723). A definite trend seems to be a portrayal of these “*personnages de mœurs*” (as Galleron calls them, p. 107) as inconsequential and lacking any substance, so that their misdeeds cannot be taken overly seriously; they give the impression of being puppets rather than real people. Another ingredient is the obligatory *scène de mœurs*, a practically autonomous piece that tends to recur frequently from play to play regardless of the plot—often the weakest component in these comedies, which may amount to no more than a series of portraits and stand-alone skits framed in a perfunctory story line. Galleron concludes that the aim has become entertainment, at the expense of the moral lessons that comedy was also supposed to provide.

Chapter six, “La relativisation du ‘regard noir’” is oddly representative of the book as a whole in the sense that it is almost entirely devoted to undoing what the author has painstakingly constructed over the preceding 150 pages. After placing the concept of “dark vision” at the foundation of her work, Galleron then discusses numerous instances in which it does not obtain. A great part of the problem—which the author herself does not appear to have grasped—definitely lies in a literary approach that severs the plays from the context in which they were written and performed: such an approach ignores the performers and the audience. While a purely literary analysis might seem as one legitimate option among many others to its practitioners, in the case of dramatic literature it is likely to lead to the kind of incoherence—or at least inconclusiveness—that Galleron faces and acknowledges repeatedly throughout her study. In this specific case, it leads her to considering as a unified whole comedies written for three very different stages: the Théâtre-Français, the Théâtre-Italien (which gave plays partially in French, in addition to its *commedia dell'arte* repertory), and the illegitimate stages collectively known as *Théâtres de la foire* (fairground playhouses), which flourished after the Théâtre-Italien was shut down by royal decree in 1697, and which would eventually manage to secure a licensing deal with the Paris Opéra in 1714.

While the audience at these different venues was essentially made up by the same spectators, expectations varied considerably as to what should be performed in each and how, although at a quick glance, the play texts may look superficially similar. When French dramatists wrote portions of comedies given at the Théâtre-Italien, they had to retain certain features of *commedia dell'arte*, especially the predominance of *tipi fissi* (Harlequin, Pantalone, Columbine, Isabelle), scenes ending in non-sequiturs, and the use of machine-driven special effects in the service of fantasy. Fairground dramas similarly followed their own set of rules. The *scènes de mœurs* inserted in such plays may not be treated as strict equivalents of those in French texts, if only because

their meaning and effect were contextually quite different. For instance, while one may wonder about the actual realism of *scènes de mœurs* in French comedies, the question has no relevance whatsoever for the Italian and fairground corpora, in which verisimilitude (let alone realism) was never set as a goal. To further complicate matters, intense competition meant that each troupe would copy the other or pepper its own productions with allusions to recent shows by their colleagues. Galleron's attempt to make sense of this heterogeneous whole—its unity merely defined by a set of questionable start and end dates—was doomed to stumble on the basic reality of theatrical life in *fin-de-règne* Paris, which explains that she has to continually temper her sweeping affirmations, and point out exceptions to what she has just presented as general principles. [5]

The third and final part of the book, “Eléments pour une histoire de la comédie de mœurs,” shows that the defining features of *comédie de mœurs* can be observed throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in one form or another, with a peak in the early 1700s before *sensibilité* began to hold sway. This suggests that *mœurs* is no genre at all, but rather a component—a flavoring, so to speak—found in a great variety of comedies over two centuries: a set of colorful but superficial characters (the crooked financier, the coquette, the *petit-mâitre*) who ostensibly flout accepted moral norms without provoking much outrage. They merely reflect “le monde comme il va” (“The Way of the World”) [6] and their depravity is treated lightly, as if it did not have any real serious impact—a stark contrast with later treatments of the subject, such as Laclos's *Liaisons dangereuses*, which illustrates the dire consequences of what Mme de Volanges calls “nos mœurs inconséquentes.” [7]

Galleron's conclusions remain tentative, so much so that she provides three of them, one for part one, a shorter one for part two and a “conclusion générale.” A reader well versed in the history of early modern French theater will find that she has managed to demonstrate the limitations of a literary approach to dramatic texts the inherent workings of which cannot be explained purely by close readings (however meticulous and penetrating), and which did not operate according to principles of poetics alone. The author herself ends up conceding that, somehow, in the comedies she studies, anything and everything could be inscribed in the *mœurs* rubric: “dans les pièces des années 1680 à 1720, tout peut faire mœurs, pour ainsi dire” (p. 134), a telling admission from someone who intended to affirm the singularity of *comédie de mœurs* as a legitimate, distinct genre, and even a “major genre” (p. v).

Be that as it may, Galleron's close readings often prove instructive, as when she deconstructs the conceit of a particularly corrupt society in the late *ancien régime* by bringing out identical claims throughout history, or when she demonstrates that the main types of characters in *comédie de mœurs*, long believed to reflect essential social realities, are little more than engaging dramatic artifacts.

This reader's general impression is that, while on one level this book fails to deliver what it promises—a definitive characterization of *comédie de mœurs*—and while it often errs by approximation, it does offer, on another level, provocative analyses that would have perhaps been better served by a more concise presentation. As for its inconclusiveness, it could have been tempered by a more comprehensive approach, since many of the hurdles encountered by Galleron in her attempt to offer valid generalizations result from analyzing an extremely heterogeneous textual corpus as if it constituted a single coherent whole. [8] Indeed, if one reads *La Comédie des mœurs sous l'ancien régime* selectively, focusing exclusively on examples from the plays produced

at the Théâtre-Français, its claims come off as considerably stronger, because these comedies did conform to some degree to a literary model that Galleron implicitly takes as a benchmark for dramatic writing. Her analyses sound most convincing when she draws parallels between the treatment of *mœurs* in drama and in other literary forms, which goes to demonstrate that it was, in fact, an element foreign to theater (or at least not endemic to theater), although for decades authors persisted in using it for their plays.

## NOTES

[1] Galleron evokes this issue briefly in her “General Conclusion” (p. 260-261), noting that the terms may not be completely equivalent, and that “comedy of manners” is sometimes considered synonymous to “*Restoration* [spelled “*Restauration*”] comedy,” supposedly encapsulating a whole period of British drama from the *Restoration* of the Stuart monarchy in 1660 to about 1710. See for instance George H. Nettleton and Arthur E. Chase, eds., *British dramatists from Dryden to Sheridan* (1939), revised edition by George W. Stone (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975), pp. 149-152.

[2] In my *Le Jeu de l'ordre et du chaos. Comédie et pouvoirs à la fin de règne, 1680-1715* (Paris, Champion, 2002).

[3] I am using this less common but more neutral adjective, “spectaculous” (meaning “relative to spectacle”), because “spectacular” now usually refers to something particularly striking or even excessive.

[4] Galleron records my own stated preference for picking Boursault’s play (p. 15 and note 59) but does not seem to lend it any particular credence because it goes against the dominant opinion.

[5] Moreover, it is well known that the extant texts from the Théâtre-Italien and the Théâtre de la foire found in the six-volume Gherardi collection (1700; for some reason Galleron only references the 1741 edition) and the ten-volume Lesage/D’Orneval collection (1721-1737) were heavily edited for publication, in order to make them appear closer to “regular” drama of the kind performed at the Théâtre-Français. These sources need to be handled carefully, with a constant awareness that they may not reflect what was said and done on stage; yet Galleron seems to consider all dramatic texts of the period as belonging to the same model.

[6] Not coincidentally the term was used by William Congreve as the title of a play (1700) now considered as a prime example of Restoration drama.

[7] Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses, ou lettres recueillies dans une société, et publiées pour l'instruction de quelques autres, par M. C.... de L....*, Amsterdam [Paris], Durand, 1792, “Lettre CLXXV de Madame de Volanges à Madame de Rosemonde,” p. 256.

[8] The methodological difficulty of defining a corpus is further emphasized by an odd disjunction between the claim that the author blends traditional scholarship with the means of digital humanities (back cover) and her actual practice. One might have expected a “big data” approach, such as text mining, which would have brought out heretofore unnoticed aspects of the plays; instead, the author’s notion of “digital humanities” seems limited to reading texts readily available on line, as opposed to hard-copy versions. In fact, she sometimes relies on non-

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authoritative editions such as those found on [www.theatre-classique.fr](http://www.theatre-classique.fr)--handy for casual reading or undergraduate teaching, but hardly suitable as research sources. She goes as far as pointing out (pp. 73-74, note 7) that the site only offers thirty-four plays by Dancourt, out of the seventy-one credited to him, but she declares that this is a large enough sample to ensure "reliable" conclusions. Readers may feel much less confident about it.

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