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

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With my thanks to H-France for allowing me to defend my book, I would like to start by observing that I was somewhat surprised by the first question formulated by the reviewer, who is “wondering why we should care whether *comédie de mœurs* existed at all.” Indeed, I might have expected such a question from one of those decision-makers looking for places to make cuts in the SSH budgets, and wondering in general why should we care about anything related to the theatre, or to any concept of the history of literature. For my colleagues, it seemed to me, the ample enumeration I make in my introduction of critical works, including those very recently published, all of which refer to the concept of *comédie de mœurs*, is sufficient proof of its usefulness and provides enough motivation for someone to take a closer look at this object of study. Indeed, while Guy Spielmann affirms that “several researchers (myself [i.e. Spielman] included) have provided abundant evidence to justify abandoning *comédie de mœurs* as an operational concept altogether,” this stance does not seem to have been largely adopted and even less to have become common knowledge. Indeed, ironically, the concept is even used in the introduction to Spielman’s own book, written by C. Biet.[1]

The reason offered for challenging my object of study is that, in Spielman’s opinion, such an operational concept “is based on a profound misunderstanding and misrepresentation of comedy as a purely literary genre.” I cannot but flatly disagree with the premise involved here. No genre is “pure literary,” and comedy is not the only one asking, at least at some point, to envision itself in the “context in which it evolved” (“performative and spectacular” for the comedy, in Spielman’s terms). Yet other approaches to literary texts exist (stylistic, structuralist, etc.), and yield or have yielded interesting, and even illuminating results without taking the context into account. Comedies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were made to be staged by very different actors and in very different settings, and I am fully aware they bear profound traces of these differences, but this does not mean we cannot read them as mere texts. I would even posit that this is at the core of our discipline as literary critics.[2] The question is therefore whether my interpretations and conclusions are (negatively) affected by the fact that I “position[...] [my]self squarely in the field of poetics” instead of tackling the “technical crafts involved in performance” or instead of discussing “the economic and sociological dimensions of theater.” I will come back to these two capital sins a little later, which seem to me to act as a straightjacket imposed by Spielman on the study of the theatre of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Before doing so, I would like to underline that most of the questions raised by and the criticism formulated by Spielman appear to be related to a truncated reading of the book's title, exacerbated by a misunderstanding of the book's methodology. The title reads: *La comédie de mœurs ... poétique et histoire* (my emphasis). Two chapters (the seventh and eighth), which are very quickly discussed in a short paragraph by Spielman, are dedicated to the second aspect, *histoire*, and deal with plays from 1630 to 1800 approximately. While the major part of the book is dedicated to identifying the genre's conventions, these two chapters are not an add-on, but prove amply that, contrary to Spielman's assertion, I am not "setting out to study the 1680 to 1720" period. Instead, I am studying a literary object or phenomenon that goes largely beyond these chronological limits. Such an extension may account, at least for some scholars, for the characterisation (that Spielman contests) of the *comédie de mœurs* as a "major genre." The fact that I cover a broader period of time than the one for which I am credited is important to note, since it also explains why I do not justify the 1680 and 1720 dates. To me, they are not milestones, but mere pointers to a literary period spanning from the end of the seventeenth century into the beginning of the eighteenth century, with no clear boundaries, as often is the case in literary studies.

As for the methodology, contrary to what Spielman suggests, this book is not based on the assumption that the *comédie de mœurs* started with *Les Mœurs* by Saint-Yon (1685), nor that it developed for a number of years from there on. [3] I do not consider this play a "prototype" or a "model", the first term being Spielman's; the second quoted from my book, but taken out of context. [4] I consider it a sample, an element to be examined in order to abstract, by induction, a first set of thematic and structural characteristics defining the *comédie de mœurs*. These thematic and structural characteristics are further tested against a larger corpus (in chapters two through six) before deciding on their usefulness in describing the genre. It is clear, of course, that the choice of the initial sample is of paramount importance, since starting with another play may have easily led to another definition of the *comédie de mœurs*. But the fact that *Les Mœurs* is a "minor play by a minor author" (actually, an unknown and rather intriguing author, I would say), does not disqualify it from the outset as a valid starting point, for a whole series of reasons.

Before detailing these, however, I have one more comment regarding Spielman's concerns about my methodology. In note eight, Spielman claims that my notion of digital humanities "seems limited to reading texts readily available on line." This is quite unfair, since it does not take into account the difference between a description on the back cover and the actual body of the book. The first tries to give an idea about my research interests, and naturally refers to other aspects of my work, which includes a digital humanities approach to literature— illustrated by the special issue I have edited recently for *Revue d'historiographie du théâtre* on "Études théâtrales et humanités numériques" (<http://sht.asso.fr/revue/etudes-theatrales-et-humanites-numeriques/>). But this does not mean that I am actually applying these methods in this book, and nowhere in the introductory chapters or further in the book do I state that I am using the methods and techniques of the digital humanities. Unfortunately, such a "big data approach" is simply not possible at the moment because we lack a machine-readable, duly annotated corpus—hence my resorting to the "non-authoritative editions" for the footnote on Dancourt he mentions. The plays on the Théâtre classique website happen to be the best corpus in XML (partially conformant to TEI) available. I am told that the reviewer is not confident with the representativeness of the sample existing on this website (34 plays by Dancourt out of 71 credited to him). Leaving aside the fact that the sample published by André Blanc drawn from the STFM collection is even smaller and yet considered representative of the authors' style [5], I will emphasize that 34/71

is almost 50 percent: statistically speaking, I think we can assume that representativeness is secured.

As for my reasons for choosing *Les Moeurs*, first, I happen to like the play and I believe it deserves to be re-read. Is it necessary to point out that much of the body of scholarship in theatrical studies of the last decades has been renewed by people reading “minores” they like? [6] Second, as explained in the introduction, many other scholars have included it in their lists of *comédies de mœurs*; while I agree with Spielmann that “historical research should not take general opinion as evidence”, there also is no reason why “general opinion” should be systematically considered wrong, and no indication exists that one has a better chance to reach the truth by positioning him- or herself against it. In this case, the general opinion about *Les Moeurs* being a good example of *comédie de mœurs* (something that I suspect Spielmann himself won’t contest—or at last did not do so in this review) is sufficient indication that the play should be taken into account when discussing whether the *comédie de mœurs* exists as a genre or not, i. e., if it has a set of characteristics that differentiate it from other types of comedies. Third, I did not decide to start my study with Saint-Yon’s comedy without having, beforehand, looked at several other potential candidates, including *Les Mots à la mode* by Boursault, suggested by Spielmann himself [7], but also *Turcaret* by Lesage, *Le Joueur* by Regnard, and some others; these readings formed the body of a whole part that I had to cut from the book, for reasons of space. My mistake was that I did not provide a quick taste of these other preliminary readings in the introduction, so as to better explain the choice of *Les Moeurs*. However, if I did not do so is also because—and this will be my fourth argument—I provide extensive evidence in the first chapter about the productivity of Saint-Yon’s play for conceptualising the *comédie de mœurs* as a genre. While *Les Moeurs* is by no accounts a starting point, it makes a clear case for the *comédie de mœurs* as a type of play that intends to rejoice its public through exploiting in a systematic way a topical image of “the modern times,” considered to be irremediably corrupt. Such a definition of the *comédie de mœurs* is not contested by Spielmann, who even finds it interesting.

Moreover, *Les Moeurs* has the merit to suggest that the playwrights are not firm believers in the idea that the world is really a desperately corrupt place. While building universes in which all candour and good faith have literally disappeared, their works invite us, at the same time, to question these representations and the pessimistic consensus they seem to reach. In chapter six, I conclude that “si [la comédie de mœurs] construit un mythe, celui de la décadence de la nature humaine sur fond de modernité endémique, elle crée aussi les conditions pour le déconstruire, pour le relativiser” (p. 173). In my analysis, I give numerous examples of what I call *jeu de mœurs*, a game that writers play so as to question the topical image of *le monde corrompu*. Unfortunately, this analysis seems to have been dramatically misunderstood by Spielmann, who interprets it as a discussion of the “numerous instances in which [the ‘dark vision’] does not obtain.” This leads him to suggest that I “undo” what I have built, and that the variety of the plays forces me to introduce “exceptions to what [I] ha[ve] just presented as general rules.” I am afraid that what he sees as “exceptions” are rather examples of this “mise en question du regard noir” that I consider as a basic convention of the *comédie de mœurs* as the “utilisation du regard noir.” Somehow, while accepting the first convention, Spielmann failed to acknowledge the second in his reading of my book.

This allows me to return to another of his reproaches, that I am “unifying” the corpus without taking into account the differences between plays staged at the Théâtre-Français, the Italian theatre or the fairgrounds. On the one hand, the reproach is, again, a bit contradictory. Spielmann

seems to think that I do not distinguish between the Italian and French corpora with regards to their “realism” (“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”). However, a few paragraphs earlier, the reviewer applauded my book for “[showing] what [the *comédie de mœurs*] is not: a ‘realistic’ glimpse on contemporary society.” On the other hand, I daresay that the unification of the corpus, if unification it is, works rather in the opposite sense in my book. Far from trying to force a hypothetical “realism” onto Italian or fairground plays, I am showing that “verisimilitude” is not a goal even in French *comédies de mœurs*. More generally, I fail to see how the differences between dramatic styles and scenic practices put into question the poetic principles I’ve identified in chapters two through six—with some success, according to the reviewer. Spielmann repeatedly returns to his assumption that the works with which I am dealing “d[o] not operate according to principles of some poetics alone.” This is evident, but it is also evident that these plays operate according to some principles of poetics—and my book sets to uncover a few. Maybe am I wrong in the occasional observation I make, in the light of these principles, about a particular play from the *Comédie Italienne* or *théâtre de la Foire*, but as no specific examples of these hypothetical errors are provided in the review, I cannot answer the charge, either to defend myself or to make a genuine *mea culpa*.

To pursue this matter a bit more, I would like to add that another misunderstanding shadowing this review appears when Spielmann considers that my “tout peut faire mœurs, pour ainsi dire” (p. 134) is equivalent to a “telling admission” that “anything and everything could be inscribed in the *mœurs* rubric.” What I meant, and what seems clear to me when re-contextualizing the expression, is that in the plays I was studying, the “*scène de mœurs*” can be introduced by anything—a short remark, the appearance of a character, a shift in the topic of conversation, and so on. When looking at the “portraits and stand-alone skits” that actually compose the *scène de mœurs*, these are remarkably consistent from one play to another and do not contradict at all my previous observations about the poetics of *comédie de mœurs*. Nor are they—may I stress it again and contrary to what Spielmann asserts—“reflect[ing] ‘le monde comme il va,’” since they are playfully constructing and jocularly de-constructing such an image. They seem to me quite different from “nos mœurs inconséquentes” that Spielmann quotes following Laclos’ *Liaisons dangereuses*, a novel whose vision of the world and of human beings can be argued as being very far from that supporting the *comédie de mœurs*.

Last but not least, Spielmann reaches the conclusion that “*mœurs* is no genre at all, but rather a component—a flavouring, so to speak—found in a great variety of comedies over two centuries.” I would gladly concede this, could Spielmann come up with a set of clear criteria for distinguishing between “genres” and “flavours.” The body of scholarship I have consulted so far is very cautious in this respect, as is to be expected when dealing with such a complex notion. According to Antoine Compagnon [8], one seems to be allowed to speak about a genre when a group of texts presents some set of regularities that are both met by a variety of writers and somewhat expected by the public. In the Ancien Régime plays [9] that I study in my book, I have identified patterns whose repetition cannot be merely coincidental, and their persistence over time, as well as their apparition in several success plays, gives some indication that they were recognised and appreciated by the theatre goers and readers. I claim, therefore, if not a definitive right to speak about “genre,” at least that I am not totally wrong in doing so.

More generally, the feeling I have in reading this review is that it is caught in many places by my cautiousness and my reluctance to make definitive affirmations. Spielmann takes as

insufficiently grounded what is actually sometimes understated or toned down, in order to avoid that superior tone of absolute certitude used by many (mostly nineteenth-century) critics of *comédie de mœurs*—a tone that accounts for several long-lasting misrepresentations, such as *comédie de mœurs*'s closeness to “actualités.” *On ne se refait pas*, as French people put it. I just hope that my readers will appreciate my caution and that some will consider it a necessary characteristic of scientific writing. On the whole, I also hope that, in spite of Spielmann's peremptory affirmations, the book will prove itself to be grounded in a “serious interest in theatre,” and an acceptable contribution to the scholarship in the early modern French drama. [10]

## NOTES

[1] “la comédie de mœurs... est un théâtre d'actualité, non d'actualités.” C. Biet, in Guy Spielmann, *Le Jeu de l'ordre et du chaos: comédie et pouvoirs à la fin de règne, 1673-1715* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2002), p. 14.

[2] Spielmann nuances his own assertion a bit later, when he affirms that “understanding theatre (as opposed to dramatic literature) requires expertise other than literary.” Should I have refrained from using the word “theatre” in my book and replace it systematically with “dramatic literature,” which apparently can be approached on the sole basis of a literary expertise?

[3] Why have I written a chapter on seventeenth-century comedy if the phenomenon I study has such a clearcut starting date? We are coming back to the under-evaluation of the historical part of my book.

[4] This is the context in which the expression appears: “Il est curieux que la pièce ait réussi à passer à la postérité et à s'imposer en tant que modèle de la comédie de mœurs. Il est probable que l'attention que lui portent les critiques du dix-neuvième et du vingtième siècle tient au caractère explicite du titre” (p. 19). It seems to me that my words show that I do not embrace the opinion of those considering this play to be a “model,” in the sense of “an example to be followed.” If this is not the case, I apologise to my readers and I regret I was not able to come up with a formulation that would have indicated more firmly where I stand.

[5] See F. C. Dancourt, *Comédies* (Paris: Nizet, 1985).

[6] See, for instance, M. E. Plagnol, “Le cas des mineurs,” in “La recherche aujourd'hui (special edition),” *Dix-huitième siècle* 30(1998): 87-101.

[7] A bit later in his review, somewhat contradicting himself, Spielmann suggests *Les Précieuses ridicules* as a starting point for the *comédie de mœurs*. I discuss this play in the subsection three of chapter seven (“Le moment Molière,” pp. 202-207) and conclude that “le Maître n'aura finalement pas cherché à s'illustrer dans cette voie [de la comédie de mœurs].” As for *Les Mots à la mode*, in his fourth endnote, Spielmann suggests that I did not follow his categorization of Boursault's play as “prototypical” for the *comédie de mœurs* “because it goes against the dominant opinion.” In fact I did not do so because it is wrong. *Les Mots* by Boursault is not a prototype nor a model of the *comédie de mœurs*, both because other plays can be used to prove that the genre pre-existed Boursault's play (once again, see my chapter seven), and because its dramatic patterns seem to me to have a lower echo in the (admittedly, fuzzy) corpus with which I work.

[8] See <https://www.fabula.org/compagnon/genre.php>

[9] I persist in using such a “broad and undefined label” since I do not see how exactly am I wrong in doing so—let the first not having ever employed it throw the stone...

[10] Point taken for « Restauration comedy », one of those automated corrections Word would do in a French environment, and neither caught by me nor the publishing house. We will try to do better in the second edition of the book.

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