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John D. Lyons, *Women and Irony in Molière's Comedies of Marriage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. xi+253 pp. Notes, bibliography, index, line drawing. $100.00 (cl). ISBN 978-0-198-88737-9. $99.00 (eb) ISBN 978-0-198-88739-3.

# Review Essay by Claire Goldstein, University of California, Davis

It felt like a daunting task to review what the *H-France Forum* editor described to me as John D. Lyons’s final scholarly monograph. Lyons’s distinguished career has been replete with erudite and field-changing books that consider deeply the ways seventeenth-century literature constitutes a philosophical practice, as in *Exemplum* (1989, repub. 2014), *Before Imagination* (2005), or *Phantom of Chance* (2012).[1] A Chevalier de la Légion d’Honneur, he has accrued the academic equivalent of an EGOT: Guggenheim, NEH, and ACLS fellowships. Often his research has focused on tragedy, for example in *Kingdom of Disorder*, where he unsettled critical understanding of the French theatrical canon and traditional narratives about French Classical aesthetics or his 2019 *Tragedy and the Return of the Dead*, where he adopts an expansive transhistorical and transnational perspective.[2]

*Women and Irony in Molière’s Comedies of Marriage* is thus in some ways a fresh departure. Lyons recounts in the Preface that the project was sparked by conversations with students “as is often the case” (p. vii). Reading Molière’s *Le Misanthrope* in an Introduction to French literature course taught in the fall of 2017, where all of the students in the course were women and the #MeToo movement was erupting, brought forth a different apprehension of the play and the character traditionally taken to be its protagonist: “Alceste's misogynistic dream of complete dominance, against the background of twenty-first-century reports of men who were able to reduce smart, talented, beautiful women to abjection, did not favour a reading of the play in which Alceste appeared as the heroically virtuous, upright fighter against corruption that we often see in commentaries on this play” (p. vii). Lyons promised his students a book that would center Célimène, and from that promise, and his students’ periodic reminders, this book was born. In it Lyons explores the ways Molière’s comedies highlight the friction in seventeenth-century France between the cultural valorization of speaking well, a skill ascribed specifically to women, and a legal and cultural context that left women largely powerless in the choice of a husband—a decision, Lyons emphasizes, that would irrevocably determine the conditions of the rest of their lives. Inspired by classroom conversations and current events, the resulting book has the feeling of a sort of master class in which the reader follows along. Lyons teases out the ways Molière’s “powerless girls and women,” working from within a system largely stacked against them, use various kinds of irony to try to exercise some degree of influence on the dramatic inflection point of a marriage (p. 25).

Following the Preface, an Introduction outlines the intersecting domains of the theatrical marriage plot and the theological, legal, and cultural landscape of marriage in seventeenth-century France. Lyons also highlights women’s privileged access to refined speech, and he delineates the forms and theorizations of irony which, he argues, constitutes the chief defense and weapon of female characters and their male allies. Citing Joan DeJean, who is citing Michael Taussig, Lyons sees the rhetorical strategies deployed by Molière’s female characters as a socio-political intervention, although never in an overblown way: “Dramatic practice based on irony was particularly important in a period in which ‘knowing what not to know’ was the key to surviving in a repressive absolutist regime. Though perhaps knowing what not to admit that you know would be more precise” (p. 21). Rather like the sometimes-elusive reasonable character one always looks to identify in Molière’s comedies, Lyons explains but does not engage in critical velitation. Does literature in general and Molière’s oeuvre in particular specifically convey a message? Lyons replies: “I neither suppose that Molière was writing comedies to advocate for social change nor that we need to ‘misread’ the comedies in order to make them matter to us” (p. ix). Do we misconstrue the sociability of what was later named the “salon,” and in the period was called “*ruélle*”? Is Préciosité real?[3] Lyons demurs while reminding readers that misogyny was certainly a real phenomenon in seventeenth-century France even though “the word *misogyne* did not appear in a French dictionary until 1873” (p. 12). Was Molière a feminist? Or did he offer up his female characters for public ridicule? Lyons outlines the debate, but it is not in this type of *querelle* that his critical interest lies.[4] Rather, he proposes to look closely at the family dramas Molière stages and the way irony is wielded to create some room for female characters to maneuver: “There is one recurrent characteristic that seems beyond dispute. The comedies have in common that they represent in a positive light women’s quest to avoid forced marriages and to choose partners with a view to happiness and pleasure” (p. 15).

The body of the text comprises four sections, organized by types of marriage scenarios and divided into short chapters, each focusing on an individual Molière play. Section One, “Schools for Marriage,” pairs two comedies about teen wards and their guardians who design to become husbands: *L’École des Maris* (1661) and *L’École des femmes* (1662). Section Two, “Courtship and Therapy,” by contrast, examines *Le Misanthrope* (1666) and *Don Garcie de Navarre* (1661), two plays in which female protagonists enjoy the largely exceptional freedom to choose a husband, if only they can cure their potential mate of pathological jealousy. In the four plays of Part Three, “Freedom to Marry,” *Les Femmes savantes*, *George Dandin*, *Monsieur de* *Pourceaugnac,* and *Les Précieuses ridicules*, women characters employ ironic speech as a way to bend their marital fate towards a more favorable outcome, whereas Part Four features married couples in *Tartuffe* and *Amphytryon*. A conclusion places Célimène, the character who inspired this book, in dialogue with Molière’s most scandalous protagonist, Dom Juan, two characters who, through differing means, avoid the resolution in matrimony prescribed by the comic genre and social convention.

The project of *Women and Irony* seems deceptively simple, focusing on reading through each play, from first to final scene, to observe how characters deploy irony to forestall, impede, or influence the choice of a husband. And read Lyons does, carefully drawing out the dynamics of various kinds of irony, from the preterition that various heroines employ to speak their clear truth out from under the nose of an oblivious guardian, to steganography, or covered messages that one of Molière’s most disempowered characters, Isabelle in *L’École des maris*, uses to smuggle her voice out of a highly constrained setting (p. 44).

One thread that surfaces in Lyons’ various readings is the seventeenth-century aesthetic that worked to capture the impression of being natural, a style achieved through much hard work on the part of male authors, but believed to be more easily accessed by women.[4] Lyons invokes this aesthetic in his reading of Agnès’s maladroit note to Horace in *L’École des Femmes*: “The perfect representation of nature was the highest, but also most difficult, goal of early modern mimetic poetics” (p. 65). Lyons’s writing, which manages to present literary, historical, and philosophical concepts in ways that are both accurate and clear (aims often more agonistic than complementary) brings to mind this careful, even arduous, construction of the verbal effect of ease. Each reading starts with a close engagement with the text. At one point, Lyons assures his reader, “There is no need to start with the theory. We can simply let Molière’s play teach us how it works” (p. 35). Yet as he proceeds, Lyons delicately brings out resonances between Molière’s comic stagings and philosophical and ethical questions that preoccupied his contemporaries. Here we see *Women and Irony* draw on the deep resources of Lyons’s scholarly career, as in the ways he shows literature, especially prose fiction by women, to be a locus for theorizing questions about human perception and experience. Descartes’ theory of mind situates attempts to deny or thwart women’s autonomy within an active field of inquiry; Blaise Pascal’s concept of the “hidden God” illuminates a scenario in which a domineering man becomes an unwitting messenger for the woman he has secreted (p. 43); La Rochefoucauld’s maxims highlight the period’s fascination with irrational inclinations of the heart. The connections Lyons draws from women’s writing, from Madeleine de Scudéry’s *Clélie* to Marie-Madeleine de Lafayette’s *La Princesse de Clèves, La Princesse de Montpensier,* and *Zayde*, to writing by Gabrielle Suchon and Marie-Chantal de Sévigné are especially revelatory in the ways Lyons makes Molière’s comedies speak to urgent social questions of women’s autonomy.

Written with the engaging clarity and delicately applied erudition that have characterized Lyons’s scholarship throughout his distinguished career, *Women and Irony* inspires admiration not only for its performance of mastery, but also as an object lesson in curiosity, a keyword of the French seventeenth century. For this reader, Lyons openness to new questions offers a profound model of scholarly engagement. Lyons’s book sensitively attends to the context in which Molière’s comedies were written and performed, and meaningfully reaches towards our present. Literature, he demonstrates, deeply matters—as a powerful record of the ways people in the past grappled with social dynamics of their time and reflect on the human condition, but not only so; as a locus for contemporary readers to think through our own culture and humanity, but not only so. He connects Philaminte’s “authoritarian-contrarian impulse” to “one of today’s actual tyrants…[who] enjoys being able to say to an underling, ‘you’re fired’” and the two suitors of *Les Précieuses ridicules* to contemporary internet trolls: “Like the ‘incels’ (involuntary celibate males) of the twenty-first century, these two suitors feel entitled to marry the two young woman (sic) without learning what the women want and without making themselves attractive partners” (pp. 131, 130, 230). But Lyons never tries to make literature of the seventeenth century relevant by leveling it to presentist concerns. His study is thoroughly infused with the aesthetic, philosophical, and cultural specificity of the seventeenth century, in which spectators and Angélique would regard *roturier* George Dandin as almost another species and his suicide as comic resolution rather than the tragic dénouement contemporary audience would be liable to see; and Célimène’s decision to opt out of the marriage market echoes in *La* *Princesse de Clèves*’s controversial ending (pp. 150-151, 239). I could not help but feel moved that this final academic book in a career that has given so much to the field of early modern literary studies found its origin in dialogue with undergraduate students, and proceeds, in Lyons’s signature fashion, by engaging so generously with the wide field of thinkers today and in Molière’s era. This is a book I immediately wanted to read and discuss with my own students.

# NOTES

[1] John D. Lyons, *Before Imagination: Embodied Thought from Montaigne to Rousseau* (Stanford University Press, 2005); *Exemplum: The Rhetoric of Example in Early Modern France and Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); *The Phantom of Chance: From Fortune to Randomness in Seventeenth-Century French Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

[2] Lyons’s early work on baroque drama, *A Theater of Disguise: Studies in French Baroque Drama, 1630-1660* (Columbia, S.C.: French Literature Publications, 1978) and Corneille, *The Tragedy of Origins: Pierre Corneille and Historical Perspective* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), likewise expand critical understanding of the field known as French Classical theater. This is a book review, not a panegyric, but I feel compelled to mention that Lyons also edited or co-edited several field-changing collections of essays, the *Cambridge Companion to French Literature* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016) and the *Oxford Handbook of the Baroque* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019) not to mention writing his own *French Literature: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[3] “One of the challenges of writing about the situation of women in seventeenth-century France is the issue of terminology for referring to those women who played an active role in shaping literary culture and who, in most cases, were critical of women’s disempowerment in decisions about whether they would marry, and if they did, whom they would marry” (p. 11).

[4] That plays and reading can answer, and sidestops reductive or black-hole questions, as when he maintains that his “exploration of Molière’s comedies may not make readers see him as a feminist author in a recent sense, but it is my hope that these pages will simulate thinking about the serious issues of human freedom and marriage that Molière so consistently raises in his comedies” (p. xi).

[5] See for example pp. 65-66 and p. 144.

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