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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 Michael Call, Brigham Young University

Years ago, Henri Peyre wrote about the potential benefit from encounters between the venerable canonical works of seventeenth-century France and those (and Peyre cites in particular young Americans) for whom they hold no immediate cultural importance: “Il n’est pas mauvais que le *Cid*, l’*Ecole des femmes*, et *Bajazet* soient parfois lus ou écoutés par des adolescents ou des hommes à qui nul n’avait jamais enseigné à respecter (ou, par réaction contre ce même enseignement, à blasphémer) les noms de Corneille, de Molière, et de Racine.”[1]

As presented in the preface, John Lyons’s recent book stems from just such a pedagogical situation (an introductory French literature class), but with an important gender twist: instead of Peyre’s “adolescents ou des hommes,” Lyons’s class consisted entirely of female American undergraduate students, and their questions and reactions to the gender dynamics portrayed in Molière’s comedies serve as the springboard here for a fresh approach to the playwright’s corpus, exploring the varied representations of the institution of marriage while privileging the perspective of the plays’ female characters.

In a succinct summary at the beginning of the study, Lyons writes, “This book is about the way irony appears in the struggles that arise between the men in positions of power and the women who need to outsmart them” (p. 2). This critical lens allows Lyons to narrow his scope to a handful of plays that showcase this interaction, a somewhat heteroclite selection that includes several of the major plays (e.g. *Le Misanthrope*, *L’École des femmes*, *Le Tartuffe*), but also many that are less frequently performed or read (examples include *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac*, *Amphitryon*, and, in the most extreme case, Molière’s biggest theatrical flop, *Don Garcie de Navarre*). In this respect, Lyons’s study serves as a focused but surprisingly versatile introduction to Molière’s theater, and one of its true charms is to see the ways that the “minor” plays help to illuminate and enrich our understanding of more familiar figures like Agnès, Elmire, or Célimène. Lyons arranges the plays according to relationship status or stages: situations in which women are being forced into marriages, comedies that present relatively freer courtship, or those that examine an existing marriage. While this prevents him from making a diachronic argument regarding irony’s role in Molière’s evolving dramaturgy, it allows for illuminating comparisons or parallels. These range from pairings that might seem natural (reading the two *Écoles* together, for example) to the unexpected (using *Le Tartuffe*’s Elmire and *Amphitryon*’s Alcmène to think about the portrayal of failing marriages).

In their repeated exploration of women’s lack of control over their matrimonial future, the comedies raise “serious issues of human freedom and marriage” (p. xi), and Lyons argues that the plays encourage us to view the women’s plight with sympathy while also constructing a sustained and coherent philosophy of what the female characters desire from their romantic relationships. While such a stance finds evident support from plays like *L’École des femmes*, Lyons makes the more daring move to see such sympathy even in comedies like *Les Précieuses ridicules* or *Les Femmes savantes* that seem, at least on the surface, highly satirical of their principal female characters. In a comment about the former that speaks to the book’s broader claims, Lyons writes:

It is the contention of this study that far from opposing the preference of the young women characters in that play, Molière uses humour to establish the social aesthetic of Cathos and Magdelon as fundamentally sympathetic in its opposition to Magdelon’s father Gorgibus (who simply wants to arrange marriages for them strictly on the basis of money) and to the two suitors the father approves, Du Croisy and Lagrange, who consider themselves entitled to ask whatever they want of women and make no attempt whatsoever to learn to please and persuade. (pp. 229-230)

Consequently, the study represents a challenge to some of the traditional emphases and interpretations of Molière’s theater, arguing for the importance and validity of the female characters’ perspectives and championing their struggle to love as they please. In a representative example, Lyons turns on its head the conventional reading of the pivotal scene in *Le Tartuffe* in which Elmire encourages the titular character’s advances after having concealed her husband, Orgon, in such a way that he can hear the conversation. Noting other instances in Molière’s theater when characters carefully craft a rhetorical situation in which they can speak the truth while knowing that it will be taken as ironic by their listeners, Lyons invites us to consider the possibility that Elmire’s act is not a last-ditch ruse on the part of a woman defending her family, but the expression of a wife unhappy in her marriage and openly expressing her need for emotional and sexual fulfillment.

Fittingly for a work that is about irony, the ending of the study argues that for the women in Molière’s comedies, the true goal is often deferral, not closure. The era’s plays and novels frequently described courtship and marriage in antithetical terms—to marry was to enter the realm of contractual obligation and disempowerment, no longer free to pursue one’s own pleasure. The solution is perhaps an interminable courtship, prolonging the moment of freely chosen desire. Célimène, of course, is the epitome of this perspective, as Lyons points out—a young, rich, and attractive widow, she enjoys the greatest latitude afforded to women of her time and social class, and her refusal to commit to any of her numerous suitors speaks to how much she values that freedom. Such an attitude surprisingly aligns Célimène with Molière’s most notorious advocate for marriage, although one whose overuse of it empties it of all meaning: Don Juan, the infamous “épouseur à toutes mains.” Lyons claims that Don Juan’s romancing speaks to the deep desires of Molière’s female characters, often frustrated by the joyless marital options confronting them in the comedies. Like Célimène, Don Juan constantly pursues new amorous adventures to remain continuously in a state of longing, and Lyons opportunely finds in the dual seventeenth-century meanings of the verb *amuser* a fitting symbol: entertainment and also prolongment.

In some respects, though, the claims of a general consensus regarding the aims of the women in Molière’s theater should not obscure the more nuanced portrait of marriage that develops from the individual chapters. While Célimène may well represent one important perspective on marriage and courtship, we see many others emerge through Lyons’s rich discussion of the comedies’ female characters: Isabelle’s use of marriage as a method of escape from a tyrant (*L’École des maris*), Angélique’s frank dismissal of marriage’s restrictions (*George Dandin*), or Henriette’s reasoned advocacy for marriage’s pleasures (*Les Femmes savantes*), to name a few. This ultimately works to the study’s advantage, as one could argue that the plays not included in Lyons’s volume exhibit a similarly varied approach to the institution—we might think of such disparate examples as Zerbinette in *Les Fouberies de Scapin* who values marriage as a protection or guarantee of sorts, the *suivante* in *Sganarelle* who alleges the comfortable benefits of a companionate marriage, or *Le Mariage forcé*’s Dorimène, who eagerly anticipates using marriage as a cover (and source of funding) for her amorous liaisons. Marriage factors into the emotional fulfilment of Molière’s female characters in surprisingly diverse ways.

One of the significant contributions of the study is precisely this ready applicability, the way that Lyons’s insights, clear methodological approach, and plentiful examples not only demonstrate points of contact among the featured plays but also invite connections to the rest of the corpus. While the book includes case studies of ten plays (along with a consideration of *Le Festin de Pierre* in the conclusion), the centrality of the marriage plot and the near omnipresence of irony (verbal, situational, and dramatic) in Molière’s theater leave ample space for scholars to explore these ideas in other plays, or even in works by other playwrights of the period. *Le Malade imaginaire*, for instance, lends itself immediately to the study’s themes, staging both a more traditional courting couple and an unconventional troubled marriage that provide interesting comparisons and counterpoints to the cases that Lyons examines—in light of Lyons’s work, Béline could be viewed as a kind of anti-Célimène (or a pre-widowhood Célimène), resistant to any continuing courtship from her husband and eager to cash in on the legal and financial advantages of marriage. Likewise, the scene in which Angélique and Cléante improvisationally sing their love to each other in front of an unwitting Argan finds important antecedents in the similar ironic rhetorical situations that Lyons highlights in *Amphitryon*, *L’École des maris*, *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac*, or *George Dandin*—in each case, characters daringly express the truth, knowing that their antagonists will mistakenly read their words as ironic and arrive at the opposite meaning.

However, such situations are not just constructed by the plays’ female characters—we might think here of Tartuffe’s *bravura* moment at the conclusion of Act 3 in which he confesses his sins openly to Orgon, knowing that the dupe will take his statements only as further evidence of Christian humility. Indeed, one of the potential weaknesses of the study’s argument is the frequency with which Molière’s male characters also resort to irony, raising questions about the special relationship that the study claims for women’s use of the trope. If Isabelle in *L’École des maris* employs irony, so does Sganarelle, albeit briefly, at the opening of his disagreement with his brother, Ariste. If Célimène in *Le Misanthrope* is a master of irony, Alceste resorts to it as well (despite his reputation for sincerity)—as Lyons notes, Alceste’s “je ne dis pas cela” is the *locus classicus* for Molière’s use of preterition. The link between women and irony might well map onto comedy’s broader dichotomies that set in opposition the powerful and the powerless, or the fools (thanks to the genre’s traditions, often synonymous with the powerful) and the clever characters who seek to deceive them through the slipperiness of language.

But irony need not be unique to Molière’s female characters (nor their unique defense in their struggle for happiness) for Lyons’s study to have considerable value. As he observes, much of the traditional critical attention has focused on the plays’ male protagonists, and his volume consequently is a timely corrective. In addition, Lyons’s thoughtful discussion of the plight of Célimène, Henriette, or Isabelle is admirably contextualized in two different ways: in the first place, by placing Molière’s theater within the broader culture of the time, establishing comparisons and relevant connections with contemporary literary, philosophical, theological, and theatrical works (and here Lyons’s expertise in tragedy and the novel serve him well); and secondly, by situating his arguments in regards to a wealth of secondary sources. Notably, a number of these are from English-language critics (writing either about Molière or seventeenth-century French culture more broadly), and the study highlights and dialogues with the excellent work done by scholars such as Christopher Braider, Larry Norman, James Gaines, Faith Beasley, Richard Goodkin, Holly Tucker, Michael Hawcroft, Julia Prest, Larry Riggs, Joan DeJean, Lewis Seifert, and Robert McBride.

Above all, it is gratifying to see Lyons bring his sensitive close reading and comprehensive grasp of the period’s cultural context, amply demonstrated in his prior work, to bear on France’s most famous comedic playwright. For this welcome and insightful contribution, well might the assemblage of Moliéristes with whom Lyons engages here eagerly—and unironically—intone: “*Dignus, dignus est entrare in nostro docto corpore….*”

# NOTES

[1] Henri Peyre, *Qu’est-ce que le classicisme?* (Paris: A.G. Nizet, 1965), 12.

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